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Abstract

**A Comparison of Chinese and Western Distance Education
Initiatives: Educational Goals and Instructional Practices**

Geoff Potter, Ph.D.

University of Victoria, Canada

This paper examines current distance education initiatives in China and compares instructional models with those used by western distance educators over the past three decades. Traditional Chinese instructional goals and processes are somewhat different from those practiced in some western nations. The paper seeks to identify the unique characteristics of each system and to comment on common practices and experiences.

Change is occurring in educational practice everywhere and is currently emerging in China's education and training systems. A traditional didactic, classroom and teacher-based Confucian model has served the Chinese culture for centuries. However, recent directives from the Central Government and constructive responses from several provinces and institutions have introduced structural changes into the established system with mixed results. The changes reflect political evolution and phenomenal economic growth which has, among many other things, brought communication technologies, computers and the Internet into some selected areas of this huge country, making distance education possible.

By contrast the western experience of distance education has, during a period of three decades, slowly and pragmatically evolved away from traditional instructional practices and towards the creation of new ways of teaching and learning responsive to the unique needs of distance learners.

The paper poses two questions:

- i. have Chinese educators in general and distance educators in particular been able to change their instructional methods to accommodate the changing needs of their students?
- ii. If this process is initially proving difficult, what guidance might Chinese distance educators obtain from models employed in some western nations?

Specifically the paper examines the following issues:

- Recent and current distance education initiatives in China.
- Commonly used distance education practices in Canada, Australia, the USA and the United Kingdom.
- Comparisons of:
 - Educational goals for distance education
 - Distance education instructional design models
 - Distance education evaluation methods
 - Available and preferred instructional technologies

The paper will conclude with a summary of areas in which cooperation between institutions with similar challenges and experiences is recommended.