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Book Review – Distance Education and Technology: Issues and practice

Editors: David Murphy, Ronnie Carr, James Taylor, Wong Tat-meng. (2004). *Distance Education and Technology: Issues and practice*. Open University of Hong Kong Press, Hong Kong Press. ISBN: 9 6277 0747 3

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Distance Education and Technology: Issues and Practice consists of selected readings from the 21st World Conference of the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) held in Hong Kong in February 2004. The book contains 24 papers and is organized into three sections:

- Issues
- Teaching and Learning with Technology, and
- Innovative Approaches

The first section deals with issues that face practitioners of open and distance learning in the 21st-century setting. It covers topics as diverse as the digital divide as a development issue the comparison of the environmental impacts of face-to-face and distance education, and the challenges of partnerships in this brave new world of transnational distance education. The papers in the second section focus predominantly on various forms of e-learning: “online,” “e-,” or “m-.” There is a range of issues and practices discussed, from a training programme for online tutors, to social presence, to development of identity online. The third section is the shortest, comprising six papers that, for the most part, describe new tools or learning environments to support learners or instructors in the online environment.

The papers are easy to read and are presented in clear, unambiguous style. The layout is pleasing, and each paper is a reasonable length, which facilitates reading ease even in areas that might be somewhat unfamiliar for some. The editors are to be congratulated on achieving this balance, because such balance not always an easy task when dealing with such a wide variety of issues and authors.

For the most part, the papers are reasonably well grounded in their respective literature, although a few are somewhat thin in this regard. While a number of the authors cite literature that was written before the dawn of the world-wide-web, others might have made a more significant contribution if had they likewise done so. Even though these papers deal with various forms of “e-” and/ or on-line learning, the authors would find a wealth of information from scholars and practitioners who worked with older technologies, on how to use interactive technologies to

provide student support, develop a collaborative learning environment that might inform their current practices, and aid in the development of critical thinking skills.

Some highlights of the book, for me, are:

Issues

- Roy, Potter, and Yarrow’s approach to measurement of the environmental influence of campus, print, and electronic learning systems, concludes that electronic ODL systems are the most environmentally friendly. Roy and colleagues also include a discussion of possible policy considerations for institutions that must decide which model to use and/or how they might internationalize their campuses.
- Tysseling’s paper builds on previous work of W.H. Chen and B. Willman, and provides an interesting visual model to describe the “onion skins” of five constraints to access (physical, financial, cognitive, content and political), how these “onion skins” interact in relation to one another, and how this visual model can help determine the precise problem effecting access. The author applies a marketing model using this tool to point to ways we can best help redress the problems of the digital divide.
- Bates’ paper on myths and realities has the tone of a “keynote” that I am sure will produce many discussions in corridors, coffee houses, and meeting spots. Like all good keynotes, it is open to argument on many points. We will look to Bates’ book, mentioned in the paper, to provide further substantiation of his argument and, of course, to other discussions in corridors, coffee houses, and meeting rooms on myths and realities.

Teaching and learning with technology

- Gunawardena’s discussion on the application of two stepwise regression analyses, providing insight on the relationship between social presence (literature discussed in the article) and learner satisfaction with online learning.
- Downing and Chin’s interesting analysis of the relationship between learning styles (as categorized by Honey and Mumford: activist, reflector, theorist and pragmatist) and satisfaction with the online. Their study shows a statistical correlation between the reflector (online extrovert) style and satisfaction with the online learning environment.
- Kirkwood’s management framework for determining the type of multimedia tools (from very simple to very rich) to use in any given setting – a model that will be helpful for those trying to design high quality, cost effective courses that include multimedia.

Innovative approaches

In fairness to the authors in this section, I only took one course in computer programming in the early 90s and quickly decided that it would be best if I just applied programmes that others had developed. The reader must therefore assume I am not that well equipped to analyze this section in depth, so with this proviso in mind:

- Webster’s attempt to construct a more flexible LMS is particularly useful, especially given the constraints that many experience with the more commercial products at this stage of their development.

- Ng, Tak-song, and Hoi-Sham’s approach to using parse-trees to identify potentially plagiarized material in programming assignments in online courses, promises to be a most useful tool for those teaching IT ad computer courses.

Not unexpectedly, given that this volume is, in essence, a conference proceeding and not a scholarly journal, there is little ground-breaking research here. Some papers present primary research studies, but most are a result of the author’s reflection on practice and on literature. A few papers are rather shaky in their arguments but, for the most part, the papers are well presented, argued, and documented. Many offer good insights and tools, and I suspect that readers’ responses in most instances will be: “*Hmm interesting. I think that this has broadened my understanding of that area, or I could try to apply that idea in my environment.*”

In general, *Distance Education and Technology: Issues and Practice* is good book for practitioners and others looking for concrete examples of application and approach. The three themes give a variety of reading, and will provide something of particular or general interest to most of us practicing in this field.

