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Sustaining Distance Education: Integrating learning technologies into the fabric of the enterprise

Editor: Berge, Zane L.(2001). *Sustaining Distance Education: Integrating learning technologies into the fabric of the enterprise*. 413 pages, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. ISBN 0 7879 5331 8

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I am an eager reader of the published works of Zane L. Berge. As director of training systems for the Instructional Systems Development Program at the University of Maryland at Baltimore County, Berge brings a strong intellectual perspective to any discussion of distance education. He has a wide and practical vision of practices in distance education through his extensive consulting experience. Moreover, much of his research and writing does not focus on the desiccated, hair splitting academic disputations in which distance education “theorists” engage frequently. His research and writing in the field of computer-mediated communication gets “down and dirty” with the difficult and often unexamined processes by which technology users collaborate and build community. It is no surprise to me, then, that Berge’s work is often so well received by his peers. He is the co-editor (with Deborah Schreiber) of *Distance training: How innovative organizations are using technology to maximize learning and meet business objectives*, a 1998 Jossey-Bass volume that won The Charles A. Wedemeyer Award.

At least two attributes that are scarce among writers about distance education and training, stand out across the body of work produced by Zane Berge. First, his writing displays an analytical flair manifest in his partiality for organization and classification. Readers of Berge’s work usually come away with a wonderfully digestible, boiled down gumbo of kernel phenomena, trends, and practices in distance education and training. In a nascent field of practice such as distance education and training, such taxonomic fervor helps to promote learning and research on unifying and meta-analytic themes. Second, Berge’s published works show a talent for application of somewhat stiff, formal, “from on high” concepts in distance education and training, to the resource-constrained, technologically imperfect world of mere mortals saddled with action plans, PERT charts, and budgets requiring them. Provided are valuable information and insights that are most arguably needed right now, not later when we learn more to design, develop, and deliver distance education and training for our organizations. Berge’s writings offer readers as much to improve practice as they provide to advance theoretical structures and understanding. For the most part, Berge’s current work, *Sustaining Distance Training*, embodies these worthy attributes.

Berge’s aim in *Sustaining Distance Training* is “to explore in a more systematic way the question: *How do organizations sustain efforts in distance training when their goals call for more than conducting isolated or sporadic distance training events?*” (p. xii, emphasis in original). His approach is to offer case studies drawn from for profit enterprises, non-profit organizations, and government agencies. In two introductory chapters, Berge provides an overview of contexts for distance education and training (prevalence, definitions, and training, education, and workplace trends) along with frameworks that, according to Berge: “suggest that there are stages or levels of

technological and other capabilities within and organization with regard to technology-enhanced learning and distance education” (p. 13). The 17 chapters that follow contain case studies clustered around three major themes: meeting the challenge of uncommon organizational change; setting competitive standards; and achieving organizational goals. Lastly, Berge follows these case studies with a chapter, “Tools for Change,” that provides readers with a roadmap for better integration of distance education and training with the variegated perspectives and cultures exhibited across organizations. For the task-driven reader, Berge’s final chapter offers a checklist of ways that instructional designs can link to organizational perspectives.

An appendix to this book, the content of which might not entirely satiate research experts, describes the case study methodology that generated much of the information presented and conclusions proffered in this book. A glossary of distance education, training, and technology terms rounds out the book, along with a detailed and useful index (a feature scarce in many recently published books, but which is maintained so well in most works published by Jossey-Bass). Personally, I believe that the glossary probably has little use for readers, because my preference as a reader is to have definitions of terms integrated into the text and, in that way, available to me just in time. I do not like to guess whether a term for which I demand clarification might have a definition in a many-page distant glossary. Oh, well, I suppose this is not a serious distraction for many readers. *De gustibus non est disputandum.*

The first major section of six case studies grouped around the theme “Meeting the Challenge of Uncommon Organizational Change,” reveals the tensions created in some organizations to “do something, do anything” to scramble on the bandwagon of distance education and training at the expense of properly managing change so that it does not disrupt orderly progress toward organizational goals. Case studies from such diverse organizational settings as the US military, regional and worldwide telecommunications firms, a company attempting to assist clients to work virtually, and a US government tax collection agency, illustrate how difficult it is to focus distance education and training to serve organizational aims. These case studies also demonstrate solutions to this difficulty, which are as varied as the organizations studies as they are effective.

The second major section of six case studies exemplifies responses generated in the auto, financial service, telecommunications, consulting, and computer manufacturing industries to the task of “Setting Competitive Standards.” The case studies in this section help readers reflect on a number of significant planning decisions. For instance, what functions can distance education and training efforts fulfill for organizations? How should organizations plan, organize, and control these efforts? What level and mix of resources are required? What are the attributes and features of quality distance education and training? Are there any benchmarks? And how do answers to such questions about inputs, processes, and products of distance education and training interact with knowledge about the cultures of organizations, the realities of their resource and product markets, indigenous human capital and technological sophistication of organizations, the locations in the organizational life cycle of primary products and services, and preferences and economic bases for sourcing decisions about design, development, and delivery of education and training?

The theme of the third, and final, major section of case studies in Berge’s book concerns “Achieving Organizational Goals Using Sustained Distance Training.” The five chapters in this section present cases studies from such diverse sectors as public education, mail and package delivery, online education, and disaster prevention and relief. These cases deal primarily with implementation practices and issues. These case reports will stimulate the reader with interests in how distance education and training contribute to organizational performance, in specifying components of benefits as well as costs of distance education and training for purposes of compiling ROI, and in viewing the roles of distance education and training within CQI and process improvement principles and aims. Taken together, these cases speak clearly to the wisdom of discarding current conceptions of the status of distance education and training efforts in organizations. In fact, so often aspects of the design, development, and delivery of education

and training in organizations are viewed as though they form projects, not as though they are components of organizational strategy. Berge defines a project, using the Project Management Institute definition, as a “temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product or service” (p. 17). One lesson I derive from reading the case reports in this section of the book is that the fruits of investments in distance in education and training might never produce yields without full reconciliation and integration of these investments with the performance goals of organizations.

The reader will learn much from this volume of case studies, as most of the case studies are informative. Moreover, most are accessible in the sense that readers are provided with enough information about the organization studied and about the distinctive factors facing these organizations in the adoption, implementation, and integration of distance education and training. A few of the case studies seem to resemble cautious public relations pieces written in bland prose in which descriptions out weights or analysis. However, the bottom line for Berge’s edited volume is that readers will be rewarded with the opportunity to inspect and contemplate actual distance education and training efforts, which occur in diverse organization settings and respond to a wide variety of organizational needs.

In my estimation, however, the crown jewel of this book is the two introductory chapters written by Zane Berge. These two chapters are a “must reads” for managers seeking a quick synopsis of what to expect from distance education and training. These chapters are also ideal for some managers who require a persuasive briefing about the differences between the somewhat older, comfortable view of education and training as simple information transmission and the emerging view of education and training with adult learners as transformative, learner centered, holistic experiences. Many managers can chant mantras about the centrality of education and training for the health of their organizations, but they never might have seen the business case made so well and simply as Berge does in these introductory chapters. Berge wraps all of this up for readers in a package of straightforward, lucid prose. I believe this book is a great investment. It makes me want to hear more from Zane Berge about distance education and training.

Berge believes the audience for his book includes “organizational managers, performance consulting professionals, and practitioners charged with training functions in corporations, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies” (p. xiv). I agree. Berge’s introductory chapters provide just the right information necessary to help especially new managers, consultants, and trainers understand the business case for distance education and training. Also, the case studies allow this audience to examine how a variety of organizations have implemented distance education and training, in spite of barriers and difficulties. Another audience identified by Berge are: “students and professionals trying to enter the distance training field... [with applicability to] courses in business management, government training, and college classes...[in fields such as] education” (pp. xiv–xv). However, I feel that this book, as excellent as the case studies are, would more likely end up on a reading list, but not as a primary textbook.

One little sidebar: if you still like readings printed works, and are not yet firm about requiring all of your text to appear on a monitor, you will like the work Jossey-Bass has done with the design of this over 400-page book. The book is large enough to rest comfortably on one’s lap. Its pages feature wide margins, readable fonts and point sizes, and enough leading between lines of text to invite easy scanning. Taken as a whole, the book design seems open and inviting. With the advent of all sorts of design layouts emerging from vanity press offerings and self-publishing efforts, I still can recognize a Jossey–Bass book from a distance!

