August – 2004

Book Review – Distance Education and Distributed Learning

Editors: Charalambos Vrasidas and Gene V. Glass, (2002). *Distance Education and Distributed Learning*. 231 pages, softcover. Greenwich, CT.: Information Age. ISBN: 1 9315 7688 2

Reviewed by: Ramesh C. Sharma, Indira Gandhi National Open University, India

As universities and educational institutions around the globe strive to adopt and expand the use of information technologies in their teaching/ learning offerings, this book, *Distance Education and Distributed Learning*, will help those engaged in coming to grips with this fundamental paradigm shift taking place in education. This book addresses a wide range of issues related to distance education and online technologies. In the broadest sense, today's technology-driven changes in distance education will help make students and teachers more aware of social justice and equity through the use of technology used to solve real life problems irrespective of time and space, culture and ability to participate. Distance education has changed over the years, and even more so since the introduction of Web-based technologies. Today, the trend is towards globalization and collaboration among educational institutions. Distance educators and students now have access to emerging opportunities to engage in higher quality education irrespective of time and space.

Distance Education and Distributed Learning addresses the latest thinking on the integration of older and new teaching and learning technologies. Comprised of ten chapters written by renowned scholars, this book examines issues pertaining to the use of interactive media in distance education contexts. Discussed are issues related to interactive media design, learning experiences, student assessment for the online environment, hidden curriculum of e-learning, research in distance education, and online education in a global village settings.

In the book's preface, Sir John Daniel touches upon the hybridization of distance education and conventional teaching. The book then moves on to its opening chapter "Designing and Studying Learning Experiences that Use Multiple Interactive Media to Bridge Distance and Time," written by Dede, Whitehouse, and, Brown- L' Bahy, who present their research findings based in a grounded constructivist perspective on student participation and media use. By examining a case study of a Harvard Graduate School of Education course "Learning Media that Bridges Distance Education," Dede and colleagues focus on student's experiences in terms of the social, affective, and cognitive dimensions found in distributed learning classroom settings. To set the tone for their research, the authors examined a theoretical framework based on distributed cognition; active and collective construction of knowledge; social constructivist models of learning; situated learning; learning styles; and asynchronous and synchronous learning environments. Their research ultimately revealed that learning is, in fact, enhanced in virtual learning settings, be it asynchronous and synchronous. Indeed, less than half of those students surveyed selected face-to-face interaction as their preferred choice of learning medium. One important aspect of the research presented in this chapter, was the finding that learners' educational experiences change as they interact with integrated media.

Chapter 2, written by the editors and entitled: "A Conceptual Framework for Studying Distance Education" launches headlong in to the intellectual fray with the assertion that a paradigm shift is taking place in distance education, one which seeing the shift from that of simple correspondence education to more sophisticated and distributed modes and models of interactive learning. The authors support this assertion by presenting theoretical and methodological context of their research conducted at the Center for the Applications of Information Technologies, at their home institutions: the Western Illinois University and at Arizona State University. They discuss how context, interaction, learner control, social presence, and feedback contribute to a workable framework for studying distance education. After special mention of Moore's theory of transactional distance, the authors' then focus on supporting research that examine the use and improvement of technology for different teaching and learning modalities.

Chapter 3 entitled: "Rethinking Assessment for the Online Environment," is written by Robin Mason, a specialist in the design and evaluation of online courses. Mason focuses on cultural issues in terms of online global teaching, synchronous and asynchronous technologies, and models of virtual universities. Taking as her queue the benefits and difficulties we, as distance educators, face in the online teaching environment, Mason stressed the necessity for re-casting assessment practices. She defines what student assessment "is" in an online environment, and describes its practical application. Mason presents different forms of Web-based and online assessment, and raises serious concerns over cheating, manipulating information, and plagiarism in an online environment. In a nutshell, Mason urges us to rethink on how we should apply accepted best practices found in the traditional system, to that of the online medium.

Chapter 4, "Learning to Solve Problems Online" written by David H. Jonassen, moves the book's focus away from educators and online course developers, to that of learners. Simply put, Jonassen places emphasis on student problem solving in online learning environments. He first defines what problem solving is, followed by a typology of problems ranging from ill-structured to well structured problems, how to incorporate story problems, puzzles, algorithms, decision making, trouble shooting, rule using problems, strategic performance, system analysis, and dilemmas. Jonassen stresses that to motivate online learners to solve problems, then online learning environments and supporting systems must be re-engineered to support learning for solving problems. According to Jonassen, however, convincing universities and businesses in promoting problem solving in online learning is a crucial problem that must be addressed first.

As the title of Chapter 5 suggests, it deals with the "Embodiment of Knowledge in Virtual Environments." It is here that that author, Rob Walker, discusses the exact nature and role teacher plays in distance education vis-à-vis issues of human interaction and teaching philosophy. He analyses the changing face of distance education in terms of convergence of conventional and distance teaching, or as Otto Peters succinctly puts it "The integration of the elements of the three main forms of learning and teaching provides the university, whose traditional ways of working have solidified and quite often become ritualized, with a flexibility and variability that it has never before experienced. In this way, it is now able to deal with the special private situation and occupational requirements of older students as well, and to take sufficient account of them. For this reason, it will no longer prescribe fixed and binding locations and times for learning and personnel for teaching. Studying may be started, interrupted and restarted at any time, and may be carried out either full time or part time, whereby students may also switch between the two forms. Where this is necessary and possible, the curricula can also be oriented more closely to students' private and vocational experience, as studying will become extremely individualized and student-centred, and mainly based on self-learning." (Peters, 2000: 19). In the face of technology growing importance and use, Walker examines efforts underway in developing alternative pedagogies for new and emerging distance education modalities (i.e., virtual classrooms).

Chapter 6's author, Terry Anderson delves into the "Hidden curriculum of E-learning." According to Anderson, hidden curriculum holds both advantages and disadvantages for learners, and asserts that there must be fair and unbiased evaluation of these issues to ensure the highest road is taken. To clarify his argument, Anderson grounds his assertions in four e-learning contexts: 1) learning to learn; 2) learning the profession; 3) learning to be the expert; and 4) learning the game.

In Chapter 7, "Distance Education and the Professorate: The Issue of Productivity," Thomas C. Reeves asserts that faculty productivity is a complex variable and therefore difficult to measure. According to Reeves, the public often has erroneous perceptions about faculty; moreover, even higher education administrators often perceive faculty colleagues as uncooperative. Focusing his discussion on time spent by faculty in teaching and value of teaching over research, Reeves reveals serious concerns in terms of understanding faculty productivity, as well as faculty's future in distance education. Reeves argues that emerging business forces, new technologies, teacher autonomy, course delivery, etc., are elements that determine the professorate. There are content specialists, external providers, technologists, and part- and full-time faculty providing tutorial functions. In sum, Reeves paints a picture that foresees no need of human faculty in future distance education systems. This author strongly favours rigorous research in the area of faculty productivity, and calling for adopting pragmatic epistemology, stresses that the nature of research into this area needs to be developmental. Reeves cautions, however, that such developmental research should also seek solutions to real problems, and construct design principles used to arrive at future decisions.

Chapter 8, titled: "Evaluation and Research in Distance Education: Implications for Research", was written by Gary J. Anglin and Gary R. Morrison, covers evaluation and implications for research in distance education. This chapter begins with an examination and evaluation of research into different distance education delivery modes like correspondence, radio, television, two-way audio-video courses, and Web-based instruction. Anglin and Morrison recommend the need for clear distinctions to be made between basic, applied, and evaluative research.

In Chapter 9, Linda Harasim, an international expert in online education associated with designing, implementing and evaluating networking applications in the USA, Latin America, and Canada, examines what exactly makes online learning communities successful. She supports her viewpoint using a three phase theoretical framework: idea generating, idea linking, and intellectual convergence. To illustrate her point, Harasim presents a short examination of an international community of online educators called the Global Educators' Network (GEN). According to Harasim, the success of an online learning community depends on certain success indicators, like contextual and signifying descriptors of success (i.e., user reports, active participation and longevity, engagement indicators); and substantive indicators that signify analytical markers (i.e., social discourse and intellectual progress).

The last chapter of the book, "Of Nomads, Polyglots, and Global villagers: Globalization, Information Technologies and Critical Education Online" by Michalinos Zembylas, Charalambos Vrasidas, and Marina S. McIssac, critically examine the role of distance education in the 21st century. Discussed are the changing modalities of traditional and online education in view of globalization forces. Zembylas, Vrasidas, and McIssac urge readers to assess the implications of globalization, and the role of new technologies and emerging pedagogies. An important question emerging from this discussion is: What shall be the nature and impact of the increased use of technology in education? An understanding of the cultural, political, economic, and pedagogical challenges would reflect on the implications of global distance education concept. The metaphor of the "Nomad" (Deleuz and Guattari, 1983, 1987) and the "Polyglot" (Braidotti, 1994) has been critically examined to find answer on to how information technologies can be used to benefit the

underprivileged. To harness the full potential of Internet in education, the authors favour development of critical sensitivities and critical literacy. To achieve the above within the context of nomad's and polyglot's mode of thinking, the authors identify three characteristics: critical emotional literacy, collective witnessing, and collective intelligence. According to the authors, these tools must be utilized for empowering individuals and groups to be critical of the status quo and to work for peace, justice, and equity.

Overall this book, decorated with a simple yet elegant cover design, makes an excellent treatise. All the contributors have presented their thoughts and experiences in an impressive manner supported by relevant research. Each chapter provides an excellent list of references. This is a well-researched volume, which in a nutshell wisely advocates the use of open and distance education and Networked technologies in teaching and learning settings. The authors have shared their international experiences. I personally suggest that this volume would be useful to both those interested and actual practitioners in the area of online learning and open and distance education.

References

Braidotti, R. (1994). *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Deleuze, G., and Guattari, F. (1983). *Anti-Oedipous: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, MN.: University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, G., and Guattari, F. (1987). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia.* Minneapolis, MN.: University of Minnesota Press.

Peters, O. (2000). The transformation of the university into an institution of independent learning. In T. Evans and D. Nation (Eds.) *Changing University Teaching: Reflections on creating educational technologies* (p. 19). London: Kogan Page.

Athabasca University