

BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDUS

Handbook of Distance Education

M.G. Moore & W.G. Anderson (Eds.)

Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2003

Basic Statistics

Physical weight: 1.753 kg; number of pages: 872; price: US\$185 (Can\$249, Aus\$277); 55 chapters, each of approximately 8,000-8,500 words and written by 81 writers of whom approximately 33% are women. The United States is home to 67% of the total authorship. The author index occupies 18 pages, the subject index eight pages. Nine topics show more nuances of indexing than do other topics: computer-mediated communication, costs of distance education, culture, evaluation, faculty, interaction, mega-universities, Web-based learning, and women. The predominant technology represented is Web/on-line, with 13 chapters overtly discussing its applications and associated research studies, and countless references in other chapters.

The Content

In his Preface Michael G. Moore explains the intended scope and intellectual heft of this handbook: it “has been developed in recognition of the need for an authoritative compilation reflecting the state of the art in what is arguably the most significant development in education in the past quarter century” (p. ix). Hmm: this looks very ambitious, and I read two paragraphs later that I’m holding a “comprehensive and detailed account of the current state of the art ... a compendium of new, specially commissioned work from all the leading thinkers and practitioners of distance education in the United States, supplemented with chapters by some of the most distinguished of their foreign peers” (p. x). Moore explains to student readers that at least in this volume they can relax about the issue of “authority”—what I name as “some documents being more equal than others” regarding the production of knowledge: “the authors ... have considerable authority ... everyone has been published at least once in the *American Journal of Distance Education* ... Most are veterans of many years of research, writing, practice, and study, the authors of all the main books

and principal articles in the field” (p. xi). Well, regarding that last clause, it surely depends on one’s perspective and one’s experience: I have colleagues whose insights, common sense, wit, and fearless observations of trends and issues enable them to produce must-read documents, but they are not represented in this handbook. Of course, not everyone can be invited, nor can all invitees accept; but any perceptions of even unintended educational imperialism make me uneasy. And because on page xxi we learn that the handbook is “designed primarily for use by educators in the United States,” it seems fair to argue that the tome’s title should reflect its US bias.

Moore raises some important issues about the production and dissemination of knowledge: he argues for building a “solid theoretical foundation for research and practice” (p. xi) and deplors attitudes of expediency held by some young researchers who may give their supervisors headaches by regarding literature reviews as a chore or as irrelevant because some articles do not always focus on the Web or another new technology; or by not bothering to find out what has been learned already from earlier practice or research. Just as tellingly Moore takes aim at senior practitioners: his consulting experience leads him to “conclude that an impatience for moving to action without adequate comprehension of previous experience characterizes not only the research but virtually all American practice ... the result will be a chaos of misdirected, naïve, costly, and wasteful initiatives—a fair summary of the state of the art at many institutions today” (pp. x-xi). Hence his passion for creating a handbook for students, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers that serves as a “key for *knowing what is known* [italics in original] before they begin to search for new knowledge or begin to design and deliver new programs” (p. xi). Yes indeed, few of us “oldies” would dispute his points. But as we would advise our students or younger colleagues to learn the reputable writers in any field, gain the right combination of information literacy skills to evaluate any book, article, or Web site, and be willing to search even for fugitive material (these days, this almost means items that are not full text on-line and free!), so any reader of this handbook needs a *caveat lector*: *Think not that the chapters and their references are adequate if you want to claim adequate information about distance education.*

Seven sections divide the content. Nine chapters focus on “Historical and conceptual foundations” (noting in passing one chapter on one form of history of distance education—as seen through the activities of the International Council for Distance Education—and another that argues for “empathy” as the base for a theory of distance education). The next nine chapters—on “Learning and learners”—refer to various arguments for more theory development and discuss a variety of aspects too numerous to list here. The “Design and instruction” stable of nine chapters focuses

heavily on on-line technology applications, with one chapter on Deakin University's library services and another that appears to argue that "the new learner-centered conception" in distance education would be "difficult, if not impossible, to apply" if we did not have on-line technology. (Well, I suppose it depends on how we define learner-centredness and how broad our horizons of understanding are: despite the current rhetoric, not everything "good" about distance education was invented by on-line devotees). Eleven more chapters explore "Policies, administration, and management," including policy development and strategic planning, quality assurance, legal issues, evaluation, and faculty participation. The next eight chapters identify "Different audiences in distance education": 100% US focus here, with three chapters devoted to the US armed forces. Three succeeding chapters analyze the complexities of managing the "economics of distance education" before the reader is taken into six chapters about "International perspectives": in essence mostly about globalization issues, but some additional work on cultural and mega-university matters. With all this material, one needs a finely nuanced subject index, but after encountering some indexing errors (e.g., two references to information on pages that were blank and inconsistent indexing of the titles of the four long-established refereed journals), I lost some confidence in that tool. A sharp mind might explore the covert message from a situation where the name index is much longer than the subject index.

The authors were asked to produce "an overview and synthesis of the research and scholarly literature of the subject being treated, supported by an extensive list of references" (p. xiii). Of the other two specific questions to be addressed, one asked for an explanation of how "empirical research evidence" informed the synthesis, and the other asked for an indication of further research directions. As I have not read all 872 pages, but scanned many, I am left with an impression of reports of mostly US research results and not as much use of reputable "foreign" (non-US) literature as I would wish (even realizing that the handbook is responding to US interests). Pragmatism applies here too in the many descriptions of practical applications of technology and a focus on what works, as distinct from stepping back from the fray to reflect overtly, think critically about epistemological issues and everyday jargon, compare traditional canons of distance education with some contemporary trends, draw out tacit and personal knowledge, or recognize that earlier technologies still hold considerable value in many contexts where sustained and inexpensive access to information and tutors is problematic.

We lack professional biographical information from the authors, but their e-mails and institutional affiliations are given. Commendably, a minority of authors are researchers from "fields adjacent to distance education ... [because Moore believes that] distance education should be

enriched by such cross-fertilization” (p. xiii). I could have wished for a few more such folk, especially those who could provoke critical and creative multidisciplinary thinking.

Comments

This section is relatively brief because you will have to make up your own mind based on your own philosophies and on the effects of your reflective experience. I acknowledge—with some feeling from direct experience—that the editors’ tasks in compiling such a handbook are not easy: the act of commissioning from a willing author is just the beginning of a delicate and complex process. There are some solid chapters, but it would be invidious to name them. There is some evidence of dichotomous thinking that pits older technologies against newer ones or that pits conceptions and assumptions about “traditional” higher education classrooms with the learning spaces offered by on-line technology. Students and those new to distance education need to be critically alert when reading such understandings. I was surprised to see no serious discussion of the use of audioconferencing in higher education: are non-US folk the only ones with extensive experience here? Is this not a relevant, lesson-producing technology given the use of synchronous on-line discussions? There is scant recognition of the continuing usefulness of that sophisticated technology we name *print* (even despite Nielsen’s research on readability issues for on-line material). Do so many of our learners demand that all their course materials and discussions be exclusively on line?

My scan of the book revealed few overt attempts to interrogate longer-term effects of technology application using, for example, Everett Rogers’ attributes for long-term adoption of an innovation or a framework similar to the set of questions offered by McLuhan and McLuhan (1988) (the *it* refers to any selected change induced by a technology): “What does it enhance or intensify? What does it render obsolete or displace? What does it retrieve that was previously [made obsolete]? What does it produce or become when [pushed] to an extreme?” (p. 7). Perhaps my long-view thinking is premature.

The term *instruction* is heavily used throughout the handbook; now there is a topic for some critical thinking about how language illuminates predominant teaching theories in use. Ditto for the term *distance*: to the critical mind its use is a good example of who has the power to define the center and the periphery, how, and with what results. I missed information about private-sector activity (e.g., as with the members of EADL in Europe), and looked for more discussion about the value and use of nonpositivist experimental research methods (especially since arguing for more qualitative and critical research approaches just before the 1990 ICDE conference).

Time to stop. I will use the handbook, recognizing that producing something of this scale is a challenging enterprise and that it contains some useful information.

Caveat emptor. No “handbook” will satisfy everyone, so the buyer’s or reader’s task is to compare what he or she reads with the broader history and the wider fields of practice, not to mention one’s own values and experiential learning. Dip into this reference book when you have time to hit the library; it does add to the literature base. Recall that Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom have long and distinguished histories of distance education practice and records of that practice in various refereed journals. If you lead courses on distance education and buy the handbook, choose chapters as additions to a wider collection of material to be studied.

Liz Burge

Reference

McLuhan, M., & McLuhan, E. (1988). *Laws of media: The new science*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

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Rethinking Learner Support in Distance Education: Change and Continuity in an International Context

Alan Tait and Roger Mills (Eds.)

London: Routledge Falmer, 2003, 199 pp. ISBN: 0-415-30143-2 (hardcover), 0-415-30144-0 (softcover)

Every second year for the past two decades, Alan Tait and Roger Mills of the Open University in the East of England have been organizing and hosting a conference on student support in open and distance learning that has become known as “the Cambridge conference.” Since its beginnings in 1983, the conference has produced sets of proceedings that have been welcome additions to the bookshelves of those fortunate enough to have been registrants. More recently, however, the paper outcomes of the conference have been edited collections published for a wider market. This book is the latest of these, a result of the 2001 Cambridge International Conference on Open and Distance Learning.

The theme of the conference and hence of the volume is an examination of change in the conceptualization, management, and delivery of learner

support services. Pressures for change arise from a variety of sources, largely external to institutions providing ODL and for the most part beyond their control. These pressures derive from the neoliberal agenda for education that is being played out worldwide, evident in measures such as the following:

- shift of public funding for education from higher to lower levels of education (e.g., the global drive to implement Universal Primary Education by 2015);
- expansion of secondary and higher education through increased privatization;
- reduction of public spending on education at all levels, by increasing class size and teacher-student ratios, shifting costs to the user, encouraging private enterprise initiatives intent on capturing the lucrative “education market,” and a consequent heightening of competition among providers especially at tertiary level;
- the drive by national governments for “comparative advantage” in terms of attracting investment, emphasizing the need for labor pools that are at the same time highly skilled and low-waged;
- regulatory systems that emphasize accountability, giving rise to managerial and business models in institutional governance and an emphasis on results measured by standard sets of indicators;
- looking to the information and communications technologies that are being produced by multinational companies and used to such powerful effect by finance capital, to work their magic at all levels of educational provision in tasks that include delivery of cost-effective programming, facilitation of international and multilevel collaborations, and creation of administrative efficiencies;
- the increasing prevalence of the notion of *student as customer*, and a concern for “customer service” driven by quality assurance schemes that define quality in terms of customer satisfaction and personalized service.

The world of distance education provision is running to keep up, particularly in the area of learner support. Too long seen as a costly if necessary add-on to already costly learning materials, support to learners is moving closer to center stage now that students are becoming customers who demand better service and complain if their expectations are not met or take their custom elsewhere. As well as co-editing the book, Roger Mills contributes a description of this “new student” and an argument that quality learner support is an important marketing point in the increasingly competitive world of ODL provision, thereby becoming revenue-generating rather than a “spending ministry.” Co-editor Alan Tait provides a comprehensive look at the pressures on the OU-UK—take in a wider

range of learners, but do so with less government funding and a higher level of service—and how the university's world view, culture, and organization of learner support are having to change in response. Margaret Johnson, Clive Barrett, and Marion Phillips look at one particular area of OU response, the “re-versioning” of advice and help to learners to make resources available in generic, but also more personalized, form on line.

Brian Kenworthy looks at similar issues from an Australian perspective, arguing that the principles underlying learner support remain unchanged, but voicing a concern that the “commercial imperative of the new providers” might not recognize these principles or be in a position to follow them. Chieko Mizoue adds an Asian perspective, describing how library services can be provided to this new student in the Japanese context. Robin Mason also looks at the new student and sees a possible role for a “tutor-lite” model that might more effectively meet the needs of these “pioneers in (the) new consumer-oriented approach to learning provision.” Mary Thorpe takes a quite different approach, based on a functional definition of learner support as “all those elements capable of responding to a known learner or group of learners, before, during and after the learning process.” This definition helps her make sense of how collaborative, on-line learning is blurring the boundaries between course development and learner support and offering distance educators new means of achieving their goals.

Another thrust of the book is an examination of the concept of tutor as mentor. Alan Mandell and Lee Herman remind us of the formative work done in this area at Empire State College. Helen Lentell makes a case for the tutor's central place in learning, supporting it with evidence from a private-nonprofit sector collaboration that places the tutor front and center as coach and mentor. Jennifer O'Rourke takes us to three nonprofit-sector initiatives offering noncredentialled programs that have mentors at the core, linking the learners' experience, course content that presents principles of good practice, and their application to everyday life and work.

A third, and major, contribution comes from those authors who offer another set of cautions to the “business” or providing learner support, arising from their location in non-Western cultures and nonaffluent settings. Jason Pennells voices concerns about the effect on learners in such contexts of transforming a paper-based program to an electronically based one—given the limitations of infrastructure and access, how successful can the new program be, and what message is it sending? Evie Nonyongo describes the major transformations that two institutions in southern Africa have made to their models of learner support, driven not so much by new technologies, but by new political realities. Writing also from a southern African context, Norma Corry and Tony Lelliott make a case for the more traditional methods of learner support continuing to be the most

appropriate for the conditions under which South African teacher education students live and work. Carol Bertram writes also of a South African teacher education program, describing how self-help groups—real, not virtual—help keep learners motivated, but appear actually to be interfering with their deep learning of course concepts. Louise Aylward writes also of culture and its effect on learning, in this case how in the Confucian tradition of the teacher and text as authoritative means that new ways of using computer-mediated communication need to be found if they are to be effective for learning in the Hong Kong context.

Open and distance learning is clearly a field in flux, as providers struggle to find ways of responding to neoliberal policy imperatives without abandoning the principles of learner access and success that have been their foundation for over three decades. The contributions to this volume provide a wealth of insights that can serve as signposts in this struggle. The book represents a snapshot of where we were in the course of this struggle at the turn of the 21st century, and practitioners who wish to engage with these challenges in a more productive and meaningful way can ill afford to be without it.

Barbara Spronk

Barbara Spronk is an independent consultant in open and distance learning who earned her doctorate in anthropology from the University of Alberta in 1982. Since then, her work at Athabasca University and the International Extension College has involved her in projects in over a dozen countries. Her research, teaching, and consulting interests include the effects of globalization, culture, and gender on open and distance learning.

e-Research: Methods, Strategies, and Issues

Terry Anderson and Heather Kanuka

Allyn and Bacon, 2003, ISBN 0-205-34382-1

Anderson and Kanuka's (2003) book *e-Research: Methods, Strategies, and Issues* provides an introduction and resource for researchers who plan to use the Internet either as a research site or as a research tool. Research projects that involve the Internet as a research site include ethnographies of electronic communities, historical analyses of postings to a mailing list, content analyses of Web-server logs that show how people interact with a particular Web site, or any other analyses of Internet activities. In contrast, research projects that involve the Internet as a research tool include projects where researchers use the Internet to study activity that does not necessarily take place on the Internet. This second form of e-research

includes all projects where researchers use the Internet to collect data, review related literature, analyze data, or disseminate findings. This broad definition includes all researchers who distribute surveys through electronic mailing lists, conduct interviews via e-mail, access articles that have been published in electronic journals, use computer conferencing to collaborate with co-investigators, maintain a Web site for a research project, present research findings at a virtual conference, or engage in any other research step using the Internet. Anderson and Kanuka's definition of e-research is broad enough to encompass most current research in distance education and the social sciences more generally. The book is a supplementary research text that is dedicated to "e-researchers everywhere and especially to struggling graduate students" (p. v). There is also an accompanying Web site located at <http://www.e-research.ca>, which includes updated lists of Web resources cited in the text, a separate chapter on Web site construction, information about the authors, and an opportunity to provide feedback or suggestions.

The Preface and the first two chapters set the stage for the book by introducing and defining such important terms as *research*, *e-research*, *e-researchers*, and the *Internet*. Building on this solid foundation, Anderson and Kanuka then present a chapter on "Designing e-Research" that emphasizes the importance of asking "meaningful and answerable questions" (p. 27). This discussion is illustrated with multiple examples that demonstrate relevant criteria for identifying good research questions. The chapter also includes a reasonable discussion of key distinctions between qualitative and quantitative research approaches that provide an important introduction for new researchers. Some assumptions associated with quantitative research approaches (e.g., hypotheses, objectivity, and the specificity of research questions) slip into the discussion at various points, but astute readers may be able to read beyond these to acknowledge alternative assumptions that guide qualitative research approaches. Chapter 4 follows up with useful sections on assessing the quality of literature and authenticating net-based resources, as well as information about formal and informal literature sources and search techniques, plagiarism, and reference management software (e.g., EndNotes, ProCite).

Through citations to the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS, 1998)* and other related documents, Chapter 5 identifies key research ethics principles as (a) voluntary informed consent; (b) privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity; and (c) recognition of potential research risks. Based on these key principles, Anderson and Kanuka then introduce three ethical issues that are particularly relevant in e-research. First, they address the blurring between public and private domains on the Internet and relevant criteria to help researchers identify when the use of textual materials entails human participation.

Researchers and the research ethics community struggle to distinguish between public and private materials on the Internet, and Anderson and Kanuka's discussion may be useful to these people. Second, they address possibilities for anonymity or confidentiality in Internet interactions and how these possibilities relate to copyright laws, security shortcomings on the Internet, data encryption methods, and the possibilities for electronic signatures. Third, they discuss the particular ethical complexities and difficulties of defining potential risk that stem from possibilities for sexual experiences on the Internet that involve no interpersonal physical contact. Anderson and Kanuka's presentation of these ethical complexities highlights the importance of case-by-case decision-making and directs researchers to their institutional research ethics boards for specific procedural details.

In Chapter 6 Anderson and Kanuka review various Internet tools to aid research collaboration. Subsequent chapters are devoted to common research methods such as interviews (Chapter 7), focus group interviews (Chapter 8), surveys (Chapter 11), content analyses (Chapter 12), and quantitative methods to support archival and observational research approaches (Chapter 10). These chapters include specific tips and pointers for ways to adapt these standard techniques to Internet capabilities, as well as advantages and disadvantages of each technique. There is also an interesting chapter on net-based consensus techniques (Chapter 9) that introduces research methods such as the Delphi method and Nominal Group techniques, which may be unfamiliar to many researchers, but seem ideally suited to e-researchers who are, for example, interested in participants' predictions for the future of some electronic tool or related interactions. Throughout these chapters Anderson and Kanuka emphasize participant recruitment and data collection methods, with some attention to data analysis and related software tools (e.g., Atlas/TI, NUD*ist, HyperQual, StatSoft, etc.).

Chapter 13 describes Internet-based mechanisms for disseminating research results, including e-journals, personal Web sites, and virtual conferences. This chapter is nicely complemented by the practical how-to tips and strategies on Web site construction that form the basis of the Web chapter that appears on the accompanying Web site. The book concludes with a brief chapter about the potential future of e-research.

Overall the book includes some useful information and helpful examples, but it left me somewhat dissatisfied. Yes, there are sections that I will recommend to graduate students and colleagues who are venturing into the world of e-research. I was particularly impressed with the careful definitions of relevant terminology, the reviews of software products for all stages of a research project, the advice and sample letters for recruiting research participants, the criteria for evaluating literature sources, the

abundant practical tips, and the many references to on-line resources. The book is intended as a supplementary guide for e-researchers rather than a complete research text, but I was hoping for broader coverage and more depth. I was also discouraged by what seemed to be sloppy proofreading (e.g., *Principle Researcher* instead of *Principal Researcher*, *proscribed* instead of *prescribed*) and general disorganization of the chapters. The chapter sequence seemed haphazard, with no discernible order in the mid-section of the book. Within chapters the authors sometimes jumped to new topics without clarifying the relevance to previous topics. This disorganization may lead to misinterpretation in some places. For example, discussing observational studies only in the chapter on quantitative methods might lead readers mistakenly to assume that observational studies require statistical approaches. Readers who have a good understanding of research approaches will be able to identify useful components from this text, but new researchers are advised to acquire a better understanding of research elsewhere before delving into *e-Research* in order to avoid being misled or confused by the layout and content in this first edition of a text for a new field. Based on the definition provided here, e-research is ubiquitous. Researchers and graduate student advisors would be well served by a solid e-research methods text, but this is not it.

Reference

Tri-council policy statement: Ethical conduct for research involving humans. (1998). Retrieved July 18, 2003 from <http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/english/policystatement/policystatement.cfm>

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