ANNOUNCING

2nd International Conference on Open Higher Education:
Innovations and Technology

March 24-28, 1987

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IN REVIEW/CRITIQUES DE LIVRES

The Role of Technology in Distance Education

A. W. Bates (Ed.)
Reviewed by D.R. Garrison

Distance education is characterized by mediated communication between a noncontiguous teacher and learner, facilitated by means of technologies ranging from print to microprocessors. The many recent technological developments have intensified the problem of distance education practitioners attempting to understand and use these technologies appropriately. An overview of distance education technologies and their application is the subject of *The Role of Technology in Distance Education*, edited by A.W. Bates. The stated purpose of this book is "to deal with practical matters arising from the use of various technologies in distance education."

The intended audiences for this book are staff working in "specialized" distance teaching institutions, and "staff in conventional institutions who are now considering the possibilities and practicalities of off-campus teaching." Since the vast majority of applications are drawn from the Open University setting, distance education practitioners from similar specialized institutions would likely gain the most from this book. Also, some of the detailed descriptions of the technology itself might be of greater interest to administrators and academics than to distance education teachers.

The hard bound book consists of 19 chapters organized under four headings—Introduction and Overview, Media in Course Design, Media in Course Management and Presentation, and Selection of Technology and Course Design. The vast majority of chapters are exclusive of illustrations and the text is small and compact. Most chapters have a good reference list for those who wish to do further reading.

The first part of this book—"Introduction and Overview"—consists of one short chapter giving some background to the Open University (OU), a discussion of some general developments in distance education, a presentation of four major technological trends since the establishment of the OU, and finally, a statement regarding the purpose of the book. This four-page chapter is insufficient in setting the stage for such a large amount of technical information that is to follow. The discussion of developments in distance education and technology is seen almost entirely from the perspective of the OU. In addition, there is no discussion as to the structure of the book or rationale for why the technologies are categorized as they are. Why the technologies are seen as either "Media in Course Design" or "Media in Course Management" is not readily apparent and the classification does little to assist the uninitiated to organize this technological complexity.

In the second part, under the heading, "Media in Course Design", are chapters

on word processors, broadcast television, video cassettes, satellite and cable transmission, video discs, computer assisted learning, radio, audio cassettes, and home kits. The first chapter is an excellent discussion of word processing, which from the perspective of the OU is an important component of course design; however, for the reader not associated with a similar instititution, this technology may be of little interest or importance.

The third chapter, on broadcast television, presents an excellent discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of this media and how it may best be used. The next chapter, "Video Cassettes," is also a very good discussion of this media and how it may be used. The chapter on satellite and cable provides a perspective on the European situation and a good overview of the Knowledge Network in Canada.

Chapter Six, "Video Discs," gives an interesting overview of this technology, although the cost estimates, technology, and examples of educational use are somewhat out of date given the rapid advances of this technology. In addition to the increased number of laser-disc applications in the last couple of years, the technical issues that need to be addressed relate to interactiveness due to "level two coding," compact discs (CD ROM and CD Video), recordable discs, and the coming of erasable discs. The chapter on computer assisted learning (CAL) is not so much a description of CAL as it is a description of various CAL programs at the OU and a report on their evaluation. The next chapter is a fair and critical examination of the use of radio at the OU. An interesting discussion of audio cassettes is found in Chapter Nine. The author discusses the power of communicating with voice, the advantages of cassettes, designing cassettes, and the advantages with regard to cost and video. The final chapter of Part 2 is on home kits. Again, discussion of the purpose, production, advantages, and cost are from the perspective of the OU.

Part 3 includes chapters on telephone teaching, Cyclops, computers in administration, teletext systems, viewdata systems, tutors and media, and resource centres. Telephone teaching is given a good, brief overview; effectiveness is addressed, and the problem of graphics discussed. Given the growth of teleconferencing, particularly in North America, perhaps this area deserved more than one chapter. Certainly audiographic enhancements of teleconferencing, such as slow-scan and telewriting, could have been expounded upon in greater detail. Cyclops, OU's hybrid of a videotex and telewriting teleconferencing system, is described in detail. Although the system had many advantages when it was pioneered in 1976, there are comparable systems available today at less cost than reported in the book.

Chapter 13's discussion on "Computers in Academic Administration" is concerned with administrative uses as well as support for teaching in the form of computer managed instruction. The first part is likely of marginal interest for distance education teachers, but the second part may hold considerably more interest for teachers. The next two chapters on teletext and viewdata systems could have been combined, given their similarities in purpose. Both chapters give a reasonably good overview of the technology and their possible application in distance education; however, the differences between the two could have been made clearer.

In Chapter 16 on "Tutors and Media", the author discusses the complementary

nature of tutor, students, media, and text. The critical and selective role of students and tutors in using media is also discussed. This discussion is placed in context by considering the tutor's role from a broader perspective than just media. "Media Resource Centres" is the final chapter of this section and is an excellent discussion of the support such centres can provide the distance learner from the print, electronic, and human interaction perspectives.

The fourth and final section consists of two chapters concerned with the "Selection of Technology and Course Design." Chapter 18, "Pedagogic Differences Between Media," attempts to address "the question of which teaching methods and channels of communication to use, in order to achieve a given set of educational aims." The chapter provides "a simple taxonomy of courses, educational aims and teaching strategies" with regard to media. Although the author states that this is just a beginning to the discussion, it represents the best and most important chapter of the book, given the title of the book. The last chapter, "Putting it Together: Now and the Future," is largely a discussion of the advantages and limitations of technology now and in the future. The greatest problem the author identifies is "deciding which media to use, and the different ways in which each medium should be used so that they complement one another."

The Role of Technology in Distance Education is a useful and informative book that looks at a broad range of technologies associated with distance education. The book is recommended as a reference for teachers, administrators, and academics involved with the delivery of education at a distance. While more space than necessary was spent describing the characteristics of the technology rather than practical matters arising from its use, it did attain its stated purpose. This book is likely the best comprehensive overview of technology in distance education, notwithstanding its publication date and recent technological developments.

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