

Book Review – Distance Learning Technologies: Issues, trends and opportunities

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April – 2003

Book Review

Distance Learning Technologies: Issues, trends and opportunities

Author: Linda Lau (2000). *Distance Learning Technologies: Issues, trends and opportunities*. Idea Group Publishing, Hershey, PA. 252 pages, softcover. ISBN 1 8782 8980 2

Reviewed by: Chère Campbell Gibson, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Distance education continues to expand and colleges and universities strive to prepare professionals, including future faculty members, business trainers, industry, and the military, to work in distance education. Texts that focus on distance education, broadly defined, are few and far between. Even fewer focus on the technologies used, issues to be confronted, and opportunities to be afforded all within a breadth of contexts. It is from this perspective that this book was reviewed.

To be honest, the review of this book got off to a bad start. While the title of the book suggested a breadth of technologies would be discussed, the preface suggested otherwise with a lead off sentence that focused on the World Wide Web. The third sentence claimed that: “distance learning was pioneered at Stanford University more than 30 years ago . . .” – an assertion that ignored a mere 120 plus years of distance education in the United States and longer elsewhere! Nonetheless, the opening paragraph once again referred to distance learning technologies – plural – so there was hope for a comprehensive treatment.

Contrary to what one would assume from the cover, which suggests a sole author, the book is actually an edited book, consisting of 16 chapters divided into three sections. The editor suggests the first section “. . . provides the theoretical foundation of distance learning. . . ” the second section “. . . describes the conceptual aspect of distance learning. . . ” while the third and concluding sections “. . . provides five cases of practical implementation of distance learning.”

With a focus on the theoretical foundations, the first section begins with a chapter on constructivism, followed by a chapter emphasizing interaction, narrowly defined as learner-instructor and learner-learner interaction. Evaluation is the focus of the third chapter, followed by a comprehensive chapter on implementing corporate distance training using change management. Although this chapter focuses on the corporate environment, in my view, it would have made a better first chapter because it set the stage regarding the range of technologies, strategic planning, change management, and other major considerations that should be examined when implementing distance education. This section had a notable lack of connection to distance education theory or research. However, references were made to some relevant theory borrowed from cognitive psychology and classical instructional design.

With an emphasis on the “conceptual aspect” of distance learning, the second section contains seven chapters. The first chapter focuses on three strategies for using distance technologies in higher education, and emphasizes issues related to personnel, funding, markets, competition, fraud, and alliances. Written by the same authors, the next chapter discusses alliances. Several foundational chapters followed, focusing on the elements of a successful distributed learning program and essential conditions for successful online teaching and learning. Other chapters in this section describe a learning environment built on applications of technologies and Total Quality Management. Discussions of digital video in education and group decision support systems complete this section.

The final section presents five case studies that cut across sectors, from primary and secondary education to higher education, public and private, as well as business and industry. The national contexts for these studies include the United States and Egypt with both video conferencing and Web-based solutions highlighted.

The book was a challenge to read. In spite of the overview provided by the author/ editor, the order of the chapters seemed rather odd. The chapters focusing on theoretical foundations ignored existing distance education theory and failed to recognize seminal authors working in areas such as constructivism and interaction in distance education. Clearly unfamiliar with the literature of distance education, some authors sought to enhance their theory by building on sound applications of existing work, while others proceeded to formulate theoretical frameworks already in existence. Recognized by many as an early technology, the medium of print, with one exception, was all but ignored by chapter authors in spite of its considerable use alone or in conjunction with other media, including video- and computer-based instructional applications.

The chapters were also extremely uneven, ranging from superficial examinations to an in depth treatment of important issues, to assertions without supportive documentation and zero references to positions reinforced with current literature or Web-based resources and references that have informed the thinking and writings of the author(s). While the topic of distance education is an important one, and the technologies, issues, trends and opportunities related to teaching and learning at a distance are important to understand, this book does not represent the best starting point for exploration.

