

BOOK REVIEW

Mark Hawkes, *Book Review Editor*

***V-Learning: Distance Education in the 21st Century Through 3D Learning Environments*, by Leonard A. Annetta, Elizabeth Folta, and Marta Klesath**

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V-Learning: Distance Education in the 21st Century Through 3D Learning Environments, by Leonard A. Annetta, Elizabeth Folta, and Marta Klesath (New York: Springer, 2010, 182 pages, \$110.66).

As an online instructor, I often wonder how I can present my courses in a challenging and interesting fashion while at the same time ensuring that my students learn the information outlined in the course syllabus. Plagued by this thought, it was not until I enrolled into a university and community college instruction class that I was forced to reach beyond my current knowledge base of online instruction into one that opened the doors to a virtual classroom. Much to my chagrin, this journey began through a book review assignment.

My book of choice, *V-Learning: Distance Education in the 21st Century Through 3D*

Learning Environments, was examined from the perspective of an online instructor. Primarily, I wanted to find innovative ways to ensure that the online learning experience for my students proved to be informative and fun. Bearing this in mind, my disappointment in completing the book review diminished and I began reading the book.

The book is divided into 11 chapters targeting specific topics related to distance education and virtual learning environments. Many of the chapters are supplemented with reference information, figures, and illustrative examples that make the contents of the book easy to read and comprehensible. In just the first few chapters, the authors' intentions to provide educators and readers with examples of how 3D learning environments can be utilized in distance education as an effective tool

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for educating students in the new millennium was quite clear.

Chapter 1 of the book introduces how distance learning has evolved over time along with the direction it is headed in years to come. Skills required to lead in the 21st century (i.e., play, performance, simulation, appropriation, multitasking, distributed cognition, collective intelligence, judgment, transmedia navigation, networking, and negotiation) is also discussed as a way to urge distance educators to prepare learners with these skills necessary in maintaining prosperity and stimulate economic growth through the application of technology and innovative ideas. The authors conclude that this chapter sets the stage for subsequent chapters and prompts the reader to consider how 3D multiuser environments and video games can significantly impact distance education and equip students with the skills needed in the 21st century.

Chapter 2 targets millennials and why they fail in distance learning environments. Millennials, often categorized as “Generation G” or the “Net Generation,” are considered students of today who learn differently from traditional students. This shift in learning is influenced by the accessibility of web-based information found through computer-generated websites such as wikis, blogs, and Youtube. Contributing factors to students failing in distance education includes the course delivery, students’ motivation, and the lack of “bells and whistles” used to liven up lectures. Additionally, the authors also summarize the findings from an article written in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* concerning a panel of millennials’ views about distance education. When students were questioned about distance education, they indicated that it was not favorable because it was a language and literacy experience. When comparing it to face-to-face instruction, students viewed distance education better because it afforded them an opportunity to say things online that they would be apprehensive about saying in the classroom (p. 18). The chapter ends with a plea to accommodate the learning needs for millennials in dis-

tance education to ensure a successful learning experience.

Chapters 3 and 4 introduce the power of serious games in education and virtual learning environments (VLEs) in distance education. Chapter 2 challenges educators to move beyond traditional teaching methodologies to those that incorporate videogames and synchronous online teaching and learning. The authors highlight Dede’s (2002) complementary interfaces of information technology that will shape how people learn through “world-to-the-desktop,” “Alice-in Wonderland,” and “ubiquitous computing” interfaces (p. 27). They assert that as the aforementioned interfaces become mainstream, students will be drawn to these platforms of learning. Additionally, Chapter 3 suggests that because millennials are gamers by nature, in order to sustain participation and attention it is important that educators design curriculums around 3D worlds and games. The power in doing so will enable students to extend their minds and bodies into virtual space transcending it to the academic community creating a sense of presence, identity, community, and play.

Chapter Four provides information on how to utilize 3D virtual learning environments in distance education. The authors gave examples of how premade environments, such as Second Life, have proven successful for educators in the field of sociology, anthropology, and psychology because it allows students an opportunity to experience things they may never be able to experience in real-life situations. This chapter gives credence to the benefits of incorporating virtual learning environments into distance education.

Chapter 5 provides in-depth details on the benefits of computer games and how they relate to educating students. These goals include the ability for students to obtain rewards based on achievement, evaluation and repetition of skills, building upon previous knowledge, and the ability to control their investment in the game. Such goals are similar in education because students are expected to gain and demonstrate knowledge, self-evaluate

their performance, and are challenged and rewarded through the learning process. Case studies are provided as examples of how educational games can be designed across disciplines.

The idea of time, space, and identity was introduced in Chapter 6 as characteristics potentially advantageous in online instruction and are pertinent to effective synchronous learning environments in that they allow for real-time interactions, offer maneuverable environments for interaction with others, and allow students the opportunity to express themselves freely without reservations. Chapter 7, on the other hand, expounds more on the concepts of presence and identity discussed in chapter three. Additionally, the authors introduced the idea of stimulating perspective taking through cognitive conflict. They assert that perspective taking are basic structures of social reasoning and is useful in interpersonal relations, moral reasoning, social problem solving, and communication (p. 87), all of which are important components to consider when resolving conflict. The authors conclude that the more an environment can stimulate empathy for others in the virtual world, the greater perspective students will have in that particular environment.

In Chapters 8 and 9 the authors elaborate on the concept of situated learning and how to engage students in distance education. McLellan (1985) defines situated learning as the belief that knowledge is contextually situated and is fundamentally influenced by the activity, context, and culture in which it is used. McLellan indicates that a well designed virtual learning environment must include the following elements to ensure students learning: stories, reflection, cognitive apprenticeship, collaboration, coaching, multiple practice, articulation of learning skills, and technology. When incorporating the above elements in a virtual learning environment, students will be motivated to learn and engage fully in the learning process.

Chapter 10 focuses on ways to effectively evaluate and assess distance learning courses

utilizing 3D learning environments. The authors note that because the task of assessing such learning environments is tedious, many researchers shy away from doing so. In knowledge of this, they propose the use of Heck, Steigelbauer, Hall and Loucks' (1981) five-step process to effectively guide the assessment process which included the following: (1) identify innovation components, (2) identify additional components and variations that constitute variations of implementation that range from ideal use to unacceptable use for each component, (3) refine the innovation components as a part of the research, (4) finalize the innovation components, and (5) collect innovation data (pp. 126-127). Additionally, they recommend the use of design-based research because it focuses on real world practices and is flexible in design revision, multiple dependent variables, and capturing social interactions. The authors conclude the chapter discussing ways to collect data and measured variables such as engagement. Implications for future research are also discussed.

In the final chapter, the authors propose transforming blended learning (combination of learning approaches) into trihybrid learning (combination of classroom learning, web use, and 3D VLE) because it gives both faculty and students a flexibility that wouldn't be possible in traditional learning environments. Additionally, the authors make differentiations among three 3D VLE's (Second Life, Activity World, and There) utilized in education today. Among the three, Second Life is deemed most popular because it allows instructors to customize, organize contents, and individualize the software to accommodate their course needs. Additionally, it is free, offers tech support, and is compatible with Babblar, Skype, and Vivox, which are designed to enhance communication features inside and outside of Second Life. The authors conclude the chapter by recommending that future research in the area of virtual learning environments should focus on ways to accommodate students with physical and mental disabilities to determine whether or not such learning environments made them feel

like an active participant in the classroom itself.

Overall, *V-Learning: Distance Education in the 21st Century through 3D Virtual Learning Environments* was easy to comprehend. The authors did a wonderful job of communicating the book's contents in a manner that individuals who don't have a "tech savvy" bone in their body are able to comprehend and follow from chapter to chapter. Additionally, their use of illustrations makes it easy to process the information into layman terms.

In terms of the book's strengths, I enjoyed the authors' inclusion of case study examples on how 3D learning environments were utilized in various disciplines. This provided me with evidence of its use and opened my mind to a "floodgate" of ideas that could be implemented in my online classes. Additional strengths include information on how to adequately assess the effectiveness of virtual learning environments and website information designed to assist educators in determining which virtual learning platform may work for their respected distance learning programs.

When looking at weaknesses, the authors' illustrative examples are captured in black and white. Often times, this made it difficult for me

to ascertain the image on the page. Additionally, it would have been beneficial if the authors included more feedback from college administrators, educators, and students concerning roadblocks as well as successes encountered in their virtual learning experiences.

Despite the aforementioned weaknesses, I would recommend this book to both college administrators and educators as a resource in understanding the dynamics of virtual learning environments and how it can significantly enhance student learning, engagement, and benefit the overall climate of distance education programs.

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