

BOOK REVIEW

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DESIGNING AND TEACHING AN ON-LINE COURSE: SPINNING YOUR WEB CLASSROOM by Heidi Schweizer.

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Designing and Teaching an On-line Course: Spinning Your Web Classroom, by Heidi Schweizer; (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1999, 121 pages, \$32.00)

Designing and Teaching an On-Line Course: Spinning Your Web Classroom provides a multitude of guidelines and ideas for the first-time online instructor as well as suggestions for the accomplished Web instructor that can enhance an online class offering. This is a nice auxiliary book for instructors involved in, or about to get involved in, teaching their first online course. The book weaves between how-to tips and theoretical foundations of designing and teaching an online course.

Be forewarned about the author's courseware preference. She uses Lotus Learning Space to design her own high-quality graduate courses at Marquette University. On page 2, the reader quickly realizes that she will focus on this courseware. Therefore, if an instructor is planning to use or is using Learning Space, this book is an absolute must-have. In fact, armed with the basic Learning Space instructional material and this book, an instructor should be able to get a quality online course up and running.

Even if an instructor uses other courseware, he or she can skip over the Learning Space-specific material and glean valuable and applicable information from the rest of the

• **Karen A. Sneary**, Asst. Professor of Business, NWOSU, 119 Barnes, Alva, OK 73717. Telephone: (580) 327-8507. E-mail: kasneary@nwosu.edu

book. We recommend the book for the instructor who is beginning to develop an online course, but topics included allow insight for those who have been in the online environment for a period of time. Schweizer includes ideas for developing a student-centered online course as well as learning theories, examples, tips on visual design, how to involve students in the online atmosphere, and much more.

Chapter One discusses the selection of a software package to use in the development of the online course. The author used *Learning Space* and used screen shots from this software throughout the book. The first chapter includes the navigation of the learning space screens, which would not apply to all software packages, but did contain a description of what type of information was contained in each “room” of the course. This could be applied to a variety of software packages. Schweizer does discuss the issues of converting from a traditional face-to-face teaching environment to an online environment. This included the necessity of the instructor to no longer rely on physical cues of the student or change a lesson plan at the last minute, but instead to facilitate a great deal of student interaction and rely on students’ text messages for encouraging learning.

The author also discussed Glasser’s “control theory,” a learning theory that states that beyond the physical needs, one has four psychological needs: belonging, freedom, power, and fun. The chapter has suggestions for meeting these four needs in the online atmosphere.

How quickly does Schweizer shift from how-to tips to theories of learning? On page four she describes the set up of *Learning Space* and on page five, Glasser’s control theory and the four basic psychological needs of humans. She then combines the two to show how an instructor can use *Learning Space* (or any other courseware) to set up a course in order to meet those needs. Among these were the needs to foster a caring environment that will let students who are new to online classes feel that they know you and can interact in a “safe” environment. Online courses have the ability to empower students because students who are

afraid to speak up in a face-to-face class can express their ideas in a text format in an online class. For example, student profiles in *Learning Space* meet the belonging need, self-composed PowerPoint projects meet the freedom need, interactive and independent projects meet the power need, and interactive discussions meet the fun need. In this chapter, the author quickly states a point that the online course instructor must realize—the large differences between the traditional and online classrooms require a major difference in design.

Chapter Two summarizes a variety of guidelines to use when developing the online course. The author reveals ideas to maintain “teachable moments” in the online environment, while still having a structured course. Flexibility is critical for instructors who teach online courses. Schweizer discusses performance-based curriculum design, a model that encourages the use of clearly defined outcomes for students to accomplish during the course. These outcomes are at three levels: program, course, and unit. The basis of this chapter is to urge the teacher to put some extra thought into developing and posting information about the online course. We found this chapter to be somewhat difficult to follow for the application of the online environment. As instructors, the ability to write performance outcomes should be something that we should have already accomplished in a beginning-level education course. The section covering Bloom’s Taxonomy again was information that instructors should already be aware of if they have ever enrolled in an education course. We felt that this chapter did not pertain to the development of an online course, but instead pertained to the development and teaching of any course. This is a valuable chapter for the beginning online instructor who is planning to simply post the course outline as a way of introduction. For the more experienced instructor with background in Bloom’s Taxonomy, Schweizer gives tips on how to fill the unlimited space with useful information, but not much more.

Chapter Three, "Designing On-line Assessments," begins with a summary of current learning research, including constructivism, multiple intelligence theory, and brain-based research. Schweizer introduces rubrics and makes a great argument that they are powerful assessment tools that are perfect for an online course. An example of a rubric is given, but it applies to a driver's education course, a course that would almost have to include a hands-on section of the course, which eliminates the idea of an online course being accessible anytime and anyplace. The example in the appendix also leaves the reader wanting a more defined rubric or other examples. The author mentions that online instructors must think "out of the box" when planning for assessments in an online environment. The development of rubrics in the online atmosphere provides tips that would be useful in the traditional atmosphere as well. The chapter does make mention of testing in proctored settings versus giving online exams, the latter of which would allow students to use the book and any other resources available to them. This could affect the integrity of the course, and especially the testing that occurs during the course.

The availability of an online gradebook is a tool that is helpful to both students and teachers alike, as it prevents students from continually wondering about their progress and grade in the course, as long as it is up-to-date. The author talks too briefly about the online gradebook. The course designer would have to refer to the *Learning Space* instruction booklet for information. However, there are some ways to set up an effective gradebook that the author ignores. She does mention the improbability of closed book tests.

Chapter Four briefly mentions Gardner's eight intelligences, but the author goes on to provide suggestions of activities that would be useful in the online environment, involving multiple intelligences via the use of technology. We felt that the wide variety of on-line resources that were mentioned, such as guest lecturers, videos, texts, and lecture notes, were good examples of ways to allow students to

explore a variety of resources and find those that fit their learning style and needs. Some of the examples leave the reader wanting more information, such as how to and why incorporate music into the course. The variety of choices allows the instructor to pick and choose from the list. Even if all the multiple intelligences are not reached, taking a few tips from Schweizer would greatly improve a course. Screen shots display examples of various resources that have been used in the online atmosphere.

In this chapter, Schweizer also addresses copyright and fair use, something that is absent in many online books and all online courseware instruction books. Hopefully, the reader will not overlook these few important pages. The author clearly states what is and is not protected. Copyright and fair use are important to educators not only in the traditional setting, but online as well. A simplified version of the copyright act is included, as well as the fair use guidelines.

In the next chapter, Schweizer outlines effective discussion groups. As the author states, "Creating interactive learning environments is essential if you expect your students take the information that you provide and turn it into meaningful 'knowledge.'"

The creation of discussion groups to foster interaction among students or groups of students is a critical factor for the success of an online course that allows collaboration and interaction. A course that has a more personal feel to it is discussed in great detail in Chapter Five. Allowing groups to create their own identities for groups, introductions, and the assignments of encourager, summarizer, checker, and technician lets students feel a belonging to the class and get to know their online peers. The suggestions given to hold each student accountable for the group's work was creative, including calling on students randomly for their perspective of what was occurring in their group and holding synchronous chats to meet with students and check on progress.

Online instructors have the same roles they would have in a successful traditional classroom, but modifications must be made as described in Chapter Six. Instructions and objectives for the course must be clearly defined to eliminate confusion for the student. Students need to know that there is a “real” instructor who is available to them and will respond in a timely manner. Likewise, instructors in the online atmosphere must be flexible in addressing technological problems on the part of the student and provide adequate written instructions and details when responding to students’ questions, both as a group and individually. Online courses must have a humanizing factor to make students feel personally involved and comfortable. The author’s tips to accomplish this range from the simple (asking how students would like to be addressed) to the tough and time-consuming (responding quickly to questions, summarizing discussions). Communication with students should provide outlines of course materials, suggestions and assistance in overcoming problems both technologically and subject-wise, and provide questions for students to consider when working through assigned material.

Schweizer reminds instructors that the absence of the traditional classroom has an adverse affect on students turning in work. Steps must be taken to overcome the “out of sight, out of mind” effect. Students need to be aware of their progress in the class as well as have timelines set to prevent procrastination, frustration, or inevitable failure. The structure of the course will certainly have an impact on its success. Well-structured courses allow students adequate time to complete assignments and poorly structured courses either provide too little time or no deadlines at all. The author gives one example of how a teacher stepped in to keep students in line and on time.

Chapter Seven focuses on the technological aspect of the online course. Technology is yet another critical factor in the success of an online course. First, many technical decisions, such as the hardware to use, are out of the hands of the instructor. The author thankfully

does not tell the instructor what type of computer or what type of server is best, since this is usually a moot point. She does give the minimum requirements to conduct an online course. Schweizer mentions the importance of having a technician available to assist students with technical questions. This would work in a “perfect” world, but many institutions do not have the available personnel or funding to allow this type of support. We are of the opinion that online instructors need to have a grasp on technical issues if they are in a teaching environment that is unable to provide a technician for online student support. They will receive the brunt of the student questions and frustration if technical problems arise. The instructor must be willing to spend almost as much time dealing with technical difficulties as with teaching. The author gives some good tips, such as offering help numbers, on-line help sites or creating a discussion area for students to help each other. An important consideration when developing an online class is the minimum technical requirements that students must have in order to complete the course. Students need to be aware of these requirements at the time of enrollment. The minimal requirements need to include hardware and software.

Developing an online course that is visually appealing and still functional for student learning is the focus of Chapter Eight. This type of information is useful for the instructor who is tempted to either fill every inch of space on the screen or put every piece of information in 11-point Courier font. Specific design principles that are mentioned include the use of appropriate fonts that are easy to read, using white space to provide focus to important elements of the sites, and keeping the Web site relatively simple and easy for the student to follow, void of busy backgrounds and too many animated graphics. The author suggests that instructors provide an easy way for students to navigate a course, return to the home page, and completely exit the course. The tips on how to construct the splash page—the first page the students encounter—were especially

important. While this chapter is at the end of the book, it is one of the best-composed.

The expert advice of Jerry Patterson, Jill Rossiter, and Richard Schafer is given in Chapter Nine in a question and answer format. This chapter holds little applicable information and addresses many issues brought up earlier in the book. This chapter is basically a justification for the author's tips and instructions. Also, the author lumps all the questions together and does not identify the expert answering each question. She states that some answers are consensus answers, which I believe takes away from the effectiveness of the answers. According to these experts, online instructors need to feel comfortable with using technology and field-test a course before making it available to students.

One expert answer may be disheartening to the new online course designer. After going through a book that gives several presumably time-saving tips, the experts agree that online instruction requires more time, ranging from twenty to forty percent more than the traditional classroom. At this point, many instructors might ask, "Then why did I buy this book, and why am I going online, if it's going to make me spend more time setting the course up and teaching it?"

The optimum size of the course will depend on the course, but an instructor wants to be sure it is small enough to have interaction, online discussions, and still have the ability to respond to students in a timely manner. Online teaching provides instructors flexibility and the ability to reach a diverse group of students. A well-designed course provides students with a wide variety of resources to reach multiple learning styles, personal interaction with

instructors, and exposure to a diverse student population. A key to success for online students is their autonomy and self-motivation to participate in and complete a course without having to attend class physically.

The appendix provides a number of resources that instructors can modify to fit their needs in the online environment. A variety of online resources that could be referred to in the development process would have been helpful, in addition to the appendix. It is our view that the book touched on some important aspects of teaching in the online environment, but did not go in to a great amount of detail for the development process and detailed suggestions for teaching online courses.

The book is easy to read. While the chapters do not flow together, they can be read as independent units. Sections of the book revert back to introductory undergraduate education theory, such as Bloom's Taxonomy, writing course outlines, and the development of rubrics. These references to theory and their applications in the online environment are extremely helpful in some instances, such as the proposed steps to meet the multiple intelligences. However, in other instances, the reader has to muddle through theory in order to glean applicable information. Also, the reader must agree with the author's choice of learning theories. Those who dispute these theories obviously would not agree with the author. *Designing and Teaching an Online Course* is a good source of information for the instructor who is just starting out teaching and developing an online course, but veterans of the online teaching environment might find it does not offer enough detail for an experienced online teacher.