

Book review: Revisiting foundations in an accelerating field: a review of *Teaching and Learning at a Distance: Foundations of Distance Education* (8th ed.)

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Introduction

Teaching and Learning at a Distance: Foundations of Distance Education is a foundational text in the field of distance education, now arriving in its eighth edition. Its central focus is on the theory, research and practice of teaching in online environments, including the design, delivery, management and evaluation of remote learning programs. The text is primarily written for educators, instructional designers, graduate students and administrators who wish to understand or lead distance and online learning initiatives. It is especially well-suited for introductory courses in distance education or for practitioners seeking a reliable reference in the evolving landscape of digital instruction.

Within its field, this volume occupies a respected place as a long-standing, comprehensive treatment of distance education foundations. It strikes a balance between theory and practice and consistently aims to bridge empirical research with applied concerns. Over successive editions, it has adapted to new technologies and shifting pedagogical contexts, and this 2024 edition offers a timely update as distance learning becomes increasingly embedded in mainstream higher education and K–12 systems.

Outline of the content

The eighth edition is organized into three major parts: (1) foundations, (2) teaching and learning and (3) managing and evaluating distance education. Within these parts, the chapters proceed from conceptual underpinnings into applied practice and institutional concerns.

Part I: foundations

Chapter 1: Foundations of distance education introduces what distance education is, its rationale and its role in contemporary education. Chapter 2: Definitions, history and theories of distance education reviews historical trajectories, theoretical models and conceptual definitions of distance education. Chapter 3: Research and distance education surveys empirical findings concerning outcomes, effectiveness and trends in distance learning research. Finally, Chapter 4: Technologies, the Internet and distance education explores the role of technologies, Internet infrastructures, synchronous and asynchronous tools and communication systems used in distance education.



Part II: teaching and learning

Chapter 5: Instructional design for distance education discusses systematic design processes, models and strategies tailored to distance settings, including unit-module-topic organization. Chapter 6: Teaching and distance education examines instructor roles, pedagogical strategies and responsibilities unique to distance contexts. Chapter 7: The Student and distance education focuses on learner characteristics, self-regulation, engagement and support in remote environments. Chapter 8: Support materials and visualization for distance education covers tools such as study guides, visual aids, interactive materials and scaffolding techniques. Chapter 9: Assessment for distance education addresses issues of validity, reliability and design of assessment in distance environments.

Part III: managing and evaluating distance education

Chapter 10: Intellectual property, ownership, distribution and use discusses copyright, licensing and issues of ownership in distributed instruction. Chapter 11: Managing and leading a distance education organization addresses administrative decision-making, leadership, resource allocation and institutional strategy. Chapter 12: Evaluating teaching and learning at a distance offers frameworks, case studies and procedures for evaluation of courses and programs.

The volume also includes a preface, outlines of its organizational structure, pedagogical features (goals, discussion questions and visuals) and updated references and suggested readings throughout.

Highlighting parts and critique of the argument

Strengths and highlights

One of the book's enduring strengths lies in its clear and structured presentation of foundational theory. For instance, the chapter on *Definitions, history and theories of distance education* is especially valuable for situating various conceptual frameworks and for tracing how those have shaped practice over decades. Its integration of equivalency theory – emphasizing that distance education ought to provide instructional opportunities equivalent to face-to-face, rather than duplicating them exactly – is a powerful conceptual anchor.

Another strength is the consistent emphasis on evidence-based practice. The authors repeatedly ground their recommendations in empirical research; Chapter 3's survey of distance education research is broad and well curated, offering readers a scaffold for interpreting later chapters' claims.

The chapters on instructional design, teaching/learner dynamics and assessment (Chapters 5–9) strike a valuable balance between theory and actionable guidance. They provide sound strategies for scaffolding, formative feedback, visual supports and assessment flexibility in distance settings. The chapter on assessment, in particular, navigates the difficult terrain of upholding rigor and academic integrity in remote settings – a challenge many practitioners face.

On the institutional side, the chapters on management and evaluation (Chapters 11 and 12) are particularly salient. They push readers to think beyond course design toward systemic questions: leadership, sustainability, quality assurance and institutional accountability. The evaluation frameworks and case examples are helpful for those tasked with oversight of distance programs.

Critiques and gaps

While the book succeeds admirably in many respects, there are some limitations to note:

Relatively limited engagement with emergent technologies: Given the pace of innovation in educational technology, the volume's treatment of technologies (Chapter 4) necessarily lags in coverage of cutting-edge developments such as generative AI, large language models and

AI-driven content generation. As these tools increasingly intersect with assessment, tutoring and content creation in distance education, their omission is understandable (given publication timelines) but regrettable for readers seeking a forward-looking perspective.

Descriptive rather than analytical in some applied cases: In a few chapters, the authors include institutional examples or case vignettes without deeply exploring underlying tensions, constraints, or conflicting outcomes. Some narratives provide useful “what was done” detail, but less often do they engage in critical reflection about tradeoffs, unintended effects or failures.

Equity, access and learner diversity could receive more sustained attention: Although learner needs are addressed in Chapter 7, the book could more robustly interrogate how distance education designs might inadvertently perpetuate inequalities in technology access, connectivity or scaffolding support. A deeper critique of how distance education interacts with disparities of socioeconomic status, digital divide or cultural diversity would strengthen its relevance in varied contexts.

Somewhat static view of instructor and student roles: The treatment of instructor and student roles occasionally reflects a more traditional view of separation between teacher and learner. While appropriate for many distance settings, it may underemphasize more networked, collaborative or peer-driven models of learning (e.g. those drawn from connectivist or emergent pedagogies).

Overall, the book’s argument is that distance education deserves theoretical grounding, empirical support, thoughtful design and systemic evaluation – and it makes this case competently. The omitted areas, however, suggest opportunities for future editions to push boundaries further.

Evaluation

The content is rich, well organized and largely up to date. For those new to distance education, it serves as both an accessible introduction and a durable reference. The multiple pedagogical features (e.g. chapter goals, discussion questions and updated references) make it useful in classroom settings. For instructional designers and program leaders, the applied chapters offer practical guidance that can be adapted across institutional types.

Though rapid technological change may challenge some of the technology content’s shelf life, the strength of the theoretical foundations and evaluative emphasis gives the book staying power.

Meeting reader needs

- (1) Graduate students and novice educators will find this book an ideal scaffold to understand distance education frameworks, history and practical concerns.
- (2) Instructional designers and course developers will benefit particularly from the design and assessment chapters, which provide techniques and considerations readily applicable in real-world contexts.
- (3) Administrators and leaders will appreciate the management, leadership and evaluation chapters, which help bridge from individual courses to institutional strategy.

One caveat: readers seeking deep, cutting-edge treatment of the latest AI-driven tools in distance education may find that content lacking, so this book pairs best with more specialized recent articles or edited volumes.

Format, price and value

According to listings, the print edition (ISBN 979-8887305110) retails for around \$110 for hardcover and \$50 for softcover on Amazon. The eText/digital version lists at around USD \$60

on Amazon. The format is reader-friendly: clearly labeled chapters, visual supports, discussion questions and updated resources consistent with academic textbooks. Given its breadth, longevity and utility across diverse roles in distance education, the book provides solid value – especially for library purchase or for professionals committed to deepening their understanding of distance learning.

Recommendation

I strongly recommend *Teaching and Learning at a Distance: Foundations of Distance Education* (8th ed.) for academic libraries, graduate programs in instructional design or educational technology and practitioners involved in remote and online education planning. While not exhaustive in its coverage of nascent AI approaches, its firm grounding in theory, research and practice makes it a foundational text that will remain relevant for years to come. For those wanting to augment it, pairing it with recent journal articles or edited volumes on generative AI and emergent pedagogies would be a wise complement.

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