

## BOOK REVIEW

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# ***DISTANCE LEARNERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES FOR QUALITY OUTCOMES, Edited by Chère Campbell Gibson***

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Over the past four years, interest in distance education has exploded primarily due to the emergence of online teaching and learning. As a consequence, publishers have been rushing to turn out books to meet this growing interest. *Distance Learners in Higher Education* is a refreshing change from many of the more recent books because it focuses on learners in distance education regardless of the technologies being used and considers some of the overarching learner issues that confront distance educators as they design and deliver distance programs using all types of technologies.

This concise and readable 156-page volume brings together the reflections of some of the leading researchers and practitioners of distance education in North America. The authors

represent a variety of higher education institutions and include both administrators and faculty who have many years of research and practice in both credit and noncredit distance education. Each addresses a specific facet of the distance learner in order to help us better understand the implications of design and teaching.

The underlying premise of this book is stated succinctly by the editor, Chère Campbell Gibson: "If the distance learner is to succeed, we, as faculty, must do more than provide access to information. We need to truly understand that learner and design learning environments that facilitate learning . . ." (p. viii). It seems straightforward enough, but sometimes the simplest ideas are the most dif-

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ficult to implement. One only needs to look at many of the online courses that are being churned out by the new converts to distance education to see that this advice is often not being heeded.

With this underlying premise in mind, the book attempts to provide answers to two questions:

1. What do we know about distance learners?
2. What do we know about helping that person to learn?

The eight chapters cover a range of issues related to distance learners from their general demographic characteristics, gender, culture, self-concept, motivation, and the new roles and responsibilities of learners in a networked world.

Chapter 1, by Melody Thompson of Penn State University, sets the scene by providing an overview of the demographic, situational, and affective characteristics of distance learners. While this chapter paints a useful portrait of the distance learner in higher education, it is a portrait that changes depending on how you look at it because distance learners are not a homogenous group. Thompson cautions us to keep this mind.

In Chapter 2, Liz Burge, of the University of New Brunswick, focuses on gender issues and distance learners. Burge warns us that gender-related differences in how adults learn “cannot be dismissed as indulgences of privileged academics,” and argues we need to pay much more attention to identity and inclusion. The chapter offers practical guidelines dealing with participation, curricula, barriers, and technology application with specific reference to constructivist and women-friendly approaches to teaching and learning.

Cultural differences are becoming an increasingly important issue in distance education as we move increasingly to online modes of delivery and to international and culturally diverse audiences. In Chapter 3, Irene Sanchez and Charlotte Gunawardena, of the University

of New Mexico, explore the ways in which cultural diversity can be accommodated in the design of distance education and in the support of distance learners.

In Chapter 4, Chère Campbell Gibson, from the University of Wisconsin, explores the issue of academic self-concept and its impact on the success of distance learners. She suggests that a learner’s perception of his or her ability to succeed can strongly influence learner performance and, ultimately, persistence. This chapter looks at research in this area and examines how educators can influence and enhance academic-self concept as a way of improving learner performance.

In Chapter 5, Christine Olgren from the University of Wisconsin challenges the assumption that good teaching will necessarily result in good learning. Olgren argues that, in order to ensure that learning occurs, we also need to understand how people learn, and to design courses that develop cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies and take into account the learner’s goals and motivation for studying.

Most of this book is “technologically-neutral” in the sense that the implications for teaching and learning are not specific to any particular technological mode of delivery. Chapter 6, by Terry Anderson, now with Athabasca University, and Randy Garrison, now with the University of Calgary, is the one exception. Anderson and Garrison focus on how the roles and responsibilities of the learner change when distance education involves communications technology, such as the Internet, that supports sustained interaction. They argue that the balance of control in technologically-mediated educational transactions will have to be negotiated based on different types of interaction. Issues of support, proficiency, and independence will play an important role. Ultimately they suggest teaching and learning will have to be reconceptualized if the potential of the interactive technologies is to be fully exploited.

Campbell Gibson returns in Chapter 7 with a look at the broader social context of the dis-

tance learner. She uses ecological systems theory to consider how the success of distance learners can be affected by their work, family, and social life. She acknowledges we have little influence over these factors, but urges us to try to understand them so that we can “provide a source of emotional support to learners as they begin to act upon their multiple contexts toward the end of achieving their learning goals” (p. 124).

The final chapter, by Daniel Granger of California State University, and Meg Benke of Empire State College, focuses on supporting the distance learner and the necessary human infrastructure in institutions of higher education, beginning with initial inquiries about programs right through to course completion, graduation, and advising on future courses.

The book concludes by summarizing the key strategies for design and support that emerge from the eight chapters.