

BOOK REVIEW

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Electronic Learning Communities: Current Issues and Best Practices, Sorel Reisman, John Flores, and Denzil Edge (Eds.)

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Electronic Learning Communities: Current Issues and Best Practices. Sorel Reisman, John Flores, and Denzil Edge (Eds.). (565 pp., Information Age Publishing, Greenwich, CT, 2003)

About 10 years ago, I was directing a continuing education center and was surprised when one of my well-attended courses had to be cancelled because of low enrollment. The reason for this sudden lack of students was apparently their desire to take this same course in their own offices via a satellite broadcast. The reality and possibilities of distance education immediately became apparent to me and have motivated me to be involved in delivering distance education and doing research in this area ever since. Because of the rapid changes in technology and increased use of distance learning, keeping up to date has not been easy.

This book was helpful to me in that regard, as it deals with current issues and best practices associated with delivering higher education courses online.

The book, conceived at a meeting of the publications board of the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA), is an edited tome consisting of a collection of 14 articles (chapters) written by 21 authors. It is geared toward the practitioner in the field who is looking for additional insight into the broad range of topics presented in the book. All of the authors have extensive experience and knowledge in developing and delivering distance education using electronic media and provide valuable insight into their respective topics. Although 565 pages long, the book is easy to read, well organized, and somewhat standardized in format. The main body of the text in each chapter is broken up by ample

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The Quarterly Review of Distance Education, Volume 5(3), 2004, pp. 219–222
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ISSN 1528-3518
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headings and subheadings guiding the reader through the various chapter topics. Some of the chapters also include objectives, future trends, research needs, a conclusion, and supporting appendices.

My initial reaction to the editors' title led me to believe the book dealt primarily with issues around building interactive communities online. Although some of the chapters dealt with this topic, communities are defined broadly by the editors to essentially include all courses or programs delivered electronically over the Internet. I probably would have titled the book "Online Distance Education: Current Issues and Best Practices." The styles of the authors varied and included short overviews, in depth case studies, guides to practice, and research studies. Although the book is not intended as an update on research, many of the chapters provided good support for their positions from the literature.

I found a number of the chapters particularly interesting. The second chapter, titled "Hybrid Courses as Learning Communities," by Penelope Walters Swenson and Mark Evans, dealt effectively with the development, advantages, and disadvantages of hybrid courses. Hybrid courses were defined to include a mixture of face-to-face and online components in one course as well as any mixture of delivery media such as CD-ROM, video, instructional television, and teleconferencing. Interesting anecdotal stories were interspersed throughout the chapter in support of some of its sections. The authors also provided many useful recommendations for hybrid courses that apply equally well to totally online courses. Hybrid courses are an important and growing trend in distance education, as they can draw on the strengths of both face-to-face and electronically mediated courses. In my own doctoral research involving interactivity issues in online courses, hybrid courses were recommended by some students as a way to address their feelings of isolation. One of the interesting insights gleaned from this chapter was the natural drift of face-to-face and online course instructors toward the hybrid

model. I had not thought about it this way, but it certainly fits with my own experiences working more now with faculty who are trying to make the transition to using the Internet in their classroom.

The third and largest chapter, titled "Building Electronic Communities for Distance Learners Beyond the Course Level," by David Brigham, made a strong case for expanding the idea of community beyond the classroom to include programs. The idea of community and connectedness is central to the debate about the quality of online courses, as auditory and visual cues are lost in an online environment. A detailed and comprehensive case study was provided that described the successful development of such an online community at Excelsior College. I found this chapter helpful because it expanded my thinking to consider interaction beyond the course level. Although there are a number of books available on helping instructors build communities online in their courses, this is the first article I have read that looks at the broader issues and challenges. The challenge of building a successful online community as was done at Excelsior seems almost insurmountable to me, given how hard it is to do it for just one course. Key to their success was the commitment at the beginning to identifying the needs of the various populations of distance learners. I recommend this chapter to anyone contemplating developing such a community, as it addressed almost all the issues one should consider, including cost.

Chapter 4, titled "Faculty-Librarian Collaboration in Online Course Development," by Sharon Edge, focused on how best to integrate information technology into the classroom. One of the biggest challenges facing online courses is how to provide to distance learning students library resources that are equivalent to on-campus systems. Using a case study approach, the author described a successful model implemented at one university. In addition, many useful sources for additional information, best practices, competencies, and guidelines are provided for those needing additional background. This is a useful and practi-

cal chapter for those concerned with library support and involvement issues.

Chapter 5, titled "A Different Practice Spanning the Digital Divide Through Distance Learning," addresses one of the most important criticisms of online education: its inability to serve and reach populations who lack the resources and skills needed to take online courses. The authors, Lisa Holstrom and John Bryan, describe in detail one successful program that provided associate's degrees to Head Start teachers. I was especially impressed with the extra effort it takes to address the many issues. The authors said it best, "Spanning the divide is neither easy nor cheap.... It requires more support systems, more daily maintenance, quick adaptability to changing circumstances, a different marking strategy, and considerable understanding of and faith in the people on the other side of the divide" (p. 189). The authors did a good job of outlining the important issues one should consider in trying to reach low-income, underserved students.

Teaching strategies for promoting interaction and critical thinking in an online environment is one area that has received little attention. I am always looking for resources that provide helpful suggestions in this area. My own research identifies this issue as important in student satisfaction with their online courses. The eighth chapter, titled "Strategies for Teaching and Thinking and Promoting Intellectual Development in Online Classes," by William Pierce, is just what is needed to begin addressing this important issue. I found this chapter particularly valuable as it summarized the research on critical thinking and described 15 strategies for effective teaching.

The last chapter, titled "Writing Winning Distance Education Teaching and Learning Grants," by Catherine Bolek and Ronald Forsythe, provided an excellent overview of the issues involved in finding sources of funding, writing grants, and administering the grant after it is awarded. If there is one thing you need when looking at developing distance education involving technology, it is more money. Having written numerous grants, I appreciated

their insight and practical advice. It is not so much a chapter you read, but an outline that includes resources for where to find funding and additional information, as well as providing an example of a model proposal.

A number of chapters were useful, but seemed to be less valuable. Chapter 1, "Interactive Online Educational Experiences," was a mixture of topics looking at historical perspectives, theoretical models, current interactive practices, and future trends. I found the brief historical perspective interesting as the author described the movement of distance education from print media, through broadcast media, to finally interactive media. The sixth chapter, titled "Preparing Faculty Members to Teach in the E-Learning Environment," was a short case study involving the need for and training of faculty on one particular learning management system used to support online learning. The seventh chapter, titled "Grow Your Own Course Management the Way You Want It," described the efforts of the author in creating an in-house course management system (CMS) for delivering online education at one university. This chapter would be useful to those individuals considering the development or purchase of their own CMS. The next chapter, "Course Management as a Pedagogical Imperative," discusses how course management can affect the educational quality of online courses. I agree with the authors' position that such issues as course instructions, appropriate deadlines, grading criteria, pacing, expected level of participation, discipline, timely feedback, and rules for discourse are extremely important in the success of online courses and programs. Chapter 12, titled "Exclusion in International Online Learning Communities," discusses how online educational delivery systems rooted in one country or culture could affect learners from another country who are taking an online course. Chapter 13, titled "Yours, Theirs, Mine: Just Who Owns Those Distance Courses?" tackles the difficult issue of intellectual property rights. This is a short chapter that provides a brief overview of the issue.

Two chapters seemed out of place because they dealt primarily with the results of research studies. Chapter 9, titled "Online Learning as an Improvement? The Case of Economic Principles," describes a nonrandomized study comparing one economics course taught online and face-to-face. This particular study found students in the face-to-face course getting statistically significant higher scores on many exams. Unfortunately, the chapter fails to provide a balanced view by not referencing the substantial body of literature in support of "no significant difference" between face-to-face and distance learning courses and why studies of this type are limited. In fact, hundreds of studies have been done to measure the effectiveness of distance education as compared to traditional face-to-face learning (Clark, 1983; Moore & Thompson, 1997; Russell, 1999, 2004). These studies in general demonstrate no significant difference in student performance between distance education and face-to-face settings. The tenth chapter, "Developing an Effective Online Orientation Course to Prepare Students for Success in a Web-based Learning Environment," is a pre-post survey research study looking at the effectiveness of a new online orientation course for one university. Because there was no control group of students involved, some of the conclusions about the reported benefits of the orientation course did not seem supported. The authors did a good job, however, of outlining the research base,

steps, issues, and benefits in developing a well-planned and designed orientation course.

As with any collection of articles, some chapters are much stronger than others. I liked the in-depth case studies the best. As a whole, I found the book worth reading and a useful resource. Although not the kind of book I would read from beginning to end, I found many of the individual chapters valuable in terms of the topics they addressed. The book provides a variety of perspectives on issues that are important in delivering high quality online distance education courses. Readers will find the book helpful if they have an interest in these topics.

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