

BOOK REVIEW

Daniel V. Eastmond, *Book Review Editor*

The Virtual Student: A Profile and Guide to Working with Online Learners, by Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt

Doris U. Bolliger and Richard Josephson

St. Cloud State University

The Virtual Student: A Profile and Guide to Working with Online Learners, by Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003, 191 pages, \$29.00)

Palloff and Pratt are faculty members at Capella University, an accredited for-profit online university. With their book, *The Virtual Student: A Profile and Guide to Working with Online Learners*, the authors provide educators who wish to teach online courses in the postsecondary education environment with a cookbook full of good recipes and ingredients. The book is well organized around central principles, logical, practical, and easy to read. It is an excellent introduction to the topic of online teaching and learning and has a good balance of research and personal stories. For faculty with substantive online teaching experience, some of the book's contents might seem basic and obvious.

The Virtual Student is most useful to individuals who wish to be learner-centered and desire to engage students. With the historically high student drop-out rate in distance education, students must be engaged in order to be satisfied with their learning process. Their engagement will lead to retention. The authors give readers an understanding of the "typical" online student and provide practical resources that can facilitate dynamic learning online.

The book has 11 chapters organized into two sections, and three appendices. Part One of the book is comprised of the first five chapters and focuses on who the students are that enter our virtual classrooms. The remaining six chapters make up part two, which serves as a useful guide to online instructors. The appendices contain a "Toolkit," which is one of the strengths of this book.

Part One begins with a demographic overview of online learners. The authors examine

• **Doris U. Bolliger**, Assistant Professor, St. Cloud State University, 720 Fourth Avenue South, St. Cloud, MN 56301. Telephone: (320) 308-5308. E-mail: dubolliger@stcloudstate.edu

The Quarterly Review of Distance Education, Volume 6(1), 2005, pp. 73–76
Copyright © 2005 Information Age Publishing, Inc.

ISSN 1528-3518
All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

factors pertaining to student satisfaction and include a list of qualities students who are successful in the e-learning environment tend to have. Practical techniques are discussed that help address how these characteristics can be nurtured in the virtual student. Even though the authors painted a good picture of virtual students, we expected additional statistics. For example, in writing how popular online courses have become for high school students, Palloff and Pratt point out that “65 percent of those age eighteen or younger had enrolled in an online course” (p. 3). Because we are interested in student satisfaction and retention, we wanted to know how many of these students successfully completed those courses. We also would have enjoyed more information on the *state* of e-learning not only in the United States, but also in other countries.

The authors give a definition of an online learning community and explore important aspects such as student participation, interaction with other participants including the instructor, and collaboration with one another. Palloff and Pratt then take a closer look at each one of the characteristics of successful online students. The authors emphasize the importance of learning communities and provide examples of how to build and sustain them. Icebreakers, communicating responsibilities, teaching communication skills, providing ongoing feedback, and rotating leadership roles are just a few of the techniques mentioned. The concepts are supported with research and the authors’ experiences.

Instructors must make several types of activities available to the online learners; however, not every activity needs to be designed to meet the needs of all students. Instructors can accommodate different learning styles by offering a variety of activities and assignments; for example, individual, small group, and large group activities.

Variables such as culture, gender, geographical location, religion, spirituality, literacy, disability, and socioeconomic status can influence student learning. The authors provide good examples of how content, use of multime-

dia, students’ writing styles and expression, and power structures between students and instructors can affect communication in an online course. For example, instructors should include “materials that represent more than one cultural viewpoint” (p. 41).

Student services and proper support for the successful online student are imperative. The institution that offers online courses must focus on the online learner and ensure that students have services available to them at times when *they* need them. These services include course and program information, technology assistance, financial aid, advisors, and other resources.

In chapters six through 12, the second part of the book, the authors look at how the needs of virtual students can be met. This section starts out by examining the elements of orientations. Orientations are critical because students “are for the most part unaware of the demands that online learning will place on them” (p. 65). One overall orientation session should be offered by the university, in addition to an orientation geared toward the course itself. During overall orientation sessions, students should become familiar with basic Internet tools, basic computer functions, characteristics of successful online learners, and differences and similarities of different learning environments. Students should gain a clear sense of what is expected of them, what is considered inappropriate behavior, how to critique others’ work, and where to get assistance.

Instructors should help students develop time management skills. They must also be aware of their own time commitment. We agree, because often first-time online instructors misjudge how much time this process takes and are unaware of simple time management practices. During the first week of the course, students should be engaged in community building activities. Scheduled breaks are a good opportunity for everyone to catch up.

Assessment and evaluation are important for learners. Reflection can play an important part in online learning, and grading rubrics can

be used in the assessment process. The authors suggest several practices such as fostering collaboration, revising assignments frequently, training students how to cite properly, and checking sources they use in order to discourage plagiarism. Formative evaluation of the course is important, and they present good arguments for its inclusion.

“Legal Issues and the Virtual Student” is a helpful chapter. When instructors prepare to teach or develop an online course for the first time, they need to focus on many other things, and issues such as copyright and intellectual property can easily be overlooked. The chapter includes tips on training students about these issues and the treatment of student contributions and assignments. Privacy, freedom of speech, and harassment are discussed, and the authors share some intervention guidelines, such as being proactive and, foremost, educating students about these issues.

Quality is very important in the retention of online students. The authors define quality as the combination of collaboration, presence, and community. We agree with this definition. The message the authors want to send is that everyone who becomes involved with online learners must understand their characteristics and should be aware of support mechanisms most helpful to them. If educators can meet those support needs, recruitment and retention should not be an issue in the future.

Most chapters include examples of postings by students in the authors’ online courses. Because of this, various issues come to life, and the reader gets a good feel for how students felt about them. It reminds us that virtual students are not faceless, anonymous persons, but real individuals with concerns and needs. The end-of-chapter summaries with practical instructional techniques and strategies are another useful resource.

The first appendix gives an overview of all tools included in the book. “Faculty Tools” includes sample course guidelines, evaluation guidelines, sample expectation letters, and instructions for students to analyze case studies. The toolkit also includes guides for devel-

oping critical thinking skills and good discussion questions. “Student Tools” has a student readiness self-assessment, tips on being a successful online learner, managing time, an explanation of communication tools, and instructions for providing good feedback. All of these resources could be included in a student orientation.

In writing this review as instructional technologists with backgrounds in instructional design, we would like to point out that one of the strongest aspects of this book is its emphasis on the importance of sensible, functional instructional design. A course must be well designed and of good quality. The technology is the vehicle that delivers the instruction and we should not focus too much on technology for technology’s sake. In other words, simple is better.

The strength of the book obviously lies in the best practices and resource materials the authors have developed over several years of online teaching. These resources should prove to be useful to the new online instructor and to the seasoned online instructor as well. We will integrate some of the student orientation materials into our own practice.

At its current retail price of \$29, the book is a great value; however, several caveats must be noted. While the authors do provide examples of best practices, additional information could improve this book. Although we are unsure that all suggestions are applicable in *every* online course, we suspect most faculty members will find parts of the book valuable for most online courses they teach. We think the book might be more valuable for instructors who have a graduate-level student audience. Many of the examples in it would be difficult to relate to undergraduate students or to the less than *ideal* student. This may be the case because Palloff and Pratt mainly teach higher-level courses. Educators may need to pick and choose the best ingredients for their favorite recipes.

Implementation of some of the support services or structure may be less realistic in a non-profit higher education organization that is

highly unionized and in which there is less of a top-down approach. Also, in some places the book presents redundant points. These few shortcomings aside, many of the authors' suggestions are still useful for the online instructor. One of the reasons this book is easy to read and useful is because the authors' statements,

supported with research and practical observations, may cause readers to reflect on their own ideas and beliefs. Palloff and Pratt give us practical suggestions for concepts that are interesting *and* challenge us to think of them in new ways.