

BOOK REVIEW

Daniel V. Eastmond, *Book Review Editor*

Online Learning: Concepts, Strategies, and Applications, by Nada Dabbagh and Brenda Bannan-Ritland

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Online Learning: Concepts, Strategies, and Applications, by Nada Dabbagh and Brenda Bannan-Ritland (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall 2005, 368 pages, \$41.33).

The recent exponential growth of Web-based distance learning has resulted in the appearance of numerous texts on how to design, deliver and evaluate online learning. My home and office collections contain many of these texts. They offer information about the definition, history, and theories of distance learning and provide guidance on how to apply instructional design principles in the development of online learning environments. When I first started reading, *Online Learning: Concepts, Strategies and Applications*, I expected to find a text on the foundations and design of dis-

tance learning that was no different than any of the others in my library. Instead, I encountered a volume full of useful ideas that offers a unique way to approach online learning.

Throughout the text, authors Nada Dabbagh and Brenda Bannan-Ritland clearly state their social constructivist agenda. They define learning as a social process emphasizing meaningful activity through social interaction; thus, they provide a model for the design of online learning environments based on social constructivist principles. Application of these principles, according to the authors, would allow for online learning to be transformed from its objectivist independent study past into a much richer social and learning experience.

Although Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland operate within a decidedly constructivist framework, those who favor a more “tradi-

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tional” instructional systems design approach will find much to like within these pages. Each chapter begins with learning objectives. Prompting questions, embedded throughout the text, provide guidance and opportunities for reflection, while learning activities at the end of each chapter provide ample opportunities for practice. Even their instructional design model—of which I will have more to say about later—is built on a solid foundation of instructional design principles.

Nearly all of the online learning design texts that I have read tend to be targeted toward a specific audience—usually college/university faculty or corporate trainers. Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland seek a wider audience for their work, so each new chapter is introduced with three distinct scenarios, one taken from a corporate training environment, one from a K-12 school environment and one from a university environment. The scenarios are referenced regularly and provide a usable context that facilitates both understanding and application of the concepts taught in the chapter. I found the scenarios to be a welcome feature, since many of my students plan for careers outside academia. This text can be adapted equally to K-12 school, higher education, as well as business and industry settings.

In Chapter One, “What is Online Learning?,” Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland provide a look into the broad world of distance learning, from its correspondence and independent study models of the past, to the latest developments in Web-based instruction. Since *Online Learning: Concepts, Strategies and Applications* is a practitioner’s text, rather than a comprehensive resource for researchers, I appreciated the fact that the authors do not inundate the reader with excessive history or trivia. They chose instead to provide a good deal of “need-to-know” information about the various distance learning environments, models, and modes of delivery. The technologies, strategies, and applications are covered concisely, but with appropriate depth to be useful.

The focus of Chapter Two, “Roles and Competencies of Online Learners and Instruc-

tors” is to challenge the traditional view of distance learners as “independent, place-bound, adult, self-motivated, disciplined self-starter and goal-oriented” (p. 37). Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland propose that the classic model of the isolated independent study student is now giving way to an “emerging online learner”—one who possesses skills in the use of online technology, learns through socially mediated and collaborative online activities, and becomes a self-directed learner through the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. The current emphasis in the distance learning literature on building online learning communities and enhancing learner-instructor and learner-learner interaction via online communication technologies appears to support the authors’ premise. A useful table, giving examples of specific ways in which specific competencies can be implemented by faculty who teach online, enhances the section on online instructor competencies and challenges.

Chapter Two also contains a short subchapter on copyright. Although this chapter does not replace a more complete treatment of intellectual property, plagiarism, fair use, TEACH Act, and other copyright issues, it does provide a good introduction to the topic. Of particular note is the end of the chapter, which provides applications of copyright law to teachers, students, instructional developers, and online instructors. This presents another example of how the text is structured for utility to a broad constituency.

In the next chapter, the authors tackle the issue of research on online learning. Reviews of research, though necessary, have a tendency to be the most laborious and least interesting chapters of most texts. In “Research on Online Learning” (Chapter Three), Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland meet the challenge in a clever and engaging way. The chapter focuses on a single scenario, where we follow the exploits of corporate trainers Clay and Marta, who are looking for research to support the implementation of an online learning management system at their company. Clay just happens to be a graduate student in instructional technology—

which I found to be a clever way of including the academic side in this scenario. Throughout the chapter, we look over the shoulders of Clay and Marta as they investigate studies of asynchronous and synchronous communication tools, interactivity, online communities, hyper-text and hypermedia, Web-based instruction, and student/instructor perceptions of online learning. I enjoyed the way that this chapter was written and would recommend it as a good model for how research reviews can be presented.

In Chapter Four, the book's longest chapter, Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland introduce their design model, the Integrative Learning Design Framework for Online Learning Environments (ILDF). The ILDF for Online Learning is a constructivist adaptation of the familiar ADDIE (analysis, design, development, implementation, evaluation) models used in systematic instructional design. Although I did not find the name "ILDF for Online Learning Environments" to be as easy to remember as ADDIE or ASSURE, the model itself is not unduly complex. The ADDIE components are all there, along with some unique features of its own.

The authors divide the development of online learning into three major phases: exploration, enactment, and evaluation. True to the constructivist orientation of the model, these three development phases are seen as operating within social and cultural contexts that are unique to each project, target audience, and designer. These social and cultural contexts place situational constraints that must be accounted for during the design process. This assures that design cannot be done in a "cookie cutter" fashion. Each of the three phases is "informed" by the three components of the ILDF for Online Learning: (1) pedagogical models or constructs, (2) instructional or learning strategies, and (3) learning technologies. These components provide the tools and information used in the exploration, enactment, and evaluation phases.

One of the unique contributions of the ILDF is that the online learning developer's beliefs

and experience are given equal importance to information gathered through more formal processes, such as needs assessment and tasks analysis. While the attitudes, biases, and beliefs of designers certainly play a role in any instructional design project, this role is rarely acknowledged formally in design models. Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland not only acknowledge this role, but embrace it.

Another difference between the ILDF for Online Learning and other design models is that the authors intend for designers to increase their knowledge about online design while they are applying the model. Using the ILDF requires a great deal of research and learning about theory, pedagogy, and instruction. Throughout the chapter, there are suggestions for going through the ILDF process formally and informally. Both require a sizable commitment of time and effort by the designer.

Chapter Five, "Constructivist-Based Pedagogical Models," and Chapter Six, "Instructional Strategies" provide an in-depth look at the three components of the ILDF for Online Learning: models, strategies, and technologies. After the obligatory comparison of objectivism and constructivism, which Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland handle well, they offer a useful and understandable survey of cognitive/constructivist models including situated learning, problem-based learning, cognitive apprenticeship, cognitive flexibility, and virtual learning environments. These are classified into three broad groups: exploratory (discovery/inquiry learning), dialogic (conversation/dialogue), and integrational (combination of exploratory and dialogic). This chapter also includes a helpful table with suggestions of how different technologies can be associated with the various models.

While the pedagogical models tell us why we do things, the instructional strategies, covered in Chapter Six, tell us what things we can do by suggesting specific strategies for building online learning environments. Within the framework of the exploratory and dialogic models introduced in the previous chapter, Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland suggest eight

different instructional strategies for developers to implement online instruction. Three additional strategies are introduced as supportive strategies. One of the most valuable features of this chapter was the inclusion of several examples of ways to apply each of the 11 strategies in online courses. A few that caught my attention were:

- Presenting unfinished excerpts of real-world events and occurrences so that learners can provide their own endings and rationales for why they think it should end that way (promoting hypothesis generation).
- Providing online tools and a Web posting area for students to publish draft papers and problem solutions and engage in peer evaluation of others' work (promoting reflection).
- Providing an "ask the expert" e-mail or listserv link for students (promoting multiple perspectives).
- Developing a Web-based area where students post explanations of how they approached solving a problem or completing learning tasks, which prompts learners to reflect on their performance and compare it with the performance of others (promoting coaching and reflection).
- Including links to embedded online tools, such as calculators, spreadsheets, databases, concept maps, and diagrams to assist the learner in performing the learning task or to reduce its complexity (promoting scaffolding).

Although "Evaluation for Online Learning" (Chapter Seven) promises to present the characteristics of a constructivist evaluation, I found it to be a discussion on how to conduct a competent evaluation, regardless of one's theoretical construct. All of the principles of good evaluation design were there, including the necessity for both formative and summative activities, the desirability of multiple measures of evaluation (and, if possible, multiple evalu-

ators), Kirkpatrick's four levels of evaluation, and the use of both quantitative and qualitative data sources.

In some ways, Chapter Eight, "Authoring Tools," proved to be the most disappointing to me, since I have a particular interest in this area. Publishing a book in a field as dynamic as distance learning is risky business, since information changes so rapidly. During the past decade, Web-based tools have eclipsed the CD-ROM authoring market, so it was discouraging to see so many discontinued programs (e.g. Hypercard, IconAuthor, Digital Chisel, Astound, Claris Home Page, Quest, mTropolis) provided as examples of current authoring tools. Despite the reliance on so many older (mid 90s) references, I found worthwhile information in the discussion of the pedagogical implications of authoring tools, the influence of hypertext environment and, particularly, the applications of content management systems.

I found Chapter 9, "Course Management Systems," to be one of the most useful sections of the book and an improvement over the way that the subject of content management is handled in most distance learning texts. My own research has suggested that distance learning faculty and coordinators consider the course management system (CMS) to be the most visible evidence of distance learning programs at colleges and universities. However, many texts give the CMS a very superficial treatment. Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland, recognizing the pervasiveness and central role of the CMS, provide a comparison and contrast of the features of four leading systems: Blackboard, WebCT, Lotus Learning Space, and VirtualU. Of particular interest was the classification of pedagogical features of the different systems. Even though *Online Learning: Concepts, Strategies and Applications* is a book targeted to online teachers and trainers, those who administer, coordinate, or support distance learning programs will benefit from this chapter.

As with other Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall texts, *Online Learning: Concepts, Strategies*

and Applications features both abbreviated and detailed tables of contents and a useful glossary with over 200 terms. Each chapter concludes with a generous and up-to-date reference section that provides good guidance for anyone seeking more in-depth information of the topics covered within the chapter. There is also a companion Website for the text. While such sites have become commonplace, not all of them are good ones. I found the companion Website for this text to be a handy tool with an adequate number of references and places to go for further study or practice.

There is much to like about this book; however, as with any text, there are some areas that could use improvement. Chapter Four presented a challenge, as much of the information was presented in large blocks of text. Breaking up the text in more manageable chunks with headers, as was done throughout the remainder of the book, would have been helpful. Chapter

Eight should be revised with more current references. Rather than citing discontinued programs as examples of current authoring tools, the focus could be changed to how the proliferation of multimedia on the Web has made CD-ROM tools, such as HyperCard, obsolete.

In summary, Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland have produced a text that appeals to a wide range of distance learning professionals: Those who teach online courses will encounter many good ideas and useable strategies within these pages. Those who administer distance learning programs will find the sections on course management systems to be particularly useful. Those who are wondering how constructivist principles can be applied in a practical way to the design of online learning will discover a useful model in the ILDF. *Online Learning: Concepts, Strategies and Applications* is a worthy addition to the library of anyone interested in distance learning.