

The Design and Management of Effective Distance Learning Programs

Richard Discenza, Caroline Howard, and Karen Schenk, eds.

Idea Group Publishing, 2002, \$74.95 (hardback), 299 pp.

ISBN 1-930708-20-3

Reviewed by Elizabeth Wellburn

It is interesting to see that in 2002 a book on distance learning is released whose title seems consciously to exclude all of the words and acronyms that would indicate the use of digital technologies, such as telelearning, online education, ICT, Web-based learning, virtual instruction, distributed learning, and any number of others. A glance at the contents shows instantly, however, that the book does focus on learning that is supported by such technologies. Could it be that technology has — as was always predicted — finally become a truly transparent part of learning environments that involve distance, to the extent that it doesn't have to be specified in a book title on the topic? That is inspiring to those of us who have always wanted to see the educational aspect of distance learning take on a greater emphasis than the technological.

With the educational emphasis in mind, my first priority with respect to the design and management of distance learning programs would be to ensure that such programs are built to meet the needs of a range of learners. The editors of the book seem to be of a similar mindset, devoting the first section to four articles that discuss the evolution of learning needs and how the characteristics of distance learners have changed over recent years. For instance, the profile of a typical distance learner has shifted from that of a geographically remote individual to a much more diverse profile, including what Chapter 1 refers to as the "time-strapped" adult learner. Being older and more experienced, the new distance learner is likely already to have a well-developed and disciplined approach to the work of learning. Chapter 3 takes this a step further and looks at distance

learners from the perspective of what has been learned in the literature on telecommuting, for instance, that it is not attractive or appropriate in all situations.

Also relevant to the educational emphasis is the quality of what is offered to learners. Chapter 4 discusses a survey of department chairs and deans who are asked to compare the quality of online distance education to traditional paper-based correspondence courses. The results show that at the institution in question, there is little vision that online education has much structure or potential for interaction, and it is therefore viewed as second rate. This is a particularly problematic view, in my opinion, because it does not acknowledge the design issues that can make an online environment into much more than "correspondence materials delivered through the Internet." At the same time, this chapter provides an interesting example of a place where resistance to change would be high. It is clear in this situation that there has been perpetuation of a negative vision of online delivery. Some of the success strategies described elsewhere in this volume (Chapters 1, 3, and 5) might be useful here, for example, ensuring that quality is maintained so there can be no perception of a two-tiered system, or improving the odds for success by allowing the faculty transition to occur gradually, beginning with small, easy-to-reach online components.

A different aspect of quality is how to meet diverse learning needs. One could argue that customization of content is necessary to avoid the potential homogenization of academic content that might result from a globalized approach to distance learning. Chapter 2 addresses this issue by describing the Central Queensland University model of a "glocal" learning environment, which incorporates local knowledge and culture but also links learners internationally.

The second section of the book consists of six articles related to faculty, student, and program challenges. Anyone in the field of education is probably aware that resistance to change is a given and that challenges will emerge when technology is involved, even for those who embrace the innovation. One strategy mentioned

in these chapters is to employ support and training to ensure that early success is the reward for those who adopt new teaching and learning methods. Using program evaluation to refine programs and to let students know that their input is valued (Chapter 8) is another strategy described. Chapter 9 addresses still another strategy, that of ensuring that, as an institution moves to distance education, it simultaneously plans appropriate administrative and library services.

Challenges with respect to socialization and communication are also referenced in this section. Coming from an institution that promotes the model of short on-campus residencies combined with Internet learning, I found the book does not tap the potential of collaborative learning as thoroughly as it might. Section 2 includes only a brief reference to introductory face-to-face meetings for distance learners and very little description of collaborative projects that can be accomplished online. My experience has shown that fostering teamwork through a cohort model where teams of five or six learners maintain a relationship and work on projects together throughout a program (perhaps for as long as two years) involves a tremendously sophisticated level of communication and leadership competencies. Learners can and do increase both their socialization and communication skills throughout the process of working at a distance, and these same individuals report that they often feel more personally connected to their instructors than in a face-to-face classroom. The role of the instructor as online facilitator is critical, however, and this is another area that the book could address in more detail as an important factor in managing programs.

The final section of the book focuses on specific implementations, with another six chapters covering projects involving a vast range of factors. Resourcing programs, respecting intellectual property rights, evaluating learning, trying various delivery modes, and amalgamating a diverse collection of courses into a large consortium are some of the issues addressed in the collection of cases that form the final section of the book. These cases incorporate projects from such

diverse locations as Hong Kong, Turkey, and Australia, and combine with three chapters focusing on implementation in the United States. As a Canadian with an awareness of the range of innovation for distance education in my own country, I find it somewhat disappointing not to see Canada represented in this volume. But, although the book is not the "last word" on distance learning, I recommend it as a timely, learner-focused overview. *C*

Elizabeth Wellburn (Elizabeth.Wellburn@RoyalRoads.ca) is an Instructional Designer at Royal Roads University in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.

Online Communities: Commerce, Community Action, and the Virtual University

Chris Werry and Miranda Mowbray, eds.
Hewlett-Packard Company/Prentice-Hall, Inc., 2001, \$47 (paper), 416 pp.
ISBN 0-13-032382-9

Reviewed by Peter DeBlois

Online Communities: Commerce, Community Action, and the Virtual University is not "Virtual Communities for Dummies" or a cookbook for those who want quick tips on using the latest collaboration tools to scramble together a virtual group. Rather, it is a collection of essays and case studies offering critiques on how the Internet is affecting the ways people learn, advance causes, interact with markets, and relate to each other. A busy IT professional contemplating or already responsible for supporting online communities might wonder, "Why should I spend time on critiques when I need practical ideas for designing and keeping a community running?" Answer: Because this collection is smart, focused, well-researched, enthusiastic, skeptical, sometimes wrong, and always provocative. There is much material on the "how" of online communities; this book instead looks hard at the "why" and "why not."

Among current titles devoted to online/virtual communities, *Online Communities* offers the most comprehensive overview yet of the forms, styles, and

contexts of using the Internet to create collaborative groups. The editors have assembled 19 experts from among non-profit community facilitators, corporate analysts, open software devotees, journalists, and scholars to write about vision and risk.

The Commercial and Alternative sections of the book show how online communities are transforming the relationships that undergird market dynamics and community action. Corporations have begun to cultivate Internet purchaser and user communities, not just as a new strategy in their marketing arsenals but as the venue for a significant portion — indeed, in some cases their only source — of revenue. Case studies of notable failures and successes (GeoCities, SmartGirl Internette, and Electric Minds) illustrate how critical it is to anticipate and support such distinct community players as builders, browsers, users, and buyers. On a very different front, social activists use collaboration and communication technologies for focused engagement, from allowing people in developing countries to be heard in international symposia on poverty and health to linking schools, communities, and agencies in public education and social action projects.

The book's Educational section focuses on distributed teaching and learning technologies, distance education, and Web-based student services. Significantly, six of the eight essays in this section were written by faculty members in disciplines as diverse as communication and culture, English, philosophy, political science, rhetoric, and technical communications. Along with guarded excitement about new instructional uses of technology, there is a thread of concern, even alarm, that such phenomena as distance education, its marketing, and partnerships between the academy and for-profit entities are co-opting the faculty's traditional control over the curriculum. In this vein, Joanne Addison suggests a get-in-the-ring-before-it's-too-late point of view: "Faculty need to look to themselves ... and acknowledge how little they have participated in shaping the development of distance education."

The first essay in this section, a rhetor-

ical critique of the alleged promise and reality of one vendor's portal "solution" for an institution, illustrates the provocative but occasionally naïve critical stance that some contributors level at emerging technologies. Norman Clark sees the institution-wide learning community that the vendor claimed its software would bring to Appalachian State University in 1999 as primarily fostering a "community" relationship between students and the advertisers who place banner ads on portal pages, with little benefit to the academic community as a whole. In chafing against the taint of the product's consumer-oriented frame, Clark fails to acknowledge the institution's responsibility to identify needs, develop applications, and articulate value for the community to use the product.

Other writers in this section probe such important topics as building a virtual university, outsourcing, privacy and alienation, courseware, intellectual property, and free access to knowledge. Two missing perspectives would have balanced the predominant faculty viewpoint: those who partner with faculty in supporting online learning communities (campus IT leaders, instructional development specialists, librarians, and other information resource professionals) and students, whose facility with and expectations of technology when brought together with mentoring lie at the heart of what John Seeley Brown calls the social construction of knowledge. Nonetheless, this section forcefully addresses the pedagogical and political issues that lie between the hype and potential of online communities in education.

Despite not covering every stakeholder and every nuance of position, *Online Communities: Commerce, Community Action, and the Virtual University* offers a broad critical challenge to create effective, worthy communities and to understand "why" as much as "how." Even as new books in this field emerge, this book and the socializing impact of online communities deserve the attention and debate of IT professionals. *C*

Peter DeBlois (pdeblois@educause.edu) is Director of Communication Services at EDUCAUSE.

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