

## Theory and Practice of Online Learning

*Terry Anderson and Faith Elloumi, Editors  
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*Reviewed by Deborah Bailey*

*Theory and Practice of Online Learning*, a collection of essays written by current and former employees of Athabasca University, contains both theoretical and practical information on delivering online education. The text, published under a Creative Commons License (<http://creativecommons.org/>), is openly available at <[http://cde.athabascau.ca/online\\_book/](http://cde.athabascau.ca/online_book/)>. The license allows those interested to read, print, and share the contents, provided the original author receives credit and use is for noncommercial purposes. The license does prohibit the creation of derivative works, though. Through the publication of this volume, Athabasca has made a valuable contribution to the online-education community, and people are already taking advantage of the opportunity. As of May 19, 2004, 23,594 downloads of the complete text were accomplished.

Each of the book's chapters reflects the experience and knowledge of its author or authors. The editing process created a volume that reads as a cohesive whole. Other factors that enhance the reading experience include the clear definitions of terminology that may be new for the reader and the reliability of most hyperlinks to resources. Throughout the volume, realistic practices tied to the theoretical underpinnings of online education provide readers with a greater understanding of how the theories apply to their own situations.

The chapters flow in a logical manner, following what the editors term the "value chain of online learning framework." Part 1 of the book describes the theoretical framework of online education. Parts 2 through 4 include chapters

covering the infrastructure and support necessary for a successful online program or course; the design and development of courses; and the delivery of courses, quality management, and student support services.

Part 1 serves as the foundation of the text, containing three chapters dealing with educational theory and its application in the online-learning arena, including a detailed explanation of value-chain analysis. Behaviorist, cognitivist, and constructionist theories, along with their implications for online learning, form the basis of a model for effective online instruction. Discussion of the theoretical foundation of online education illustrates how its application supports student learning, while additional discussion focuses on communication in the online realm and future theory development needs.

A common thread throughout the work is the idea that theory and practice need to be "learning-, knowledge-, assessment-, and community-centered." A full explanation of value-chain analysis supplies an understanding of its strategic planning implications for institutions involved in online learning.

Part 1 will be of special interest to those working in the field of online learning, providing them with a theoretical background that will not only support them in their daily operations, but also serve as a basis for understanding the rest of the text.

Part 2 covers the inbound logistics of the value chain. The authors of this part's initial chapter provide insights into the overall governance process of online-learning ventures and includes comparisons of ideal scenarios to more realistic operations, clarifying for the reader that online-learning infrastructure includes more than hardware and software. Descriptions of technology and its application in online education presented in nontechnical language ensure that most readers, even those without technical backgrounds, will comprehend the content. A discussion

follows of instructional media, covering plain text to multimedia applications and the underlying theory that assists in the selection and design of appropriate media. While much of the information in this section is already a part of the knowledge base of a typical online education specialist, the explanations of technology and media provide excellent background material for faculty and administrators new to the field.

Part 3 covers the operations and outbound logistics of the value chain. The development of online courses begins this section and contains a valuable discussion of the skill sets faculty members need to succeed in the online realm. The case of teaching team dynamics in the online environment provides a practical application of the skills described in the previous chapter.

Intellectual property and copyright issues create awareness at the point in the design process where it needs attention. Understandably, the authors focus on Canadian copyright law but demonstrate knowledge of copyright issues in the United States and other countries.

The function and role of the Multimedia Design Editor for Athabasca's College of Business concludes this section and details the value of such a position for all campuses. Faculty members involved in online education will gain knowledge of successful practices and of skills that may need development by reading this part of the book. The information on necessary skills and the complexity of appropriate design will further enlighten administrators who may not have a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes the successful delivery and design of online education.

Part 4 covers the delivery and service segments of the value chain. Detailed discussion of the process of instruction in the online environment contains practical information on the handling and assessment of online discussion forums. A description of the use of call centers at Athabasca for student and faculty support and their usefulness for

retention and customer service follows. A prototype online-learning management system that facilitates interaction between instructor and learner in a self-paced course illustrates possibilities for future-generation learning management systems. An explanation of libraries and the services they provide to online learners demonstrates the applicability of modern libraries to online learning. When discussing the provision of service to the online learner, the authors remind us to focus on the needs of the customer and to evaluate services frequently.

Concluding the book is a discussion of quality, not just in the online realm but also throughout higher education. Online-learning personnel, faculty, and administrators will gain ideas for strengthening and expanding programs from reading these chapters.

Although the editors of this volume did not set out to create a proscriptive treatise, the combination of chapters and their rich content provide readers with the fundamental knowledge either to begin developing an online program or evaluating an existing one. It is useful for all university personnel involved with distance education, including upper administration, program coordinators, instructional design personnel, and faculty, all of whom may read it in its entirety or only selected chapters. Program administrators will find this volume valuable as a self-education tool; for assisting with the creation of action plans for the development or evaluation of programs; and for educating administrators and faculty members. The price is right for the easily downloadable version—free. I strongly recommend the book and already use the information contained in it on a regular basis. *e*

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