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Book Review – Expectations and Demands in Online Teaching: Practical experiences

Author: Sorin Walker Gudea & Terry Ryan (2008). *Expectations and Demands in Online Teaching: Practical experiences*. Idea Group Inc., Hershey PA. ISBN: 1599047470.

Reviewer: Caryl Lynn Segal, University of Texas at Arlington (retired)
University of Texas at Brownsville, online adjunct

Since I have taught online exclusively for the past eight years and have taught at the post secondary level for more than a quarter century, I must confess, I approached the book with a built-in bias towards online instruction.

I love teaching online and found many of the comments in the book to be evidence of lack of knowledge of online teaching pedagogy and available technological resources. The authors have only had experience teaching online for the University of Phoenix, according to the biographies listed by the publisher, which may explain some of the book's weaknesses.

The book is marred by the pool used for the in-depth interviews. If Gudea and Walker wanted to explore the world of online instruction, the pool should have been limited to those who teach online. The reasons given for why someone did not want to teach online (who had never done so) fail to provide insight into what online teaching is all about.

Another weakness was redundancy in the explanation of the methodology since it was adequately covered in the appendix and did not need to be discussed in multiple chapters. For instance, the same quotes are used more than once: "I can't see the light bulbs pop up." "Online is a female-friendly environment" was jarring not only because of its sexist nature, but because males can be equally shy and uncomfortable speaking out in a lecture hall.

It also appeared as if a large number of those interviewed were adjunct faculty. Adjunct faculty will have a different perspective from those who have been teaching for a number of years in the same college/ university both face-to-face and online. Looking at the age-range of those interviewed indicated that few would have been trained in their fields using computer technology.

No information is provided to indicate the breakdown of those interviewed who work in public colleges and universities, and those who worked for private colleges and universities, and those who worked for for-profit organizations such as the University of Phoenix. The author uses a number after the quote for the sake of anonymity, but using a number followed by some key to the educational institution might have proved illuminating and also helpful to administrators and Web designers.

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The authors' state that all those interviewed had Masters degrees, but no breakdown is given for how many have terminal degrees. Also missing is demographic information to indicate the percentage of tenure and tenure-track faculty.

It would also have been helpful to know how many respondents created their own online courses and how many taught courses written by others as well as how many were dealing with administrative written pre-determined templates.

Adjuncts are certainly a large component of today's online teaching faculty, and in many cases are called upon to teach material developed by someone else. Some of those interviewed appeared to be given little support from their institution's information technology (IT) departments and given little training on how to adjust an online course during the semester.

No mention was made of the many distance education programs offered by various professional associations either. Spending a few days at a conference provides an opportunity to speak to others who face the same challenges and learn new ways of making your own teaching more effective. Providing access to these conferences or subscriptions to distance learning publications should have been a suggestion for administration.

The book according to the publisher's description was written for administrators and course designers as the primary audience. It offers some valuable insights into the problems faced by some online instructors. Course designers should gain a great deal by reading the interviewees comments and mentally thinking of ways in which the perceived problem might be rectified. I even found myself thinking, "Have you thought about 'xyz' as a solution?"

There was no discussion of the way in which Web 2.0 could be – or was – incorporated into online courses. It is quite possible that when the interview questions were written, this area was overlooked. Gudea and Walker discuss the methodology used, but omit the questions that were posed. Knowing the questions might have made the book more meaningful.

The authors stressed multiple times that online teaching was more time demanding because of the student-teacher interaction and a sense of a course being held 24/7. In my experience, if you factor in the time one spends with office hours, commuting, student telephone calls, class preps, and grading, the time demands are greater but not unreasonably so. The time demand is greatest during the content input/course design period. If a course is well developed and students are provided with a detailed syllabus, email is limited to one or two a week originating with the student and more in response to private notes from the professor. Reference is also made to online having a high drop-out rate. This is definitely not the experience that neither I, nor my peers, have encountered.

Time and again those interviewed mentioned not knowing how much students are learning. A well designed course provides a great deal of information and feedback for the professor. Since exams do not take so much of the lecture time, much more time can be given online to check on comprehension and understanding. Another plus is that students get instant feedback results for those exams that are not discussion based.

Multiple comments were made about the need for good communication skills, especially written communication. But overlooked was the fact that all teaching requires good communication skills, more verbal in the classroom and more written online. Unfortunately, there was no mention made of critical thinking and critical analysis as skills that should be goals of a course.

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I found it offensive that the author concluded on page 188 that “there is more learning on-ground than online.” The author then added, in my opinion, insult to injury by stating “there is not much deep learning online.” In a well designed course the degree of critical thinking and critical analysis by students is, at a minimum, equal to – and normally far exceeds – the student in the classroom on campus.

A few of those interviewed commented on having to “entertain” students, while no one mentioned making the material more relevant to the student, thus encouraging them to explore and learn more. The Internet is rich with both audio and video, and links in the course material can more than satisfy any perceived entertainment need. There is a wide chasm between an entertainer and a teacher.

Some of the comments were hard to fathom when talk was about the quality of the students. With the exception of senior level courses in a major field, the average lecture hall is made up of students at all levels of intellectual and academic development. The idea of teaching to the lowest common denominator was distasteful. When standards and expectations are high, students rise to the challenge or drop the course.

On page 193, Gudea states: “. . . anything that requires drawing on a board or working a problem on the board is difficult to accomplish online.” This is simply not true. The technology exists to even hyperlink from a problem to the answer that emulates what would have been written on the chalkboard. This can even be done when the wrong answer is given on computer generated exams. Blackboard, WebCT, and other popular programs have this capability and it exists using Moodle or other open source, copyright free programs.

Another perceived weakness was that none of those interviewed mentioned professionalism and academic standards. I think a pool taken exclusively from college and university faculty, both full-time and adjunct, would have made the material more valuable, especially to course designers and administrators.

Overall, I conclude that the weaknesses of this book exceed the strengths. The content did not live up to the expectations generated by the title.

