

Book Review – Distance Learners in Higher Education: Institutional Responses for Quality Outcomes

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Book Review: Distance Learners in Higher Education: Institutional Responses for Quality Outcomes

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The main message of this book is that we should not forget for whom distance education is meant, that is the learner. To counter the upheaval of research and development efforts around Web-based teaching, it states: educators “must do more than provide access to information” (p. viii). Edited by Chère Campbell Gibson, who wrote two chapters and the retrospective conclusion, there are seven chapters that provide a brief review and some guidelines on topics related to existing knowledge about learners in distance education and a first chapter giving an overview of what is known about the characteristics of the distance learner.

In chapter one, Melody M. Thompson describes demographic and situational characteristics (age, gender, ethnic background, disability, location, life role) related to success as a student as well as affective characteristics (personality type, learning style, motivations). She concludes that a dynamic conception of the distance learner is required in which education for all changes to education for each. In chapter two, Elizabeth Burge writes about gender and the need for distance educators to change the focus from “receive, retain and return” to “respect, re-frame and re-apply” for more study success by women. Barriers to access, appropriate technology and sense of a safe place are discussed and result in some long lists of constructivist, women-friendly guidelines regarding technology. In chapter three, Irene Sanchez and Charlotte N. Gunawardena write about cultural diversity and the influence of culture on learning. A history of theory development on cognitive control, flexibility and strategies is followed by a case study (Sanchez’s Ph.D. work) on Hispanic adult learners. These two authors pose the question (without answering) whether matching teaching and learning style will always be to the benefit of the learner who must function in a diverse society. In chapter four, Chère Campbell Gibson discusses the self-concept of learners, and its relation to persistence. A dynamic self-concept is proposed including process-related and content-related factors, and enhancers and detractors of this concept are indicated as well as strategic interventions that may be undertaken. In chapter five, Christine Olgren writes on learning outcomes and the effects of learning strategies and motivation. From a constructivist perspective, she indicates four types of cognitive learning strategies (selection, rehearsal, organization and elaboration) as well as metacognitive influences and strategies. Implications for course design are outlined. In chapter six, Terry D.

Anderson and D. Randy Garrison discuss learning in a networked world leading to new roles and responsibilities. A model of transactional relationships in higher education is presented, including six types of interactions (amongst learner, teacher and content) for meaningful learning. In chapter seven, Chère Campbell Gibson discusses the distance learner in context and elaborates on the applicability of ecological systems theory of micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-systems. Learning in context means to empower the learner and an orientation day for the entire family is suggested as an intervention. In chapter eight, Daniel Granger and Meg Benke discuss support to learners at a distance from a *marketing* perspective, through the trajectory from inquiry to completion. This chapter reads more like a textbook on these aspects, that is, it prescribes how to design distance education. In the retrospective final chapter, Chère Campbell Gibson summarizes the book in five strong suggestions: know the learner; provide orientation; design with variety, active engagement and choice; evaluate authentically; and provide an integrated system of support.

As the book has no pretensions to be complete in its review, it is stimulating and interesting reading, and causes one to reflect, which is enough value for the price. One of my own reflections at the end is induced by the frequent advice throughout the chapters to take into account learner characteristics when designing distance education. Assuming that the influence of those characteristics is sufficiently demonstrated, is it possible to provide for them in design and delivery of distance education? At what price? And finally, should it be done? A definite answer to this question still awaits.

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