International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning

Handbook of Online Learning Innovations in Higher Education and Corporate Training

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October – 2003

Book Review

Handbook of Online Learning Innovations in Higher Education and Corporate Training

Editors: Kjell Erik Rudestam and Judith Schoenholtz-Read (2002). *Handbook of Online Learning Innovations in Higher Education and Corporate Training.* 400 pages, softcover. Sage Publications. ISBN: 0 761 92402 7

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If you take this volume at face value, based on the title, you will likely wonder, as I did, how the combination of "online learning," "innovation in higher education," and "corporate training" could coherently co-exist within a "handbook." However, the old adage about not judging a book by its cover certainly applies to this body of work. Yes, it is about online learning. It does have something to say about innovation in higher education. In part, it is also about Corporate Training. And it can, indeed, work as a handbook – there are all sorts of field tested, helpful practices described here. But in my view the whole is much, much more than the sum of these parts (for this reason I will refer to it as a "book" notwithstanding the choice of "handbook" for the title).

The organization of the book reflects the notional conceptual diversity among the themes identified in the title. There are 20 chapters organised into two parts. The first part, "Changing Philosophies and Theories of Learning," contains Chapters 1 to 5, all deemed to constitute a single section. Part 2, "Implementing Online Learning," has three sections to it. Section A, "Programs/ Environments: University," is made up of Chapters 6 to 11; Section B, "Programs/ Environments: Corporate" consists of Chapters 12 to 15; and Section C, "Courses" contains the remaining chapters, 16 to 20.

The chapter authors all seem to have some affiliation with the Fielding Graduate Institute in California and the case study material presented reflects this background. The emphasis is on graduate level education – with "students who are most likely to succeed" being described as independent active learners, accomplished, busy mid-career professional people with superior verbal and analytic skills (Barbara Brown, Chapter 17, p. 386). This is important backdrop to an essential thesis of the book – that online learning represents an educative experience different in kind from that represented by the traditional face-to-face format. When I finished reading this book, I wondered if the arguments offered and lessons drawn are more widely applicable to other kinds of learners in other educational contexts. Does this thesis still hold in higher education in

general, as the title would seem to imply? Comments by a number of the authors suggest not – which ought to prompt a new line of inquiry that would elaborate on this question.

On the basis of the organisational arrangement of the book and the titles given to these components, one would likely assume that Part 1 is theoretical and philosophical in nature, and Part 2 has to do with practical applications. To some extent this is true, but one of the striking features of these chapters, taken as a totality, is how much the theoretical/ philosophical is explicitly grounded in the authors' practical experience – and in turn how much the practical application of online learning was informed by deep, conceptual thought.

Chapter 1, entitled "Overview" illustrates the challenges of bringing these disparate themes together when they are considered to be the separate and distinct efforts that a strict, literal interpretation of them would suggest. However, the other chapters (admittedly to differing degrees) seemed to me to exhibit a remarkable convergence of thought about "online learning."

The first, and to my mind, the most important point of convergence, is that most of the chapters deal in some way with the fundamental issue of what it means to teach and learn – and not just at the superficial level of the delivery mechanisms used to bridge spatial and temporal separation of students and teacher. From that point of view, this book has much to say to anyone associated with education regardless of whether it is classical face-to-face teaching or whether delivered through some mediating technology. Chapter 13 in particular (by David Smith, entitled, "Real-World Learning in the Virtual Classroom") offers a useful, succinct characterization of the educational process. A defining condition in this characterization is the social process required to transform private, personal knowledge into knowledge that is publicly understood and acknowledged. Much of what is presented in the various chapters has to do with what that social process needs to be in an online environment – but again, the lesson of what this is extends far beyond the context of online education and there is lots of thoughtful material here for anyone interested in education in general.

This book has also helped me better understand a number of other issues that seem to me to have been only weakly argued elsewhere. For one, I could never really apprehend claims made that because online communication is a more egalitarian mode of communication it would lead to more effective learning. Nor have I found a convincing account of what the nature of the interaction among learners and teachers should be, and how that would support a more efficacious educational experience. However, it seems to me that the theory and practices described in this book do provide a substantive basis for clarifying these issues.

A related matter that has always puzzled me is why electronic communication should make any difference to the amount and kind of learner participation – and how that would relate to a more effective learning experience. Before I read this book, I was of the view that claims about computer-based telecommunications technology in education were largely cyber-hype, full of presumptive assertions about how technology will transform this, that and whatever. Now that I have read the case made by many of the book's contributors, I am more inclined to wonder whether online technology (appropriately used) might actually result in a fundamentally different kind of educational experience. See, for example, Barbara Brown's beguiling statement that: "There is a type of intimacy achievable between teachers and students in this medium that is quite extraordinary, reminiscent of what Sproull and Kiesler, (1995) refer to as 'second-level' social effects of the technology" (Chapter 17, p. 384).

In a different vein, although I have read a number of accounts of the ethical implications of distance education, and online education in particular, these seemed to me to be so general and superficial that they are hardly noteworthy. However, a number of the chapters in Part I of the book present convincing points of view that there are particular (and peculiar) characteristics of online learning that require concerted attention. There are, of course, the obvious legalistic considerations (such as constraints on the circulation of email correspondence meant for one audience and a particular purpose to other audiences for purposes beyond those intended by the author). But, in addition, there are the less obvious considerations of the ethics involved in inter-personal communication online and how those considerations can affect the quality of the educational experience of the participants. For one interesting elaboration of this point, see Chapter 5 by Dorothy Agger-Gupta and what she has to say about "logical malleability" and the invisibility of the rules of logic and values in what appears on a computer screen. Interestingly, one could make an analogous point in relation to conventional materials-based distance education and face-to-face teaching.

This book has also reminded me how the timeworn distinction between "training" and "education" can be a counter-productive dichotomy – at least at the level of professional education described in the book. In particular, Chapter 14, by LaRue and Sobol, summarise how practice can inform and modify theory, resulting in the creation of new knowledge – a characteristic usually appropriated solely for the world of canonical theory. However, canonical theory, without reference to some grounding in the real world of application, can be woefully sterile and often absurd (history is full of examples of ugly facts destroying elegant theories). This book, itself, provides occasional illustration of how carried away one can get with unconstrained theorizing – and a few of the chapters are too full of hortatory accounts of how computer-based telecommunications technologies will transform the educational world as we know it. However, the tone and substance of most of these chapters change noticeably as the authors anchor their reflections with reference to what they and their students have actually done in the online experience.

This is not the kind of book to be skimmed in a sitting or two – nor will you want to. It needs and deserves a studied reading. Buy it. You will find it a valuable, interesting addition to your reference collection.

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