

Book Review – Technology, e-learning and distance education (2nd edition)

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November – 2005

Book Review – Technology, e-learning and distance education (2nd edition)

Author: A. W. (Tony) Bates. (2004). *Technology, e-learning and distance education (2nd edition)*. RoutledgeFalmer Studies in Distance Education Series. 246 pages, softcover. London. ISBN: 0 4152 8437 6

Reviewed by: Heather Kanuka, Canada Research Chair in e-Learning and Associate Professor, Athabasca University – Canada's Open University

Technology, E-Learning and Distance Education aims to be the “essential guide for anyone wanting advice on how to choose the right technology at the right cost for a course or flexible learning program” (p. i). Building on the previous edition (*Technology, Open Learning and Distance Education* published in 1995 – which was prior to the ubiquitous use of the World Wide Web), this book offers new chapters which provide an overview of the developments in distance education and e-learning in the past decade (Chapter 1), two additional chapters on Web-based learning (Chapters 7 and 8), and two on synchronous conferring technologies (Chapter 9 and 10) – which are co-edited with Janice Picard.

The remaining chapters on selecting technologies are basically unchanged from the first edition. Justification for the unchanged chapters by Bates is explained as a: “[resistance to] the post-modernist tendency to believe that everything new is good and there are no lessons to be learned from the past” (p. ix). Evidence of this conviction by Bates (with an obvious misunderstanding of post-modernism) can be seen throughout many of the unchanged chapters – which provide references 20+ years old and a corresponding absence of recent references to determine whether there continues to be stability within the research results in these areas.

The intended audience for this book is decision makers in education and training, as well as experienced distance education practitioners. Examples of those for whom the book will be of value includes: school superintendents, Deans of Humanities, World Bank teams, university Vice-Chancellors, College department heads, State Commissioners for Higher Education—even politicians and civil servants are listed as target audiences for this book. In the first Chapter, Bates promises the readers that this book will provide readers with information on (p. 3):

- What distance education is
- How it differs from e-learning
- How to select and use different technologies in relation to educational goals and local circumstances
- How readers can protect themselves and their organizations from vendors
- Some of the barriers to technology adoption

- How to remove some of the adoption barriers
- How to deal with rapid technological change and have a clear vision of how to deliver quality education and training to remote learners.

Does this book deliver on these claims?

Chapter 1 provides an overview on emerging trends in distance education and e-learning. As promised, definitions on distance education, as well as open learning and flexible learning have been provided. These definitions are based on Bates's opinion of what these concepts mean. As a basic book on technology, e-learning, and distance education, a richer discussion could have been provided for the reader by acknowledging that there is a general non-consensus on many of these definitions within the field of distance education, and other prominent distance educators may define distance education in different ways.

Chapter 2 provides an excellent overview of distance education organizations, and 'who is doing what.' This chapter is particularly well constructed in respect to providing an international perspective of current distance education organizations and the impact that technology has had on these organizations.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the technological explosion in the field of distance education and how to select and use these technologies. The first part of this chapter is limited in value because of the way the discussion of technologies has been framed within media used prior to 1980. Though, the classification schemes provided are useful in understanding the relationships between media, technology and applications. The ACTION framework, also described in this chapter, has not been updated from the first edition and it is my opinion that there is no need to update it (in agreement with Bates) as the basic principles of using and choosing technology remains the same. Perhaps more importantly, the ACTION framework continues to be a useful guide for technology and media selection for distance education.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 provide an overview of older distance education technologies: print, television and radio, as well as audio/ video cassettes and compact disk players. While many of these older distance education technologies are not currently in widespread use within North America, they continue to be widely used in other distance education institutions in other parts of the world. These chapters are comprehensive and provide useful frameworks for informed decision-making regarding older distance education technology characteristics. However, the data provided on costs are so seriously out of date there is little, if any, credibility for the advice given in regard to making decisions based on the cost analysis provided.

Chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10 provide an overview of newer distance education technologies, such as Internet conferencing tools (i.e., Web-based learning, and synchronous Internet audio and video communication tools). These chapters have a good balance between the advantages and disadvantages with some good, basic, common sense advice and a particularly good critical review of much of the 'online rhetoric'. This being said, there are some difficulties with these chapters as well. In chapter 7, for example, there is no description provided for 'Web-based learning' (also not defined in the first chapter) and the differences in cost and organization between Web-based learning with learning management tools versus customized institutional development have not been delineated and discussed. Moreover, much of the literature used to support the chapter on audio and video conferencing is a decade or more old. In addition there are many opinions made about effectiveness with no supporting references. There was also information on audio and video conferencing where I found myself asking "who cares?" For example, do administrators need to know about Bell Telephone Laboratories in the 1920s? That

decoding equipment is called codecs? That a full-motion analogue television picture changes 30 times per second in North America and 25 seconds per minute in Europe? That two operating lines in tandem are 58-64 kbs x 2 and six lines is 58-64 x 6, which equals 348-384 kbs? The important issues the readers need to know are the teaching and learning implications. And while there is a section on the implications for teaching and learning, it tells us what students and teachers can do, but tells us nothing on the implications of teaching and learning.

Chapter 11 provides a comprehensive, and concise, executive summary. Polonius' advice alone makes this chapter a worthwhile read!

Overall this book is a bare-bones resource and could be much improved with greater integration of the current research literature. Much of the book is drawn heavily on the author's experiences at the University of British Columbia, rather than an extensive review of the research. As such it is important to read this book with a critical perspective.

In the end, however, this book does deliver what it promises. And listed at \$53.50 (CDN) on Amazon.ca, it is also a reasonable price. Moreover, given Tony Bates' long and influential career in distance education he has earned the right to have his books placed on every distance educators' bookshelf.

