

Book Review – Online Education: Learning and Teaching in Cyberspace

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Book Review: Online Education: Learning and Teaching in Cyberspace

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In his recent book, *Online Education: Learning and Teaching in Cyberspace*, Greg Kearsley provides a comprehensive description of all aspects of online education. He brings his personal experience and knowledge to the rather interesting task of making sense out of the vast materials and practices in Internet-based, online education in a way that is useful to anyone who is interested in online education. The beauty of this book is twofold: clear flow for reading and richness in resources. Readers can easily understand the author's main ideas through well-organized headings. The style of writing is also clear and easy to follow. Moreover, the book provides ample Web resources on various aspects of online learning and teaching. All the Web resources introduced in this book can readily be accessed by clicking the links provided at the accompanying site, <http://home.sprynet.com/~gkearsley/cyber.htm>.

As Kearsley points out in the preface, this book is a comprehensive, but introductory book for people who "have some basic familiarity with computer concepts and applications" (p. xii). If you are looking for more in-depth, professional discussions of online learning and teaching, this book would be a near disappointment.

This book contains 13 chapters and an appendix. The first chapter, Introduction, discusses the major themes that characterize online education. While the earlier types of computer-based instruction focused on individualized learning experiences through drills, tutorials or simulations, recent online education is more focussed on various types of interaction and collaboration. Online education is characterized by nine themes, including: collaboration, connectivity, student-centeredness, unboundedness, community, exploration, shared knowledge, multisensory experience, and authenticity. Obviously these themes are drawn from the professional literature in the field of online education. However, it seems to me that these concepts still need to be elaborated and succinctly organized into a more coherent theoretical framework.

Chapter two discusses the scope of online education across different learning settings such as K-12 schools, government agencies, non-profit organizations, the home, and public spaces. If you look at the Web sites listed in this chapter, you will develop a good understanding of what is actually occurring in the field of online education.

Chapter three discusses the basic elements of online education. The author

examines synchronous and asynchronous interaction devices, as well as more recent Internet tools. The benefits and limitations of different online devices and applications in the educational context are also discussed along with example Web sites.

Chapter four covers research about online education. Drawing on research findings, student achievement, evaluation of online courses, school-level impact, nature of class interaction, and virtual conferences are discussed. However, once again, readers should be reminded that this book is introductory in nature. The book provides only few examples of research findings, accompanied by the author's feelings and understanding regarding each topic. This is presumably because there is not yet enough research accumulated in the field of online education to draw any definite conclusions.

Chapters five and six discuss how online education is different from classroom instruction, from learners' as well as teachers' points of view. It is argued that learning online is much different than learning in a traditional classroom. One of the pedagogical features of online learning is that it usually provides the learner with a great deal of autonomy. Therefore, to be successful in online learning, learners have to be more active and more technology literate. Engagement theory, as proposed by Kearsley and Shneiderman in 1998 and described in this book "suggests that learners must be actively engaged in meaningful tasks for effective learning to occur" (Kearsley, 2000, p. 67). From the teachers' point of view, interactivity and participation, feedback, workload, moderating and facilitating, effectiveness, faculty collaboration, and student evaluation are all critical aspects of online education. These aspects change the roles of teachers dramatically. I personally believe that while the Web and Internet are new technologies, the problems of providing instruction via these technologies, (i.e., Web-based online education) are not totally new. Nor is providing instruction via these media necessarily pedagogically innovative. What we have is an application of the new technology to distance education – a teaching approach that has provided a flexible and open learning environment for more than a century. Online education thus shares many features with traditional forms of distance education such as correspondence study, videoconferencing lectures, and TV courses. What online education offers that is unique among communications technologies, is the facility of combining the attributes of each of the older media. Online education thus provides a learning environment in which text, pictures, video and audio are integrated into one system, access to huge databases is simple and easy, and more flexible interactions – especially asynchronous learner-learner interaction – are far simpler than before.

Chapter seven contributes to the discussion of major issues in design and development of online courses. This chapter covers design principles in creating an online course, integrating online and on-campus activities, authoring courses and assuring quality of courses. Even though this chapter does not provide specific guidelines for designing and developing online courses, it does offer critical

ingredients of good quality online courses.

Chapters eight through ten bring to our attention the various issues involved in organizational, policy, and societal impacts of online education. Chapter eight discusses the organizational changes that online education entails in terms of facilities, jobs, policies, procedures, leadership, and the relationships among institutions. Policy on ownership, quality control, student and faculty workloads, accreditation and certification is discussed in chapter nine. Useful sites that provide guidance to policy issues are also offered. Chapter ten provides a brief, but straightforward discussion of societal impacts such as information “haves” and “have-nots”, good or evil aspects of technology use, privacy concerns, quality issues, cost-benefit issues, and resistance to change.

Chapter eleven addresses some of the practical issues encountered in the implementation of online courses. Chapter twelve offers some speculation about the future directions of online education. Technological developments such as ubiquitous computing, intelligent software, virtual reality, speech processing, automatic language translation, and knowledge management systems are briefly discussed in the context of education. The last chapter lists resources for further information.

As mentioned above, this book covers all the major issues in online education and provides useful Web resources and reading lists. However, the organization of the chapters may have been a little too random and linear. I am compelled to suggest in this review that the book could have been organized in a more structured way. For example, the first four chapters could have been grouped together under the theme of *theoretical, practical and technological characteristics of online education*, chapters five and six under the theme of *pedagogical features of online education*, chapters seven, eight, and eleven under the category of *design and implementation of online education*, and chapters nine and ten under the category of *policy issues in online education*. Chapter twelve could have been the last chapter of the book if the information provided in chapter thirteen were moved to the appendix.

On the whole, Kearsley did a nice job of introducing online education to the general public and education professionals. I would recommend this book to three groups of specialists: educational decision makers, teachers and preservice teachers, and professors in schools of education majoring in other than educational technology. This book will widen their perspectives and better equip them with a more refined vision of online education.

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