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Book Review – Making the Transition to E-Learning: Strategies and issues

Editors: Mark Bullen & Diane P. Janes (2007). *Making the Transition to E-Learning: Strategies and issues.* Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing, ISBN: 1-59140-950-0.

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While reading this interesting book, I had a big question lingering in the back of my mind. Should we be concerned at all about the "transition to e-learning"? Should we not make effective use of e-learning in both distance and non-distance education contexts? Having read the book, I can say emphatically that the editors – and most of the authors of the 20 chapters that constitute this book – believe in 'effectiveness' if not exactly the 'transition' to e-learning. After all, making a transition makes us move from one place to another; and in this case, we do not leave behind either the face-to-face teaching or traditional distance education. In the preface to the book, the editors make it clear that e-learning is being used "without a solid understanding of how to plan and develop instruction, of underlying teaching and learning theories, and of what makes the Internet a unique medium for teaching and learning" (p. viii). In order to address this gap, the editors successfully pulled together an experienced group of teachers and researchers from five different countries to contribute on pedagogical implications of new technology. Of the 20 contributions, however, only five come from outside of Canada; and thus the book is highly Canada-centric. In spite of this, there are enough good lessons to be learned for all of us in this book. Initially, the editors take on clarification of the meaning of e-learning, which fall under three major groups (Zemsky & Massy, 2004).

- E-learning as distance education;
- E-learning as electronically mediated learning; and
- E-learning as facilitated transaction software.

The book is organized into three sections: (1) institutional and conceptual issues; (2) learning and teaching issues, and (3) instructional design and technology issues. Section-I has six chapters. In Chapter 1, Marco Adria and Katy Campbell make a passionate case for 'e-learning as nation building.' Within the broad considerations of citizenship and nation building, the authors suggest that the metaphor of an 'e-learning nation' has the potential to be socially transformative, develop cultural identity and learning communities. Margaret Haughey, in Chapter 2, reports on the organizational models for faculty development in Canadian universities. In Chapter 3, New Zealand's Oriel Kelly of the Manuka Institute of Technology presents an institutional case of adoption of e-learning as a strategic decision to shift the mindset of expert teachers. In the process, Kelly outlines the support provided to the faculty to maintain the quality of student learning experiences. Chapter 4, in my opinion, is probably the most significant contribution to this book. It comes from the experienced Tony Bates, who discusses the Southern Alberta

Institute of Technology's strategic planning process of moving strongly into e-learning. In fact, every institution thinking of moving in the direction of use of e-learning (in whatever form), should consider the five-stage model proposed by Bates. In Chapter 5, Maggie Beers presents a case study of British Columbia Institute of Technology to show the strategies adopted in the five-year technology-enabled knowledge initiative. Beers rightly emphasizes that faculty engagement will ultimately determine the success of e-learning initiatives. The last chapter in this section, written by Ellen Vogel and Bill Muirhead, discusses the laptop nursing program at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology. They analyzed the data gathered over a two year period during the implementation of the laptop nursing program that aimed to understand the teacher competencies required to work in an ICT-enabled environment.

Section-II is comprised of nine chapters focusing on learning and teaching issues. Dirk Morrison of University of Saskatchewan discusses the imperative pre-requisite to the effective adoption of e-learning in higher education. Morrison argues for an e-learning environment that promotes holistic thinking skills and deep learning. In Chapter 8, Gail Wilson from University of Western Sydney returns our attention to the issue of faculty development. Cathy Gunn and Mandy Harper from University of Auckland describe a seven-year, incremental process of e-learning development in Chapter 9. Here again, the issue of faculty development as part of institutional change is shown to be of significant importance; this is an issue that policy-makers should look into. In Chapter 10, Richard Schwier and Mary Dykes analyze the online discussions of a graduate level course to discuss issues related to community building, social engagements, and content in online learning. In Chapter 11, Martha Gabriel explores the role of instructor's perspective of teaching and learning in the context of e-learning environment. Based on the five perspectives of Pratt and Associates (1998) – transmission, developmental, apprenticeship, nurturing and social reform – Gabriel proposes guidelines for effective teaching. Dianne Conrad in Chapter 12 discusses the challenges faced by online teachers and offers suggestions to build collaborative communities. In Chapter 13, the focus shifts to learners, and Helen Wozniak from Australia emphasizes the importance of learner engagement and, therefore, the need to empower the learners on the processes and steps needed to learn online. Wozniak presents six different online activities to help the learners. Using Moore's dialogue and structure in Chapter 14, Tannis Morgan and Karen Belfer present a framework for planning communication activities in e-learning. In Chapter 15, Richard Kenny argues for use of problem-based learning designs in online courses.

Section-III is comprised of five chapters. In Chapter 16, Lucia Botturi and colleagues from University of Lugano in Switzerland recommend the use of fast prototyping in e-learning design projects. The next chapter comes from Spain by Albert Sangrá and colleagues, and places emphasis on educational design, and debate on the issue of technology-content-faculty, specifically: Which one should come first? In Chapter 18, Tracey Leacock and John Nesbit present a software tool for self-regulated learning called 'gStudy.' Though some of the facilities are already available in today's operating systems, the 'gStudy' should be useful for students learning in the digital world. Elizabeth Murphy and Thérèse Laferrière discuss the use of online synchronous tools in Chapter 19. The final chapter, by Adnan Qayyam and Brian Eastman, focuses on PowerPoint and its use in e-learning; sadly, the statistics on use of PowerPoint for e-learning is alarming, as the tool is not really meant for teaching. While Qayyam and Eastman discuss the problems of PowerPoint as a pedagogic tool, they also emphasize that it could be used in a better way. To emphasize their point, they bring in the debate related to 'do media influence learning?' They show us that there is a need to rethink the organization and design of PowerPoint presentations, because while teachers may find it easy to use and useful, it is certainly not a tool designed for e-learning.

As I mentioned in the introduction to this review, the book presents tremendous food for thought – though faculty development issues remain predominant in many chapters. The book should be of interest to all of us engaged in designing effective e-learning environments.

References

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Zemsky, R., & Massy, W.F. (2004). *Thwarted Innovation: What happened to e-learning and why.* The Learning Alliance: University of Pennsylvania.

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