

Handbook of Distance Education

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[See table of contents](#)

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October – 2003

Book Review

Handbook of Distance Education

Editors: and William G. Anderson (2003). *Handbook of Distance Education*. 872 pages, hardcover. Mahwah, NJ.: Lawrence Erlbaum. ISBN: 0 8058 3924 0

Reviewed by: Bob Spencer, Athabasca University – Canada's Open University

It is important to note that this book is not a book of “best practices” of distance education, nor is it a manual or a practitioner’s guide to distance education. The use of “handbook” in the title is more congruent with that of a treatise. That is, a “literary composition dealing more or less formally and methodically with a definite subject” (The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1976).

The “Handbook for Distance Education” begins with a four- page preface followed by an eleven - page overview, both written by Dr. Michael Moore. The book is then divided into seven sections, each section containing several chapters (55 in total). Each chapter is written by a well known (previously published in *The American Journal of Distance Education*) author or collection of authors. The title of each section and the number of chapters found in each section is shown below:

1. Historical and Conceptual Foundations (9 chapters)
2. Learning and Learners (9 chapters)
3. Design and Instruction (9 chapters)
4. Policies, Administration, and Management (11 chapters)
5. Different Audiences in Distance Education (8 chapters)
6. Economics of Distance Education (3 chapters)
7. International Perspectives (6 chapters)

In the “Preface,” Dr. Moore states: “The aim of the book is to provide a broad and exhaustive review of the research on such topic as the best way to practice distance education at the teacher level and the administrative level, the public policy implications of shifting a greater proportion of educational resources to this method, and the implications of the expansion of distance education for the theory of education and the practice of educational research” (p. x).

For Moore, the purpose of this book is to, “open up the imagination of the readers” to ways of addressing the various aspects of education and educational systems that need to change as a result of changing the focus of learning from “where the teacher is to where the learner is” (p. ix).

For me, the most important aspect of the book is that it serves an important need. This need is what motivated Dr. Moore to undertake the huge task of putting this edited book of readings together. That is, the book is “a key for knowing what is known before” (p. xi). The book is an important reference and source of information for students, researchers, and practitioners to use before engaging in research or designing and implementing courses and programs to be delivered by distance education. Far too often one attends a conference session or is asked to review an article for publication, where the presenter/ author is not aware of the literature that pertains to their subject. That is, some researchers are conducting studies without the full knowledge of what research has been previously undertaken, and practitioners are developing and delivering courses and programs without first reviewing previous practice (for example, what works and what doesn’t work and why). While this may appear to be stating the obvious, this practice happens far too often, and hopefully this book will help distance educators build new knowledge, learn from our past mistakes, and improve our future practice. The book is consistent with Moore’s continual plea for more attention to building a solid theoretical foundation for research and practice.

The book is far too long to provide a review of each chapter or even a review of the seven sections. Dr. Moore provides an excellent summary of each section in his “Overview.” The format that each of the chapter author(s) were asked to follow is worthy of noting however, to give one a sense of what one can expect from this book. The authors were asked to adopt a bibliographic essay style of writing. Each author was asked to address the following three questions:

1. “What is the current state of your special research area in contemporary distance education in America?”
2. “What knowledge about this is based on empirical research evidence?”
3. “What further research is needed in light of the changes that are occurring” (p. xiv)?

I believe each author met the challenge and as a result, the book is a valuable contribution and resource for the field of distance education. The book has something for everybody. I certainly have my favorite chapters (yes, I did read the entire book!), but there were chapters that I did not particularly care for. However, I must say that as a result of reading this book, I did improve my understanding of the research and scholarship in the field of distance education. Several articles in the section on future research needs did, indeed, stimulate my thinking and gave me several ideas for future research for both myself and my students, as well as provided me with questions to address at a program and institutional level in my current practice. In addition, the reference sections at the end of each chapter are excellent and make the book a “must have.”

But I do have some criticisms of the book and they are three fold. First, I did not find the book “reader friendly.” The font size was too small and the contrast between the typeface and the somewhat glossy paper was too hard on my eyes. I also found the right-justified margins, given the above, made it difficult reading. I understand that many of these decisions were likely economic; however, they did effect my level of reading enjoyment. Second, the cost of the book is too high. Currently the book is being offered at a special price. The special price is reasonable and affordable, especially if one wants to include the book in one’s graduate program curriculum

or as a personal desk copy. However, the special price is only available to those residing in the United States. If one resides outside the US, one must order the book through a foreign distributor and they do not offer the special price. For example, since I live in Canada, the book would cost me close to \$300 (CAN). Third, and related to cost, is the issue of access. Not only is the book quite expensive, many readers will only want to read specific chapters or sections, yet they are forced to purchase the entire book. In today's world, one begins to question the usefulness of a large print-based book. In addition, I have, for example, found myself trying to find a quote or reference to a particular study in the book to bring to the attention of one of my colleagues or graduate students, and I have not always been successful. If the book was available in an electronic format, perhaps I could have found the citation or passages more readily and would have also saved precious time, and perhaps money.

Despite my criticisms, however, I do believe this book is a very important contribution to the field of distance education. I can only hope that the book is able to achieve some of the important goals and purposes that inspired Michael Moore and William Anderson to undertake the project in the first place. Moore summarizes this the best in his closing paragraph of the "Overview" by saying,

If anything threatens the potential success of distance education more than the rejection and neglect it has received in the past, it is the danger of overenthusiasm about technology leading to underfunded, undermanned, poorly designed, and poorly managed programs. If the present volume serves to temper some of the more impetuous enthusiasm and replace it with well-grounded understanding of the costs involved and of the need for substantial investment, training, reorganizing of administrations, monitoring and evaluation of learning, and support of learners – of the need, that is to say, for careful, and long-term planning and development of new and different delivery systems – the authors jointly will have made an extremely valuable contribution (p. xxii).

References

The Concise Oxford Dictionary (1976). 6th Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

