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Book Review – Theory and Practice of Online Learning

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See table of contents

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Editors: Terry Anderson and Fathi Elloumi (2004). *Theory and Practice of Online Learning*. Online for no-charge at http://cde.athabascau.ca/online_book) Pages 421, softcover. Athabasca University Press. ISBN: 0 9197 3759 5 Pages: 421. The online version is free; the printed book can be purchased for CDN $ 50

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When I was asked to review this book for IRRODL, I was hesitant for several reasons. First, it is an awesome challenge to review this comprehensive book, one that covers such a broad range of themes. More problematic, however, were the relations between IRRODL, the book, Athabasca University (AU), and myself. So, the readers should be aware that IRRODL's editor Terry Anderson is one of the book editors and that I am an associated professor at AU, the institution that hosts IRRODL and published the book. I, however, have never visited AU; my association has been purely online. Finally, I decided to write the review for two reasons. First, I could draw on my in-depth knowledge of NKI Distance Education, which in many ways faces the same challenges as AU. Second, I could provide some additional insights by comparing it with my current book *Online Education and Learning Management Systems – Global E-learning in Scandinavian Perspective*. In addition to several common topics, both books are available in printed and electronic versions. They also have accompanying websites.

Printed and Electronic Version

The book under review – the Theory and Practice of Online Learning – is provided as open source material, free to all who visits the website. This is a bold move by a publisher, as usually only some of the content is made available online. The question remains, however, is the free electronic version effective promotion of the printed ($50 Canadian dollars) book, or does it reduce its status and credibility as a high quality publication? Well, according to my sources, seven months after publication the electronic version had been downloaded nearly 30,000 times and the printed version had sold a few hundred copies.

The book's website (http://cde.athabascau.ca/online_book) is well designed. I found it attractive and user friendly. The book's website does provide a discussion forum, but I expected it to include some additional services such as the online resources and multimedia material that are available at my book's website (www.studymentor.com).

The electronic book can be downloaded as one 1.8MB pdf-file. Individual chapters can also be accessed online in html format. The electronic book is superior for text search and electronic annotations. However, the book does not utilize the opportunities the pdf-format provides for colors, active links to Web addresses, and internal links for convenient navigation in the book. I

was, for example, surprised to see that the table of content did not have links to the corresponding articles. (**Editor's Note:** Since this review was completed, major improvements, including HTML cross linking, have been added to the book's webpage. Terry Anderson, November 2004)

Since I have convenient access to a high-speed printer, which can print color on both sides of the paper, I read a self-printed version first. Later, when I got hold of the commercial book, I realized that they were almost identical. However, my homemade copy had larger pages and letters that some may find easier to read.

The *Table of Contents* does not provide a good overview of the 421-page book; it only lists the titles of the sixteen articles. The book also lacks indexes, abstracts, lists of figures, tables and summaries. It would also be easier to get an overview of the material if the articles used more than one level of headings. The only help the reader has in the quest of obtaining an overview of the book's content is the *Book Organization* section in the introduction. I did expect to find more tools in both the printed and the electronic versions to help me navigate in this comprehensive book.

The Content

The book includes four parts and sixteen articles. It is a collection of quality articles written by 22 present and former faculty members at AU. This is an interesting and unique approach. Since all authors have a common point of reference at AU, the book probably covers most of the important activities at that university and thereby gives a unique insight in a leading online education institution that focuses on individualized study progression. The book also represents a major publication that AU should be proud of.

The book title testifies that the book is written by practitioners with a sound hands-on knowledge of online education practice. The title also testifies that the articles are based on a broad and thorough knowledge of online education theory. However, the book covers many educational topics in addition to learning, so a more appropriate title would be *Theory and Practice of Online Education*.

The First Part

Part 1 - *Role and Function of Theory in Online Education Development and Delivery* - includes three articles that provide the theoretical foundation for the book. This is the most theoretical and demanding part of the book.

In Chapter 1, *Foundation of Educational Theory for Online Learning,* Mohamed Ally focuses on the behaviorist, cognitivist, and constructivist schools of learning and their implications for online learning. In addition to these important perspectives, I would have liked to see more references to adult and distance education theories.

In Chapter 2, *Toward a Theory of Online Learning*, Terry Anderson looks at learning theory in general and focuses on interesting attributes of online learning. Anderson claims that quality online learning will be knowledge, community, assessment, and learning centered. He further presents a model of e-learning based on students, teachers, and six forms of interaction between them and the content. The theory emphasizes that collaborative and independent study modes are the two predominant forms of online education. In my opinion, the independent study mode has a

large potential for improvement and deserves further development as I have done in my theory of *Cooperative Freedom* (Paulsen, 2003). Finally, the author reveals so much confidence in a future semantic Web that he claims it is premature to define a particular theory of online learning.

Chapter 3, *Value Chain Analysis: A Strategic Approach to Online Learning* is written by Fathi Elloumi. One of my main concerns regarding online education is the lack of cost effectiveness and sustainability, which I discuss in *Online Education Obituaries* ds that goal.

The Second Part

Part 2 - *Infrastructure and Support for Content Development* - presents three chapters that focus on systems and technologies that can support online education.

Chapter 4, *Developing an Infrastructure for Online Learning* management system, student information systems, and user portals, are discussed superficially. These pivotal issues deserve to be discussed in more detail, especially since they are not addressed in separate articles. The book barely touches upon crucial issues such as the integration of LMS and SIS systems, and the lack of system overview that often is the result of using more than one LMS system. The last part of the article discusses various aspects of change management. This is important since online learning technology and expectations evolve rapidly and unexpectedly.

Chapter 5, *Technologies of Online Learning,* is an informative and up-to-date article by Rory McGreal and Michael Elliot. It examines many of the newer Web technologies that have interesting educational implications. The only technology I really missed was blogs. The technologies discussed include multimedia, streaming audio and video, push technologies and data channels, audio chat and voice over Internet, Web whiteboarding, instant messaging, hand-held and wireless technologies, peer-to-peer file sharing, and learning objects. All technologies are backed up by suggested educational use and a number of recommended links for further information. I found this article especially interesting because it inspired me to consider how we could use these technologies effectively in future online education.

In Chapter 6, *Media Characteristics and Online Learning Technology* n these two technologies especially, since we utilize them in NKI's accessibility projects (Paulsen, 2003, p. 312).

The Third Part

Part 3 - *Design and Development of Online Courses* comprises four articles. Each chapter in the Third Part are interesting as "individual" articles, but they do not work well together, particularly if the intention was to cover the field of design and development of online courses. Towards that aim, the articles are not well coordinated and this part misses several issues of importance to course development.

Chapter 7, *The Development of Online Courses*, is authored by Dean Caplan. The most useful and interesting part of this article is the discussion of course development teams. Caplan's article states that it is not reasonable to believe that just one or two people can create a high caliber online course. A course development team is perceived as beneficial and the core of a development team should include several key roles: subject matter expert, instructional designer, Web developer, graphic designer, programmer, and multimedia designer. Each role is discussed, including practical information about typical tasks and much used software applications.

Chapter 8, *Developing Team Skills and Accomplishing Team Projects Online*, starts to claim that the primary weakness attributed to distance education at the MBA or professional education level has been in the teaching of team or leadership aspects. The authors, Deborah C. Hurst and Janice Thomas, present a lengthy article focusing on the experiences from three cases in which they provide examples of team training, team dynamics, and project work in online environments.

As I see it, the first case is the most interesting. It provides an in-dept presentation of a course on team dynamics and communication. The first phase of the course provides a CD-based simulation that the students complete independently. The setting is a "forest fire," in which the learners are members of a team charged with the responsibility of repairing a damaged communication tower in the area. The second phase of the course builds on the CD-simulation by establishing online teams assigned with the task of getting the group and the equipment back safely. It is against this background that this chapter's authors, Hurst and Thomas, provide useful and practical tools such as a chat protocol and an impressive team charter developed by one of the groups.

The second case presents the experiences from an online research team, and the third case describes the experiences with online group assignments in MBA classes. The authors conclude that that their experiences convince them that theses skills (which I understand as team building and working effectively in projects and groups) are teachable and transferable in an online world. It worries me, however, that it is still necessary to emphasize this fact twenty years after Andrew Feenberg presented his experiences with executive education at the Western Behavioral Sciences Institute (WBSI).

In Chapter 9, *Copyright issues in Online Courses*, Lori-Ann Claerhout gives an in-depth and interesting Canadian overview of copyright issues and laws, as well as guidelines for online education. It also provides a useful and practical description on AU copyright policy and practice. Even though other nations and types of institutions may face different challenges, the various samples of copyright documents provided could be useful for many.

Chapter 10, *Value Added - The Editor in Design and Development of Online Courses* by Jan Thiessen and Vince Ambrock, is primarily a descriptive article that discusses the editors' role in course design and delivery at the AU School of Business, where the editors are titled MIDE - Multimedia Instructional Design Editor. They are key members of the school's online course design, development, and production teams. They add value to the courses by improving course material quality, enhancing students' learning experiences, and ensuring that course quality standards are set and maintained for the delivering institution. This article relates strongly, however, to chapter 7 and as such they should have been located together.

The Fourth Part

Part 4 - *Delivery, Quality Control, and Student Support of Online Courses* - is comprised of six chapters that discuss very diverse topics.

Chapter 11, *Teaching in an Online Context*, by Terry Anderson is a fine and interesting article that focuses on teaching functions. This article shares many similarities with my own writing (Paulsen, 2003, p. 53). It presents a model for a community of learning, which claims that meaningful online learning occurs when there is sufficient social, cognitive, and teaching presence available. It also distinguishes between two fundamentally different models of online education: the model of community of learning and the model of independent learners. In my

opinion, this article should be included in Part 1, since it provides some of the theoretical foundation and models that are lacking in Part 1.

Chapter 12, *Call Centers in Distance Education*, is an interesting and useful article written by Andrew Woudstra, Colleen Huber, and Kerri Michalczuk. It states that educational call centers could be used for both outgoing and ingoing calls ranging from provision of information to prospective students, fundraising, collection of survey data, and even instructional services. This article discusses call center organization, critical success factors and Web and ICT solutions to support the work. It further explains AU's experiences and potential developments with call centers. After reading the article, I wonder if the call center approach should be used more for online teaching. At least many institutions could learn from the AU experiences.

Chapter 13, *Supporting Asynchronous Discussions among Online Learners*, is written by Joram Ngwenya, David Annand, and Eric Wang. This article sets out that Web-based courses generally consist of cohort students who proceed through the course at about the same pace. This is reflected in LMS systems that usually adhere to a cohort-based learning model, and in a research focus on cohort-based learning experiences. In my opinion, there is a great need for - and potential in - LMS systems and research that focus on courses for individualized pacing. This article describes some of AU's experiences from the use of a self-developed prototype learning system (ASKS) developed for learning with individualized pacing. The system is based on a "gating strategy" which creates online cohorts that are not based on a rigid schedule of submission deadlines, but rather on students' place in the course. I believe this is an important initiative, which I would like to see further investigated at AU and elsewhere.

Chapter 14, *Library Support for Online Learners,* by Kay Johnson, Houda Trabelsi, and Tony Tin is an interesting, informative, and thorough article that discusses what e-learners need from libraries and what libraries can do to adapt to online environments.

In Chapter 15, *Supporting the Online Learner,* Judith A. Hughes presents a sound and comprehensive set of support services that should be considered in online education. Among the services discussed are administrative support, technical support, study skills assistance, educational counseling, program advising, library services, accessibility for students with disabilities, ombud services, student unions, and monitoring of learner satisfaction. Personally, I was intrigued by the brief listing of resources that could be developed for improving study skills. And I really would like to read more about "web pages designed to assist in the development of time management and study schedules" and "tools for facilitating study buddy connections for peer assistance." Both issues go right into the heart of AU's model of individualized online education. At NKI, we have also recently developed and introduced a tool for individual progression plans, which could provide a major competitive impact for our online services.

Chapter 16, *The Quality Dilemma in Online Education*, is authored by Nancy K. Parker. It is an interesting and thorough article that suggests that the watchwords for students, institutions, and public agencies should be "buyers beware." It points to a long-standing conflict in values between business modeling and public services, and discusses the regulatory frameworks for quality assurance in Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. Even though this is interesting reading, my impression is that these regulatory frameworks are better suited to avoid inferior quality offerings from traditional universities than to improve practices at experienced online education institutions. The appendix includes several useful quality guidelines, consumer guides, benchmarks, and best practices.

Conclusions

This is a special book since all articles draws on experiences from Athabasca University. The approach provides a deeper understanding of one successful institution that we all can learn something from. It is also a comprehensive collection of articles that covers more aspects of online education than most of the books I have read. However, I still perceive the book as a collection of related articles, and I think the editors should have made additional efforts to present a more cohesive book.

I perceive Athabasca University as an interesting case, first and foremost because we can learn from how the institution handles flexibility. In his *Foreword*, Dominique Abrioux emphasizes the flexibility of allowing students to start on the first day of any month, progress at their own pace, and submit assignments and sit examinations at times determined by themselves. This is an extremely important strategic choice, which in my opinion also has been essential to NKI Distance Education's success.

After reading the book, I still want to learn more about the views and experiences from Athabasca University. What are their thoughts on e-standards? What are their experiences with online marketing? What about cost effectiveness? What do they see as the most important trends for the future? I also wonder why there were so few references to research conducted at AU. As I see it, AU is an ideal arena for research on administrative, pedagogical, and economic issues related to online education especially since the institution has a large number of online students and competent faculties in the Master of Business Administration and the Master of Distance Education programs.

Finally, on behalf of the readers, I would say a loud and clear *Thank You* to Athabasca University for sharing this interesting, useful, and comprehensive book as a free online resource to everyone who is interested in online education.

References

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Athabasca University