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Book Review – Web-based Distance Education for Adults

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It is not surprising that books that advise educators about effective ways to use technologies to support and enhance learning or to meet business objectives continue to be in demand (Diana Laurillard's Rethinking University Teaching, 2001; Gilly Salmon's E-Moderating, 2004; and Marc Rosenberg's E-Learning, 2001 are some prominent examples in my collection). In the cacophony of promises that technology will improve the quality of teaching and learning, vendors who continually reposition themselves in a shifting marketplace, and students who are often more proficient in the new technologies than we, we yearn to harmonize our aspirations and our observed outcomes for Web-based education.

Barbara DuCharme-Hansen and Pamela Dupin-Bryant's contribution to this genre recognizes adult learning principles and learner-centredness as paramount to effective Web-based education. They promise a pragmatic resource for all practitioners tasked with teaching adult learners, whether in higher education, government agencies or private industry. Part of the Professional Practice in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning series edited by Sharan Merriam and Ronald Cervero, this book brings the authors' welcome experience in adult education and promises to help us broaden our teaching approach to create a more successful and satisfying experience for instructors and learners alike. It is an ambitious undertaking with a promising approach, although the scant 145 pages offers little room to fully develop their proposal and some examples are irredeemably superficial (e.g., that Maria has forgotten to survey her students on page 107 does not really help our cause to evaluate Web-based courses).

The foundation of their approach is the Distance Education Plan (DEP), a systematic structure for introducing strategies, methods and activities before, after and especially during a Web-based distance education experience. Each chapter in the book is devoted to a different component of the plan, and includes a sample DEP for a communications course. The structure of the book (and DEPs) is as follows:

1. Phase I, Before the experience:
Assessing and matching student needs (chapter 2)

2. Phase II, During the experience:
Providing guidance (chapter 3);
Building community (chapter 4);
Facilitating communication (chapter 5); and
Humanizing the experience (chapter 6)

3. Phase III, After the experience:
Evaluating and implementing change (chapter 7)

Distance Education Plans address what the authors see as a serious void in Web-based education: instructors have yet to place adult learners at the heart of the process. The plans offer a means for instructors to focus on adult learning activities such as self-direction, experiential learning, and collaborative learning as essential features of distance learning. The authors argue that technologies have caused educators to question the effectiveness of traditional pedagogical approaches to teaching; DEPs are a call for a renewed commitment to adult learning principles. They downplay the role of technology itself, the "canvas" against which the learner operates. The authors make no mention of learning management systems, for example, even though they have been a dominant feature of the North American and European educational landscape in recent years. Further, DEPs are designed to work with any instructional objectives that are part of an existing curriculum or lesson plan. In fact, the authors, making fine use of a classroom metaphor, advise us to view a DEP as a "transparency that overlays a well-structured curriculum plan" (p. 8) and "become[s] part of the total teaching package" (p. 9).

The value of DEPs and their learner-centredness is apparent in the authors' interpretations of progressive and humanistic educational theories for the Web-based environment. No where is this more evident than in Phase II, where they introduce strategies to humanize the learning experience. Here DuCharme-Hansen and Dupin-Bryant stress that such experiences are primarily about people and relationships, and call on instructors to overcome the mechanistic nature of the technology that mediates these experiences. They turn to the literature of immediacy behaviours as a means to build intimacy and rapport through humour, self-disclosure and feedback. They note that cultivating closeness reduces the perceived psychological distance among learners and instructors. Interaction among learners, content, instructors and computers and its pedagogical value at a distance is foundational research in the distance education literature. I found it most valuable that the authors chose to look beyond components interacting with one another to explore their interpersonal qualities and how they contribute to the social dynamics of the Web-based learning experience.

Interaction and immediacy behaviours are a good example of how adult education and Web-based distance education are mutually beneficial, despite the fact that their genesis was the product of different eras. The authors conclude that such a merger "supports adult learning in a Web-based environment as a life-centred activity, which promotes lifelong learning, encourages self-direction, and meets the needs of adult learners" (p. 6). But I was disappointed that DEPs do not make this merger more explicit. For example, their strong investment in the social dynamics of the learning experience, a perspective consistent with the social constructivist view of learning, is one that fully supports life-centred activities. Yet, DEPs do not offer strategies for a community that has become more complex than merely a collection of learners and an instructor. As learners become actively involved in the learning process, and take control of their own knowledge in new ways, what role does the instructor play at this stage? What are the lifelong learning strategies that enable learners to be the architects of their own learning in their real world? How do we remove obstacles in content and structure for such learning to occur? The DEP strategies for

community building – ice breakers, webpage design and interface, and a code of conduct – are appropriate for the initial stages, but seem inadequate in the face of such eventual complexity. We are left with the sense that, in following the DEP's systematic roadmap, the path falls short of its ultimate destination.

In summary, this book recognizes that Web-based education is still in its infancy and that most of us are novices who find ourselves in this uncharted, dynamic territory with little or no guidance. We appreciate the reassurances inherent in a well-written proposal that downplays technology and depends on an existing curriculum in order to focus on the learner. Those of us who suspect that there is something inherently conservative in using technology around existing practices may wish to keep looking for other guides that also recognize the salience of lifelong learning and its requirements for learners, of which there will surely be more.