

Book Review – The Strategic Use of Learning Technologies

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Book Review

The Strategic Use of Learning Technologies

Editor: Elizabeth J. Burge (2000). *The Strategic Use of Learning Technologies. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 88. 105 pages. Paperback. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. ISBN: 0 7879 5426 8.

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The editor defines the term *learning technology* as “any tool that requires informed design and appropriate use in order to enhance an adult’s ability to learn – i.e., to enhance the use of various information processing strategies and learning activities alone, with peers, and with appropriate advisers and educators.” With this definition in mind, all authors focus their contribution on learners and learning services or activities as key issues – not technology as such, but the *use* of technology for learning purposes. So far, the title covers the contents of the book. Unfortunately, from my perspective, the book falls short of explaining or offering more insight in the *strategic* aspects.

Chapter 1 gives readers an overview of learning strategies for adult learners, with different learning goals. Six guiding principles are proposed to link learning strategies with learning technologies by providing [course] design components that activate, mirror, and support strategies for effective learning. These principles guide course developers, adult educators, and distance teachers in designing courses for adult learners, but they do not completely address the important question of “how to connect learning strategies with learning technologies.” Nevertheless, I agree with the author that “the challenge of teaching with technology is to create a learning design that cues and supports the full repertoire of learning strategies.”

In Chapter 2, the authors explain what learner services are, ranging from information and advice at registration, to coaching during actual study, up to career guidance after completion. What formerly has been done in person, now can be supported by using information and communication technology (ICT). This is illustrated with the example of a ‘Learner’s Guide’ partly online. Advocating a cautious approach, ICT is considered not as a replacement, but rather as an additional resource for supporting learner services, which are expected by adult learners.

Chapter 3 addresses the issue of literacy. The introduction of learning technologies in adult education implies a new set of literacies – i.e., information literacy (mastering the information-seeking process), combined with new abilities called cyber-literacy, electronic or e-literacy, or digital literacy (with slightly different definitions). These multi-literacies are also referred to as critical literacy – i.e., skills that enable adult learners “into spaces of inquiry and learning that require engagement with the cultural and social dimensions of electronic technology,” a threat

and a promise combined, which together make an essential characteristic of information-literate learners.

The unintended effects of using learning technologies, as described in Chapter 4, are interesting and should be carefully examined. However, the examples given are rather far-fetched. Nevertheless, we should be aware that the introduction of ICT “into a social environment does not result in the same environment plus [ICT].” How to deal with unintended effects that cannot be anticipated is a difficult question.

Surprisingly two older learning technologies are described in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6: paper and radio respectively. Of course, we should not abandon those technologies, especially not in adult education. It was striking to read in Chapter 5, the remark that writing on paper helps learners to structure their ideas. From my own practice, I know that this statement also applies to learners using, for example, email and/ or word processors. Moreover, such learning technology tools include implicit help for learners by helping them structure their ideas by means of built-in style formats. So, the benefit of preferring paper to ICT is not entirely clear to me. Chapter 6 describes a new way of using radio as a learning technology. The author’s presumption is that “radio as a technology may be ubiquitous, [but] it needs a certain mix of professional skills to render it a successful learning technology.” She describes such strategic issues as the training of lecturers, cost aspects, intellectual property rights, and infrastructure. Resolution of these strategic issues could transform radio “docu-lectures” into workable learning experiences.

Chapter 7 tackles problems of professional development associated with overcoming resistance on behalf of adult educators to Web-based teaching. Issues and principles are presented for different types of reactions to the introduction of ICT in education, from early adaptors, over to majority followers, to late laggards. Rather than to address the specificities of learning technologies, especially the Web as announced in the title of this chapter, the solutions offered are more or less generic to all forms of innovation. Note, however, the important role of librarians and “e-libraries” in this context: they should be proactively involved in developing information-literate Web users.

The underlying principles of learning and cognition are the same for all media and learning environments. Chapter 8 provides the guiding pedagogical vision of a constructivist or meaning-centred approach to learning and teaching via the Web: adult learners could constantly construct meaning. Justly, the authors mention the potential of the Web to “bring people together,” or, in other words, “to foster communication between (adult) learners and their peers or tutors, a variant of socio-constructivism.”

In the last chapter, the editor herself makes a selection of highlighted concepts from each chapter to create a holistic framework for reflective and strategic thinking about learning technologies. As a reviewer, I made my own selection above, in an attempt to constantly reflect on the contents in relation to the title. I believe that this book addresses many interesting aspects of using learning technologies. I believe that the reader could apply many of the ideas for his or her own purpose, be it in the context of adult learners or in a traditional classroom setting on campus. However, I found lacking strategic insights regarding the use of learning technologies, specifically a coherent plan or policy based on lessons learnt, and including the aspects and issues put forward in this book. The editor synthesizes her own view in a list of eleven themes for strategic thinking, which is certainly ‘food for thought.’ Perhaps, this was an ‘intended effect,’ because according to the

basic rules of constructivism, I have to constantly construct my own meaning, knowledge, and insight through reflection on these themes in my own professional situation.

Finally, I concur with the editor and the legendary Canadian literary scholar Northrop Frye: *'There are no answers, only more questions . . .'*

