Book Review

Distance Education: A Systems View

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Distance Education: A Systems View, 2nd edition
Michael Moore and Greg Kearsley
Thomson/Wadsworth
xxii + 368 pages, 2005
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ABSTRACT
This paper represents a review of the second edition of Distance Education: A Systems View by Michael Moore and Greg Kearsley (Thomson/Wadsworth, 2005). This second edition reflects a view of current applications of distance education, based on the vantage of instructional systems design. The strengths of the book are reflected in the uniqueness of its consideration of online courses, in particular from the point of view of systematic development and management.

INTRODUCTION
Distance Education: A Systems View (second edition) by Michael Moore and Greg Kearsley, unlike its preceding first edition published in 1996, is one textbook on the topic of distance education among many available in the year 2005. Other recent texts on this topic include Teaching and Learning at a Distance: Foundations of Distance Education by Michael Simonson, Sharon Smaldino, Michael Albright, and Susan Zvacek (2003); and Online Learning: Concepts, Strategies, and Applications by Nada Dabbagh and Brenda Bannan-Ritland (2005). These three textbooks have similar tables of contents (see book’s Figure 1). However, in analyzing the list of topics covered by these three textbooks, the Moore and Kearsley text differs in three areas: course design and development; management, administration, and policy; and the global span of distance education. Clearly, this text reflects the perspective of reputable educators who are hands-on practitioners of distance education.

DISCUSSION OF THE CHAPTERS
The authors establish two central themes for their text in Chapter 1, “Basic Concepts.” First they introduce the concept of a systems view of distance education. Anyone with an advanced degree in educational or instructional technology can appreciate the fidelity of that emphasis. This field derives from and is built upon the bedrock of a systemic view of educational processes. The second theme addressed in Chapter 1 views distance education (DE) as a changing paradigm, one that is perpetually evolving, non-static, and dynamic. In a word, distance education is seen as a vital enterprise.
Chapter 2 reviews the historical development of DE in succinct fashion. The authors identify five generations of DE: correspondence/home; broadcast radio/television; open universities using combined approaches; interactive teleconferencing; and the current generation of online-based classes. Chapter 3, “The Scope of Distance Education,” describes the many current forms of DE in the United States and summarizes their main characteristics. The authors clarify the relevance of these forms while avoiding the errors of other texts that include outdated examples in irrelevant ways. Selection of media or channels of communication for the delivery of education at a distance is the focus of Chapter 4, “Technologies and Media,” and the authors suggest that the selection of media should be based upon a systemic view of DE, while emphasizing a preference for multiple media formats based upon analyses of audience, content, and design considerations.

Chapter 5, “Course Design and Development,” is a distinctive chapter for this text. In it, the authors show their combined strengths as highly respected distance educators. Two primary modes for distance course production are identified: the author-editor mode, with one author and a few selected reviewers; and the course team mode, wherein an assembly of specialists work through a systematic design process to create a quality product. The systematic processes involved in the design of distance/online courses are supported with references to qualified research findings at every step, and the appendix to the chapter displays a multi-columned table for designing different types of distance courses.

In Chapter 6, “Teaching and the Roles of the Instructor,” the authors introduce and explain how DE changes the traditional roles of the instructor. It explores, for example, the social context of online learning and considerations of examination security. Quality training for distance teaching is recommended to include hands-on practice with the technologies, practice for humanizing a DE course, and practice for facilitating student interaction in the distance mode. As a logical extension, Chapter 7 addresses the distance education student, emphasizing that distance learners are more likely to be adult learners and focusing on the theme of ensuring student success and completion. The distance student is considered from the point of view of relevant research on attitudes and support needs, with the authors identifying the five critical points of support: orientation and admissions, ongoing assistance, study skills, problem solving, and peer relations.

Chapter 8, “Management, Administration, and Policy,” showcases another strength of the authors’ experience-based expertise in providing a step-by-step protocol for conducting DE from a managerial point of view. The topics of strategic planning, staffing, administrative issues, and quality assurance are addressed as practical matters warranting clear strategies. This chapter emphasizes relevant accreditation considerations for online education as well as national and international legislative initiatives on its conduct.

The next two chapters, Chapter 9, “The Theory and Scholarship of Distance Education,” and Chapter 10, “Research and Studies of Effectiveness,” are more traditional chapters common in such textbooks. Nonetheless, they are well written and full of authentic information. There is present in these chapters an overarching strategy for the presentation of theories and research that is consistent with the systems view of DE and the goal of optimizing its practical application. The chapter on research revisits the conceptual vantage points introduced in previous chapters and
identifies pertinent research efforts that indicate best practices.

In Chapter 11, “The Global Span of Distance Education,” the authors impress upon the readers that, while DE is present in some form in almost every country, there are glaring discrepancies between technological have and have-not countries. This global account provides an accurate report of the various efforts in DE, based upon major geographical regions of the world. In the last chapter, changes in information and technology are highlighted as the primary driving forces for perpetual change in the field. Further, evolving organizational structures and threats of commercial denigrations are discussed.

**IMPACT OF THE BOOK ON INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION**

Of the current textbooks available to university programs on the topic of DE, this book offers the best balance of practicality and academic quality. The reason for this assessment relates to the authors’ inclusion of the overarching theme of instructional systems design to this topic. By including IDS, the authors have successfully tied DE to the broader field of instructional technology that has been known for several decades. The extended experiential history in the field of technology education of the authors lends a special credibility to this text, as well.

**CONCLUSION**

This text is excellent in that it relates a contemporary and global view of DE to instructional systems design. In some ways, it is a manual for creating and administering DE courses with an important element of academic integrity evidenced throughout. The topic of DE is large and diverse, and no corpus of directly applicable research currently exists to offer data-driven corollaries for practice. Nevertheless, the authors have created a compendium of expert opinions based upon successful examples of practice in educational endeavors both national and international. In so doing, they have provided a true re-enactment of the field that proves useful to professionals and students alike.

**REFERENCES**


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