

BOOK REVIEW

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Web-Based Distance Education for Adults, by Barbara A. DuCharme-Hansen and Pamela A. Dupin-Bryant

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Web-Based Distance Education for Adults, by Barbara A. DuCharme-Hansen and Pamela A. Dupin-Bryant (Malabar, FL: Krieger, 2004, 145 pages. \$24.00).

DuCharme-Hansen and Dupin-Bryant's work, *Web-Based Distance Education for Adults*, provides a solid blend of pertinent adult learning theories with pragmatic suggestions that are relevant to those involved with the design and implementation of Web-based online and distance education programs for adult learners in primarily higher education or corporate training environments. Their work is especially useful for facilitators as well as instructional designers of online courses. To a lesser yet still relevant extent, their work also serves to inform administrators of distance learning programs regarding best practices in course design and implementation and, by extension,

leadership of online faculty and online educational programs. Their 2004 analysis is divided into three connected phases of the design and implementation of a distance learning program: "Before the Web-Based Distance Education Experience," "During the Web-Based Distance Education Experience," and "After the Web-Based Distance Education Experience" (p. 9).

At first glance, the title of this work appears misleading in that the reader may assume that only "Web-based" online learning environments will be discussed here; the authors dismiss this assumption by noting that their definition of "Web-based distance education" does include "other Internet-based communication systems such as email and file transfer protocol" (p. 6). However, the authors are quick to point out that given the predominance of the World Wide Web as the medium

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through which the majority of distance learning programs take place, the term “Web-based distance education” is the most applicable in describing the online distance learning environment.

The authors begin their discussion with a blended overview of the strong relationship between adult learning theory and best practices in distance learning. While a full discussion of related andragogical (i.e., firmly grounded in adult learning theory) concepts and best practices is outside the scope of this book, a limited discussion as presented here by the authors is certainly relevant and sets the appropriate tone for the rest of their work. Indeed, a discussion of best practices and recommendations in online distance learning without acknowledgement of the learning theories behind such practices would constitute a conceptually limited discussion in scope. Throughout the rest of the book, the authors make frequent reference to best practices in andragogy, lending theoretical relevance to their practical suggestions. Those readers who are perhaps not especially familiar with adult learning theory and its relevance in the online educational setting will gain from the authors’ overview and frequent cross-referencing.

Throughout their work, the authors cite the vital nature of developing solid “distance education plans” through which decisions regarding curriculum development and course facilitation are made. “Distance education plans” are defined by the authors as “vehicle[s] for creating, maintaining, and sustaining a successful web-based learning experience” (p. 14). A distance education plan framework includes plans for the following:

- The name of the course and potential audience;
- Plan topics and objectives; and
- An “overlay of online activities, methods, and strategies” including a description of how the course facilitator and/or instructional designer will conduct a “needs assessment,” “provide guidance,” “build community,” “facilitate

communication,” “humanize the experience,” and “evaluate the experience” (p. 15).

The development and implementation of these distance education plans occurs through three distinct phases:

- Before the experience, which includes the need to “conduct needs assessments” and “develop a plan to match activities, methods, and strategies with learner needs”;
- During the experience, which includes planning to “provide guidance, build community, facilitate communication, [and] humanize the experience”;
- After the experience, during which instructional designers, course facilitators, and/or distance learning administrators “conduct evaluations, reflect on evaluation results, make plans to effect change, [and] begin a new experience” (p. 11).

The authors continually emphasize the need for distance education plans in both contexts of higher education and corporate training to have a solid grounding in relevant adult education theory, including motivation, flexibility, and convenience. On this note, the authors suggest that distance education courses in the online environment must include learning material and activities that hold immediate or near-immediate applicability in the contextual, usually workplace, environment of the course participants. Online courses with a preference for asynchronous discussion environments foster increased flexibility and convenience for the adult learner, who must negotiate among many competing interests and responsibilities when pursuing additional educational opportunities, they posit.

The bulk of this work focuses on strategies for developing distance education plans throughout each of these three phases. Concrete and practical suggestions for establishing these plans and then implementing them are

provided through the appropriate andragogical lenses of motivation, support, flexibility, applicability, and relevance. The authors provide examples of the development of a distance education plan that takes into account the various considerations course designers, facilitators, and administrators must consider when designing distance education courses or programs. The authors utilize as an embedded example a 15-week semester course on business communication; this example can be easily modified for other content areas, purposes, audiences, and course designs. The authors also provide examples of a distance education plan for an undergraduate psychology course as well as a plan for customer service training in a corporate setting.

Throughout the discussion of each of the three distinct phases of online course design and implementation, the authors take care to address potential pitfalls and problems that may be encountered along the way. This practical approach which acknowledges the problems that may be faced lends credibility to the authors' assertions and suggestions. Indeed, the authors themselves possess both the theoretically-oriented competencies as well as the practical experiences necessary in andragogically-based online course development and implementation; accounts of their experiences are interwoven throughout the text.

Although the focus of the authors' work here is not on the technology necessary to design effective online course experiences, their focus on best practices with a constant eye on andragogy creates a series of practical yet theory-based suggestions regarding online course development and implementation. True, the authors do lend credence to the advantages and disadvantages of various generic modalities of online communication, but the reader will, appropriately so, need to refer to other sources of information regarding the technical details of online course design and delivery. Having said that, those seeking perhaps more technical guidance in online course design and delivery will not find this work applicable to their needs; on the other hand, those seeking to design an online course from a curricular standpoint and who wish to create an optimal online learning environment through which adult learners will thrive, will benefit from the pedagogical nature of the authors' recommendations. Although it is not entirely necessary that designers and facilitators develop plans for their online courses as per the format given here, one could easily argue that designers and facilitators do need to account for the various aspects the authors suggest, including the need to "provide guidance," "build community," and the like.

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