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Rovai, A. P., Ponton, M. K., & Baker, J. D. (2008). *Distance learning in higher education: A programmatic approach to planning, design, instruction, evaluation and accreditation*. New York: Teachers College Press (pp. xi, 212).

The title of this book immediately caught my eye. I have long advocated that we need to focus on a programmatic approach to the design and delivery of distance education programmes. When I looked beyond the title, I noticed the authors. All are writers/researchers whose work I have found valuable. Opening the book and reading through the list of contents confirmed that this book was likely to be of value. That, with some reservations, proved to be the case.

The focus of *Distance Learning in Higher Education* is on higher education institutions that use online technologies. However, people working in any distance education institution will find value here. The core processes that form the framework for the book apply in most settings. The attention to working at a programme level is, in my opinion, a real strength. *Distance Learning in Higher Education* is one of a small number of titles that fill a gap in the literature that usually focuses on development and planning at course or group-of-courses level.

The authors state that they aim to balance theory and practice—and they do this well. They draw on the theoretical frameworks of constructivism, adult teaching and learning, computer-mediated communication, sense of community, presence, self-directed and autonomous learning, and social equity. These theoretical frameworks fit well in the New Zealand context, and the themes are picked up in the chapters and linked to useful guidelines.

Distance Learning in Higher Education is also practical and readable. You will want to dip in and out of this book. For example, when you develop new programmes for distance delivery, or consider how you can further support your students, or consider issues of quality assurance, this book is likely to be one that you will reach for. The chapters are a good length. The detail is sufficient but not overwhelming. In fact, you may find that the chapters are introductory or provide a way to quickly review a topic, rather than

presenting a complete picture. The chapters certainly don't have enough information to provide a comprehensive picture of the complexities of any of the topics, but they could be the catalyst for you to explore further.

The authors' focus on strategic planning is a strong theme. As well as devoting a chapter to strategic planning, they emphasise organisational management throughout. The chapter on strategic planning gives a good framework, and the principles are presented again in later chapters, particularly those on programme and course design, programme evaluation, and accreditation. This emphasis on the need for careful and systematic planning at an institutional level develops the programmatic theme of the book well.

The chapter on online discussions (Chapter 7) is a good example of how the authors weave the practical and the theoretical together. This chapter provides excellent suggestions for building and maintaining interaction based on the theoretical framework outlined in the first chapter. The need for design-driven, well-planned activities is made strongly, and there is good guidance on the development of cooperative and collaborative group activities. Again, I found myself reflecting on my practice and ways to refine it.

I was pleased to see chapters on gender and culture alongside those topics outlined in the book title. It was good, too, to see links to research in those areas. However, gender and culture sit a little uncomfortably alongside other topics in this book. The issues raised by gender and culture are challenging. Considerable attention has been given to equity in distance education, but the issues are complex and the contexts are changing. Those complexities are not really addressed here.

Distance Learning in Higher Education is an American book and, although parts of the content and examples don't work for us, most of it does. Chapter 9, which is about institutions and programme accreditation, is least relevant for us because of its American focus. It's a pity, because some accreditation issues are of international concern. Although the authors mention that distance education can have a global reach, they don't explore that possibility and the associated issues. They link these issues to culture, but the links aren't really made to the earlier exploration of that topic. Overall, a wider worldview would have been valuable in this chapter.

This book is a good addition to the literature on distance education. It will be particularly valuable if you are new to the field because it provides many links to a wide range of research literature on distance education. The reference

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list will provide you with some excellent sources for further reading. If you are an experienced distance educator, you will revisit familiar ideas, research, and writing, and I'm sure you'll also find the book prompts you to consider how you can refine and develop your practice. And then there are links to resources and ideas that are likely to be valuable for everyone.

The final sections of the book contain strategic planning examples, quality assurance frameworks, a good glossary, a grading rubric for participation, and the list of references. Consider adding this book to your own collection of reference material and make sure your institution adds a copy to the library.

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Rennie, F., & Mason, R. (2004). *The connecticon: Learning for the connected generation*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age (pp. vii, 169).

At the tertiary institution where I work, almost 90 percent of students own their own laptops and over half routinely bring them onto campus where they have wireless access to the internet. How does that change the ways in which people learn? It isn't just formal on-campus learning either. Distance students at this institution all say that they have internet access—a large majority through broadband. Generally, New Zealand is increasingly connected to the internet. We really are seeing the connected generation referred to in the title of this book—a generation that believes in *being* online not *going* online.

I read this book because Mason and Rennie are both pioneers—I'd always thought of Mason, in particular, as a visionary during the early years of e-learning. Her subsequent collaboration with Frank Rennie, and their work in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, provided wonderful examples of the potential of the internet to enable social and economic development. My hope was that there would be lessons—even 5 years on from publication—that would be useful to me as I grapple with the ongoing questions of how best to take advantage of the affordances of the internet in my work in distance education.

Rennie and Mason coined the word *connecticon* to describe the three layers that create the connected information communities that are the basis of the internet in its widest sense. They describe those three layers as being the physical infrastructure of the network, the humans at each terminal or node of the network, and the interactions that occur between users and between devices. They claim that when these three layers are mixed together, “ubiquity, speed and global scale provide the heat to cook this into something we have not tasted before” (p. 5). The book is their attempt to explain the nature, impact, and implications of the connecticon within the domain of learning.

The concept of *community* is central to this book. In their second chapter, Rennie and Mason tackle the problem of defining community so that the definition can withstand the varied contexts in which they later use the term.

Their attempt is one of the better ones. Within a brief chapter they lay out what community means for them, dismissing the idea of virtual communities in favour of the notion of networks.

While their argument is a sound one, they face the constraint that the term *communities* has a ubiquity that is difficult to escape in the world of e-learning. And they don't manage to escape, quickly reverting to the term *online communities* as being equivalent to *online interactive networks*. However, for the discriminating reader, the distinction made between communities and networks is a valuable one that leads to a more nuanced analysis of e-learning.

Having established networks/communities as a foundation, the authors move on through a series of chapters that discuss various aspects of learning in the connecticon. In Chapter 3 they present a case for the importance of connectivity in learning based on a brief analysis of 'traditional' teaching. While accepting that blending some online connectivity with face-to-face teaching solves some problems, they suggest that wider issues facing higher education simply cannot be solved without a wholehearted move to e-learning. Chapters 4 and 5 investigate community networks and the potential of broadband respectively, while Chapter 6 focuses on the use of learning objects, notions of open content, and the development of learner-centred resources.

Many readers might find this section of the book less instructive. The publication date is 2004, so it is at least 5 years since the text was committed to paper. The lessons that the authors describe, the cautions that they urge, and the potential that they look toward have all been written about more fully. These chapters will not provide much for readers who have kept pace with e-learning literature.

After this point, the book becomes more interesting again. Two chapters about learning take the reader in a new direction as the authors start to consider the implications of the connecticon rather than the elements that comprise it. In Chapter 7, discussion of pervasive learning relies on two notions—ubiquity and mobility—which are also central to the discussion of informal learning in Chapter 8.

My earlier comments about laptop ownership and wireless access suggest why this is an important section. I can complement those opening comments with the observation that, amongst our students, internet-capable cellphone

access is also rising sharply, giving truth to Mason and Rennie's statement that "personal communications are increasingly able to be mobile and operate through an infrastructure of networks that can pervade every aspect of our lives" (p. 108). The learning ecology that derives from such opportunities is only just starting to be recognised and planned for on any scale.

Alongside learning ecologies, two other key concepts emerge in the discussion in these latter stages of the book: they are the attention economy and situated learning. Both concepts are seen to have particular relevance to higher education institutions which will need to wrestle with their implications.

Because they are not outside the huge range of information that exists on the connecticon, formal educational institutions will need to address two matters. First, they must help their students learn how to focus their attention on information that is relevant to their own goals and ends and, second, they must encourage them to learn through active participation in social processes rather than simply through acquisition of facts.

We will all recognise the points of the previous paragraph. Librarians have been telling us the first, and adult educators have been telling us the second, for years. Mason and Rennie have pulled these ideas into the arena of the connecticon and tied them together well—but 5 years on, the impact is somewhat lost.

Overall, I didn't find the vision that I expected in this book. The trajectory that Mason and Rennie mapped out for e-learning back in 2004 is one with which I am now quite familiar. Had I read this book 5 years ago it would have been quite influential on my thinking—and rightly so, as it turns out. Reading it now reminds me how quickly things can change—particularly with regard to ideas about, and possibilities for, the ways in which learning occurs. Is anyone brave enough to predict the next 5 years?

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Maeroff, G. I. (2003). *A classroom of one: How online learning is changing our schools and colleges*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan (pp. xiv, 306).

A Classroom of One is about the reality of the virtual world and how it is changing schools and universities. Maeroff writes from the perspective of a traditional university teacher who is trying to make sense of the changes that have been brought about by the 'revolution' in online learning. Maeroff focuses on the phenomenon of an increasing number of higher education courses that are being taught entirely over the internet, thereby enabling students to earn degrees without entering classrooms. For many traditional university teachers this phenomenon is troubling but cannot be ignored. The question is: What does it mean for the future of education?

On one level, this is a descriptive book that provides the reader with a broad and comprehensive perspective of the evolution and current directions of online learning and how it is changing educational institutions, particularly those in the tertiary sector. On another level, the book raises big questions: What is a 'school' now that online learning has become mainstreamed? What is 'teaching' in an environment that uses traditional face-to-face instruction alongside online learning? What is a 'classroom' in an environment in which teaching and learning can take place at any time and in almost any place?

Maeroff wrote most of *A Classroom of One* from research he carried out on the internet—visiting websites, entering chat rooms and reading threaded discussions. The challenge in writing this book, he notes, was to take a snapshot of a cyclone. Online learning is dynamic and changing rapidly, and is therefore difficult to encapsulate fully at any moment in time. *A Classroom of One*, however, is really about the big picture—the issues that underpin the revolution in online learning. While providing a good overview of electronic interaction between teachers and learners in online instruction and their adaptation to teaching and learning in this environment, Maeroff sets the stage for discussion about issues that many distance and online teachers

may not consider in their professional lives. In places he is contentious, suggesting, for example, that the humanities and liberal arts will not fare well in online learning because, “most students who turn to web-based instruction want to learn about application, not theory” (p. xii).

One observation that may resonate with New Zealand readers is that online courses are increasingly located in a business-oriented landscape that focuses on careers, accreditation and regulated education. The connection between the rise of online learning and the business of education is timely, as is the connection between online learning and globalisation. Maeroff predicts that, in this changing and globalised environment, online learning is here to stay. As part of the globalised world, online learning is shaped by that world and, in turn, helps give it meaning:

Some educationalists regard online learning as a device apart, an alternative pursuit forever marginalized at the fringes of institutions. They are mistaken. Online courses will edge closer to the mainstream with each passing year, so much so that eventually few distinctions will be made between courses taken online, courses taken in the classroom, and courses that incorporate attributes from both settings. (pp. xii–xiii)

A Classroom of One is about how online learning is changing the ways schools and universities are organised, how teachers teach and how students learn. In spite of this, Maeroff does not support the view that schools will become victims of online learning. His bottom line is that the classroom will not be rendered obsolete by e-learning, but that online courses are here to stay.