BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Distance Education and Distributed Learning
C. Vrasidas and G. Glass (Eds.)
Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2002,
232 pages

This book at 15 x 23 cm or 6" x 9" and 232 pages is a small, easy-to-handle paperback. Its look is somewhat utilitarian, adequate, restrained, with limited typefaces and little white space. According to its editors, "as the field of distance education grows, so does the need to reexamine its fundamental assumptions and perspectives" (p. xii). Hence they have pulled together leading contributors to the field to reassess several key issues. These include the hidden curriculum in e-learning (Anderson), faculty productivity and workload (Reeves), research and evaluation (Anglin and Morrison), assessment online (Mason), problem-solving online (Jonassen), collaborative learning online (Harasim), distributed learning (Dede, Whitehouse, and Brown L'Bahy), and the social aspects of teaching and learning (Walker). The editors have a chapter on a framework for distance education, and the book finishes with a critical theory analysis of globalization and information technologies (Zembylas, Vrasidas, and McIssac). This makes for a rich mix of perspectives and some solid reading.

The Dede et al. chapter on distributed learning uses an experience with a course offering as the basis for their contention that "the integration of interactive media into learning experiences profoundly shapes students intellectual experiences" (p. 1) and that although most students thought that they wanted more than interaction entirely online, more than half did not choose face-to-face instruction as their first choice. The course is based on a model of student-centered learning environments and constructivist learning principles. Because blended, distributed, flexible, or hybrid learning (all synonyms—take your pick!) is becoming more common on college and university campuses, this research is of particular interest.

In the second chapter Vrasidas and Glass propose a theoretical model based on a symbolic interactionist conceptual framework for studying distance and distributed learning environments. This framework consists of three rectangles, one inside the other. At the center is *interaction*, which involves dialogue, learner control, feedback, and social presence. These

are explained as modalities or qualities of interaction. The authors note, "the evolving nature of teacher-learner-content interactions shaped by technological advances considered in their social and institutional contexts [that] serves as the focus of our disciplined inquiries" (p. 35).

Interaction is embedded in structure and content, which form the next frame, and these in turn are surrounded by a frame labeled *context, technology, teacher, and institutional policies.* It is always interesting (at least for me) to see new conceptualization of the work of our field. This model provides a general heuristic, but it cannot be operationalized like behaviorist models that generate hypotheses that can be tested. Nor is it meant to. For Vrasidas and Glass the model is a system, and all parts are interrelated. These two chapters form the conceptual underpinning of the book, which is then taken up in various ways in the remaining chapters. The work is conceptually grounded in learner-centered principles and is best for readers who have some familiarity with contemporary theories of learning and its sociopolitical context. These chapters link these ideas to practice by giving practical examples and research findings to illustrate and support their contentions. Here are some sentences to whet your appetite.

On faculty productivity:

> In order to avoid being replaced by star faculty videos, historical holograms, or cartoon characters, faculty must engage in the "scholarship of teaching" to influence the roles of technology and human teachers in distance education within the foreseeable future. (Tom Reeves, p. 149)

On the hidden curriculum:

> The higher levels of dropout associated with independent forms of distance learning (Coldaway, 1986) have been related to lack of integration (Sweet, 1986; Tinto, 1975, 1987) and a host of course and personal factors (Bernard & Amundsen, 1989), but they may be more directly related to failure of students to understand and manipulate the hidden curriculum of distance education, so as to win the game. (Terry Anderson, pp. 124-125)

On globalization:

> It has been four decades since McLuhan (1964) pointed out that we are "suddenly nomadic gatherers of knowledge, nomadic as never before, informed as never before, free from fragmented specialism as never before-but also involved in the total social process as never before." (p. 358). (Zembylas, Vrasidas, & McIsaac, p. 208)

On embodiment of knowledge in virtual environments:

> Is there anybody there? I am a student on ECT401, is anybody there? I need to talk to someone. I am one of your students. Can you call me back? I need to know if there is anyone there. (Rob Walker, p. 99)

In his chapter Rob Walker tells how "I came to realize that distance education is just as mediated by social relations and distance teaching is just as much a performance as is classroom teaching" (p. 100). I found many of the chapters made for engaging reading, drawing me into thinking about what was written and my own position on a wide range of issues such as the demise of distance education as a separate entity, its convergence with classroom teaching, and Otto Peters' call for teaching to become central to the role of universities.

I close with some comments about the last chapter on globalization because so little writing in our field is from a critical theory stance. In it the authors discard the concept of the global village, which they contend is often more marginalizing than inclusive when online communities include people from developing countries. Instead they take up two metaphors. The first is the nomad from the work of Deleuze and Guattari and the second is the polyglot from the work of Braidotti. Their major questions concern *cui bono*: Who benefits the most and the least from the growth of ICTs, and what are the implications for us, our students, and the world? They respond by examining how ICTs can be used to support social justice and give three examples: "critical emotional literacy, collective witnessing, and collective intelligence" (p. 202). I found it interesting that they quote McLuhan on being nomadic knowledge gatherers, but not as the source of the metaphor of the global village, although the version they portray is certainly only one aspect of the interconnectivity he visualized. Essentially, they remind us of the politicized nature of cyberspace, its tendency to homogenize and the possibilities it also creates for resistance in varying forms. These remind us to ask for the assumptions behind taken-for-granted questions such as What do we want students to learn? How can we use the new technologies? The metaphors stress our ability to move between identities rather than trying to conform to some globalizing tendency, to focus on local communities and the needs of neighborhoods, as well as knowing what occurs elsewhere. Their description of critical emotional literacy is similar to the hidden curriculum in Terry Anderson's chapter. It is about being attentive to the affective dimensions of Internet work. In the process they highlight Boler's "economy of attention," referring to how we shift focus rapidly rather than attending to and reflecting on the learning in online conversations. They also discuss the need for Boler's "pedagogy of discomfort" which requires us to step outside the taken-for-granted and see what we have been "taught not to see" (p. 213). This relates to Walker's concerns about teaching online. Collective witnessing emphasizes a collective engagement in learning to see, think, and act differently, following on from Harasim's interest in collaborative learning.

Who might want to read this book? This is a book for experienced distance educators and those interested in the use of technologies in education. It is not a how-to text or a fast read. Some chapters are embedded in academic discourses; others relate more directly to experience. It is a book that is best read in parts and over time, mulled over, and discussed. It provides positions that raise lots of questions for the reader, as engaging books do. In the introduction John Daniel comments, "Ever since Marshall McLuhan proclaimed that 'the medium was the message,' we worry that new media may modify the educational message." The authors in this book help its readers examine that concern.

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