

Learning on the Information Highway: A Learner's Guide to the Technology

Judith M. Roberts, Jane E. Brindley, and Barbara Spronk
(Series: *Lifelong Learning on the Information Highway*)
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Learning on the Information Highway: A Learner's Guide to the Technology is the sixth book in the *Lifelong Learning on the Information Highway* series. Although the previous books in the series have been written for instructors, this work provides learners with a basic introduction to four interactive learning modes in order to help them to choose and use the various technologies effectively. Roberts, Brindley, and Spronk, each with 20 years experience working with distance learning technologies, share their insights and identify the fundamental concerns related to learning in this environment. Written in clear, nonacademic language, this jargon-free book is accessible even to those with no prior technical experience. With about 100 pages—which could have been considerably fewer considering the extensive use of white space—it can be read fairly quickly.

As might be expected *Learning on the Information Highway: A Learner's Guide to the Technology* has much in common with the other books in the series. It has the same physical appearance, with generous margins, numerous subheadings, and numbered and bulleted lists of objectives and conclusions. It would also appear that it incorporates many of the same illustrations used in the other books in the series. The chapters themselves also correspond to the different books. Chapters 1 and 2 discuss the topics of audio and audiographic learning, which was the subject of *Audio and Audiographic Learning: The Cornerstone of the Information Highway*. Chapter 3 focuses on networked learning as did *Networked Learning: The Pedagogy of the Internet*, and Chapter 4 refers to compressed video learning and corresponds to *Compressed Video Learning: Creating Active Learners*. A concluding chapter summarizes, primarily in point form, the highlights of the preceding chapters.

Each of the chapters follows the same format: a list of objectives, a brief description of the technology and how it works, reasons for using the technology, the knowledge and skills the learner needs to use the technology, and some general suggestions for learning in each technology-mediated environment. In every chapter these sections are followed by a collection of four interviews with learners who are using the technology. A conclusion consisting of “seven broad statements,” essentially the same seven statements,

concludes each chapter. A variety of tips are interspersed throughout the chapter in appropriate places, and definitions are provided in the margins. The first sections aim to present a general overview without going into specifics about any particular equipment or software. For the most part this approach seems to be sufficient, but at times it appeared that details were added in a somewhat random manner. I am at a loss to understand why, “in order to get adequate technical support,” the learner needs to understand the terms *screen wrap*, *virus*, and *accent enabler*. And although the technologies are presented in what might be viewed as an objective, I was concerned about the lack of explanation about how and why problems may arise in less than ideal circumstances. Fortunately, these issues are dealt with in the collection of interview summaries that follow.

If the introductory sections in each chapter present an idealized view, the student interviews provide the reality. Fourteen of the 16 interviews referred to equipment breakdowns and the frustration that resulted from difficulties with the technologies. At the same time the participants made it clear that technical concerns need not be overwhelming and that communication issues are at least as important as the technical issues. Many of the learners expressed initial reluctance to use the technologies and noted that quite often the technology was not ideally suited to their learning styles. In spite of this there was consensus that they were all able to learn using whatever technology the situation required. The people interviewed candidly addressed the strengths and weaknesses of the technologies and made valuable suggestions for using them effectively. It would be worthwhile for the reader to make note of these suggestions, both practical and conceptual, as many of them did not find their way into either the chapter conclusions or the concluding chapter. They are, however, summarized in the margin, making them easier to find.

Throughout the book the emphasis is on the needs of the novice. Rather than providing detailed explanations about how the technologies work, the authors have focused on what learners can do to enhance their learning experience. Instructors who feel they need to be reminded about the needs of their less experienced learners might also find it valuable. I could see this book, or parts of it, being included as part of a good orientation package for learners. Overall it is both encouraging and reassuring.

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