

LEARNER-CENTERED THEORY AND PRACTICE IN DISTANCE EDUCATION: CASES FROM HIGHER EDUCATION

As online learning matures beyond concerns about establishing its legitimacy, one of the key emerging issues could be labeled “quantity vs. quality.” Although improving the quality and quantity of online education are both desirable outcomes, many proponents of online education are more focused on “greater access, equivalent quality,” working to make online learning become a significant, and eventually even seamless, part of the mainstream of higher education. Other proponents are more concerned with developing online education which improves the quality of the learning experience, often motivated by witnessing how online learning supports improved learning effectiveness. Some of these practitioners have been exploring the application of theoretically and pedagogically-based approaches informed by recent findings in the learning sciences, as described in such sources as the National Research Council’s book *How People Learn*.

This latter topic is the focus of *Learner-Centered Theory and Practice in Distance Education: Cases from Higher Education* (hereafter LCTPDE), the product of a symposium held in December 2001. This volume has two stated aims: to “bring the voice of the learning sciences to the study and design of distance learning,” and to describe a number of distance education programs that “reflect principles of engaged learning” in enough detail so that readers can “understand the pedagogical approaches and the implications of implementing those approaches” (p. xi). LCTPD has an explicit focus on program rather than course design, and the eight distance education programs featured include campus-wide, system-wide, and discipline-specific efforts. These programs are organized into sections based on four themes — community building, problem-centered learning, innovative uses of technology, and scaling up. LCTPDE deals with each program as follows: a primary chapter written by a practitioner with first-hand involvement with the program, a formal reaction to the chapter by a practitioner with expertise in one or more distance learning-related issues, and an edited transcript of an informal group discussion of the primary chapter held at the symposium. There is also a summary section offering policy and corporate perspectives from leading practitioners on the approaches and thinking reflected in the other sections of the book.

The book’s introduction by co-editors Thomas Duffy and Jamie Kirkley of Indiana University is generally neutral on the controversies surrounding distance education and the “polarized discussions” which have resulted. LCTPD notes that educational quality depends on learning design and learner engagement rather than delivery mode, and that distance education is “right in the mix with all other courses in the dimension of quality” as measured by faculty perception of course quality (p.4). Many online learning practitioners have also experienced Duffy and Kirkley’s observation that distance education has prompted greater attention to the quality of teaching practices in classroom as well as distance education.

The introduction also makes it clear that the book focuses on applying a particular quality standard in its case studies: how well these distance education programs use “principle-based design” informed by “tremendous gains in understanding how people learn” to deliver effective learning (p.6). To its credit, the introduction not only applies this standard to its

case studies but to all higher education courses, as Duffy and Kirkley lament the lack of attention paid to applying these understandings in higher education, and in particular their “absence” in distance education (although the book’s case studies themselves seem to indicate a presence rather than absence).

The book’s introduction also confirms that opponents of online education have little if any actual research evidence to back their claims that classroom learning is superior. Duffy and Kirkley’s discussion of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT)’s 2001 survey brings to mind the 1999 Institute for Higher Education Policy report "[What's The Difference?](#)" which called for a high level of research verification (e.g., randomized experiments, tests with content or construct validity) before accepting full-scale adoption of online learning, as if such findings were available for classroom learning. Discussing the AFT survey findings which express a similar viewpoint, Duffy and Kirkley note dryly that “this concern is rather interesting given the lack of research on learning in the undergraduate classroom” (p.4). As they point out, “most higher education research relies on survey data” while “very little research has actually looked at student learning in the classroom,” and the work that has been done suggests that the quality of discussion and student learning in college classrooms is questionable. Although it is not clear that the Duffy/Kirkley literature review is a comprehensive one, the book’s introduction is worth reading for this item alone.

LCTPD is a good place to get acquainted with many theoretically and pedagogically-based approaches which are becoming more common in online education design. Several authors (e.g., Polin, Duffy and Kirkley, Bransford et al.) provide extensive explanations of the theoretical foundations for the pedagogical approaches utilized in their programs, and many others describe how their programs translate these theories into practice. For instance, Linda Polin’s description of Pepperdine University’s online Master of Arts in educational technology (OMAET) program illustrates the application of a sociocultural approach to program design (pp. 17–48), as well as the value of contextual learning as happens in Pepperdine’s VirtCamp technology training (p.45). Scott Grabinger’s chapter includes an informative table comparing traditional and sociocultural instructional design approaches (pp. 51–53) which offers an excellent starting point for discussion. Karen Ruhleder’s description of the University of Illinois’s graduate library science program (LEEP) illustrates how online technologies are “supporting new forms of engagement between students and instructors” (p.71), for instance by illustrating how live synchronous discussion allows multiple channels (p.78) and shared control of discussion (p. 86). John Stinson describes how Ohio University’s MBA program is organized around projects rather than courses (pp. 168–69, 172–73). However, contributors also note cases where practical considerations inhibited the application of pedagogical approaches, for instance Duffy and Kirkley’s description of how Cardean University’s business model inhibited the building of collaborative course communities and the use of more extensive qualitative assessments (pp. 133–35). The case studies featured in the book also supply many informative examples of solutions to thorny problems facing online educators, such as applying inquiry-based approaches without sacrificing necessary content (Bransford et al., pp. 226–28) or training large numbers of faculty in a new pedagogical method (Islas, pp. 308–311).

LCTPD is also a treasure trove of useful “nuggets” pertaining to a wide range of educational issues. Some of these nuggets will be familiar to most readers but are still worth a reminder, for instance that constructivism is a theory of how we know and not a theory of pedagogy (Bransford, open discussion, p. 104) or that campus-based students often work harder than online students because the latter are more experienced and focused learners, not because campus courses are more difficult (Ruhleder, open discussion, p. 104). Other

nuggets are fine points which may require more careful study for many readers, for instance Lani Gunawardena's distinctions between open inquiry, directed inquiry, and controlled (non-)inquiry (pp. 148–49).

A thorough perusal of LCTPD will reward the reader with his/her own individual haul. A few of my favorites are Champagne's "embedded assessment" approach to evaluation as an alternative to "evaluation as autopsy" (pp. 285–88), identifying social engineering and group dynamics as useful skills sets for instructors to have (Eoyang, open discussion, p. 67), and how Polin's and Ruhleder's programs use chat (pp. 39–41; 75–86), which offer interesting ideas on its uses even for those practitioners (such as myself) who are generally quite skeptical of its utility.

The reader will not treasure everything in LCTPD, of course. OMAET's online virtual office (pp. 37–39) is of dubious value in my opinion, and one also wonders how Purdue's TCCT program can maintain its rich teacher-to-student ratio (pp. 266–71) even if one admires TCCT's blurring the distinction between distance and classroom education in apparently effective ways. Mark Schlager's notion of applying the Hippocratic oath ("do no harm") to e-learning design is rather overreaching; criticizing "strictly asynchronous e-learning systems" as possibly harmful fails to recognize how little we know about what forms of engagement "cause harm to the learning experience" in online or any other type of learning (p. 96). The fact that these interpretations are open to debate, however, illustrates that LCTPD has succeeded in describing some of the contours of a new territory: applying current conceptions of learning to designing higher education programs is an open frontier, not a settled one.

The Open Discussions sections of the book definitely add value relative to the usual chapter or chapter-reactant formats. The frankness of the open discussions reflects the value of including participants with multiple perspectives and differing views. For instance, Polin freely admits that assessing learning effectiveness is a weak aspect of the OMAET program (pp. 62–63), while Ruhleder provides less than satisfactory answers to some tough questions about policy questions such as technology selection and use of adjuncts (pp. 100–103). However, these discussions simply illustrate how LCTPD's quality standard raises the bar in terms of assessing the effectiveness of the programs featured. One wonders what classroom-based programs are receiving comparable scrutiny and when we will see the companion volume *Learner-Centered Theory and Practice in Classroom-Based Education: Cases from Higher Education* — if ever. *Prima facie*, LCTPD provides additional evidence that distance education programs are scrutinized far more closely by administrators, accreditors, and other stakeholders than are classroom-based programs.

However, the open discussion sections suffer from some of the drawbacks of face-to-face, real-time discussion: interesting questions are left unanswered, or issues are identified but not fully explored or are missed altogether, as the discussants must move on to the next paper. For example, despite LCTPD's explicit emphasis on the SUNY project as an example of "scaling up," much of the discussion of the project (pp. 386–92) misses the essential point that scaling up means achieving both reasonably high quality and increased accessibility through scale, rather than maximizing quality. As a result, some discussants propose alternative strategies based on (perceived) maximizing of quality (e.g., more synchronous, reducing student dissatisfaction rates from 10% to zero) supported by examples of programs which lack the ability to scale. As co-author Duffy points out, most of the chapters in LCTPD describe "boutique" programs "focused first on creating a rich learning experience" (p. 11), many of which are not scalable models. Unfortunately, some

of the LCTPD participants seemed to have lost sight of this during the open discussion. The fact that even the high caliber of LCTPD's participants demonstrated this shortcoming illustrates the potential of "quantity vs. quality" to be a divisive issue and a perceptual gap whose bridging will require much additional work.

Another shortcoming of LCTPD is its age; the book's material is three years old as of this writing (November 2004). Fairly enough, LCTPD represents itself as the beginning of the conversation on this important topic; still, one wonders how its participants' work and views have evolved in the past three years, or for that matter how participating in the symposium may have changed their thinking. Nevertheless, LCTPD is an excellent starting point and resource for online learning practitioners who are exploring the application of theoretically- and pedagogically-based approaches to distance education programs.

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