

BOOK REVIEW

An Introduction to Distance Education: Understanding Teaching and Learning in a New Era

M. F. CLEVELAND-INNES & D. R. GARRISON (EDS.)

Routledge, 2021, pp. 296

The second edition of this textbook on distance education is a book of essays by well-known Canadian distance education scholars and their colleagues from Australia, New Zealand, Spain, Sweden, and the United States. Some of the authors appeared in the original 2010 edition of the text, and because their work is noted as seminal by the editors, they provide updated views on their research and its implications within the current educational context.

The second edition, like the original, is organized in chapters nested under four themes, with a lively foreword written by Richard A. Schwier, Professor Emeritus from the University of Saskatchewan. As a textbook designed to support a course on distance education, it is well organized with concept definitions in each chapter and questions for reflection, review, and discussion. In addition, a “significant contributor” is highlighted at the close of each chapter, with a brief summary of their contributions to distance education theory and practice. The organization of the book is as follows:

The Foreword: An Attendant Posture

Part I An Evolving Distance Education

1. Teaching and Learning in Distance Education: Continue a New Era
2. From Independence to Collaboration: A Personal Retrospective on Distance Education
3. Formal and Informal Paths of Lifelong Learning: Hybrid Distance Educational Settings for the Digital Era
4. Failures of Open and Distance Education’s Successes

Part II Distance Education in the Post-Industrial Context

5. Teaching and Learning in Post-Industrial Distance Education
6. Into the Breach: The Emerging Landscape in Online Learning
7. Blended Learning Revisited
8. 8. Repositioning and Re-purposing Distance Education for the Future



Part III Leading the Change

9. Leadership in a New Era of Distance Higher Education

10. From Distance Education to Blended Learning: Leading Pedagogical Change

Part IV Summary and Conclusions

11. Teaching, Learning, and Beyond

Before reviewing this new edition of *An introduction to distance education: Understanding teaching and learning in a new era*, I searched out reviews of the previous edition, published in 2010. I found a “preliminary review” by Tony Bates on his websiteⁱ and bookmarked it for consideration after I had finished reading the updated 2021 edition.

As a textbook, the editors have done an exemplary job of assembling essays reflecting commentary on significant topics along with accompanying research by the chapter authors to trace the history of distance education as a domain of practice. It is important to note that distance education as experienced by the authors and highlighted through the research they present, pre-dates many contemporary approaches to distance education that also enable access, choice, and flexibility for students through online learning, networked learning, and specialized forms of digital learning, such as MOOCs.

The authors set out to use their historical views of distance education to probe the relationship between distance education theories and the evolution of practice that is occurring in a dynamically changing digital environment. The problem for me as a reviewer was the scarcity of research citations beyond 2015, with the majority of the research cited coming from pre-2010, and primarily focused on theory without many contemporary practice examples that would have made the second edition of the text seem a better fit in my experience. Much of distance education is practice oriented, with changes occurring through practitioner research, combined with new opportunities presented by technological innovations that cause us to think and act in new ways.

I note that Tony Bates offered a similar critique of the lack of balance between theory and practice in his preliminary review of the 2010 edition. It is as if theory is the only driver of distance education practice, while in 2021 it might actually be the reverse. The dynamism and messiness of emergent agile approaches to online and flexible learning have been highlighted over the past years and especially in the last two years when institutions, faculty, and students adjusted through necessity to online learning as a mainstream practice. In that sense, the second edition is a useful contribution as a text and as a reference for practitioners engaged in ongoing action and innovation, as well as a reflection and review opportunity to assess how their interventions square with historic research. As an example, the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison, 2017), has been used extensively to examine distance education, blended learning, and online learning. It remains a topic of contemporary discussion about the design of technology-enabled learning programs and has retained its value. But, what comes after CoI as theory in the space?

Two of the most interesting sections of the book are the chapter on learning analytics, AI, and blockchain technologies, written by Phil Ice and Melissa Layne, and the Foreword by Rick Schwier.

The chapter on artificial intelligence (AI) by Ice and Layne is both illuminating and scary at the same time. The authors provide a succinct review of developments in artificial intelligence, machine learning, and deep learning, as well as discussions of learning analytics and their application. Topics such as student retention, career planning, and performance tracking are linked to analytics and AI techniques, as well as to institutional funding and economics. While the economic linkages may not be the first thing that comes to mind for practising distance educators or researchers, the topics are clearly important to many administrators charged with managing public funds and maximizing the benefits of education in systems where there are insufficient places for learners in conventional institutions.

Ice and Layne end their chapter with considerations of secure and immutable records of learning, the stuff of digital micro-credentialing, an emergent priority for many governments seeking to provide re-skilling and up-skilling opportunities for their citizens. The rise of blockchain thinking in education and its convergence with OER-based resources for online learning sets up an interesting conclusion to the chapter and provides a set of issues for further discussion, which the chapter questions underscore.

The Foreword to the second edition of the book makes it clear that much has changed in the world of distance educators since the 2010 edition, but much also remains the same. Schwier recommends that we use perspective to review what has gone before, learn from the research, and consider the tensions that exist in the apparent stasis of some organizations towards accepting the legitimacy of online and distance education, while the world moves forward at a pace, and issues such as equity and access to education remain.

In the Foreword, Schwier also recommends Chapter 11 by Cleveland-Innes and Garrison as a starting point to reading the entire volume, despite the fact that it is the reflective organizer that the textbook's editors would like you to consider as an exit and springboard to further thinking. In a sense, Chapter 11 could be the beginning of a next volume in the series which could focus on the growing dominance of online learning as a mechanism to bridge distance and time, while also providing opportunities for design creativity through innovative learning practices and practitioners. I for one would like to hear far more practitioner voices in any future book.

In summary, the book provides a strong grounding in the theory of distance education and the crossover points between those theories and affordances of online learning and newer developments such as AI, learning analytics, and blockchain technologies – all of which will have implications for educational practice and will in turn spawn new theories that will arise from these innovative developments and practices

Reviewed by:

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ⁱ Bates, A.J. (2010). Preliminary book review: *An Introduction to distance education*. April 19, 2010.
<https://www.tonybates.ca/2010/04/19/preliminary-book-review-an-introduction-to-distance-education/>