

## **Distance Learning Technologies: Issues, Trends and Opportunities**

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This edited book is published by Idea Group Publishing. The book has sixteen chapters, in addition to an author biography and an index. Besides the editor, total of 24 authors have contributed to the book. These authors are from different countries, academic backgrounds, and institutions. Although a big majority of the authors are from USA, there are several authors from Canada and Egypt. The authors represent a variety of universities, private companies, and military institutions. Most of them have strong professional backgrounds, which help them address the issues both from theoretical and practical perspectives.

It is not apparent in the book, but according to the editor, the book is divided into three sections. The first section covers the four chapters at the beginning, providing the theoretical foundation of distance learning. *Chapter 1* suggests a constructivist approach to web-based learning including the use of concept maps, visual diagrams, models, analogies/metaphors, hypothesis testing, integrated themes, journaling, portfolios, cooperative dialogue, and learning cycle of exploration, explanation, and expansion. *Chapter 2* discusses the interactive nature of distance learning by emphasizing a paradigm shift from the understanding of "sage on the stage" to the understanding of "guide on the side" in order to support students' personal growth and facilitate learning rather than simply transmitting information. *Chapter 3* summarizes how to evaluate the effectiveness of Internet-based teaching, using both the current technologies of online communication, electronic posting, and course website as well as the traditional technologies of face to face teaching, books, correspondence, and telecast. *Chapter 4* discusses the successful management of implementing corporate distance teaching by focusing on the issues of diffusion contexts, practical conditions, and projects as conduits of distance education.

The seven chapters in the second section of the book focus on the conceptual aspects of distance learning. *Chapter 5* introduces three strategies of distance learning technologies in higher education such as guest lecturer strategy used to make instruction more effective, automated correspondence strategy used for reaching new students, and large lecture hall strategy used to increase the efficiency of programs. *Chapter 6* describes the alliances of distance learning at the university level by raising certain issues like the depth of the alliances (simple exchange, partnership, virtual university), educational matters (curriculum, finance, competition, accreditation) and new trends (control in the consortium, redefinition of roles, identity of members). *Chapter 7* discusses the elements of a successful distributed learning program such as institutional plan, delivery platform, infrastructure, technology support, dedicated instructors, instructional model, assistance of local personnel, and monitoring of the program. *Chapter 8* addresses the issues related to the design of effective online instruction, of particular importance are face to face teaching, multi-faceted interaction, feedback, assignments, technical assistance, discussions with class members, individual pace, authentic activities, and ongoing support for success. *Chapter 9* introduces a learning environment which is capable of

applying technology and total quality management to distance learning by defining students as products and universities as suppliers of services. *Chapter 10* describes the use of digital video as an important instructional tool in the modern classroom as well as in distance learning systems. *Chapter 11* summarizes an empirical study of a group decision support system by suggesting a three-dimensional typology including the components of communication technology (audio, video, computer, mixed), direction of communication flow (one direction only, one direction at a time, both directions simultaneously), and location (different but predictable, different but flexible).

The third section of the book summarizes five cases of practical implementation of distance learning. *Chapter 12* describes the commuting of distance learning at the Pepperdine University from a knowledge management perspective with regard to access (legitimacy and transparency), generation (communities of interest), embedding (cognitive artifacts), and transfer (communities of practice). *Chapter 13* introduces the "Little Horus" program in Egypt, an Internet-based educational endeavor for children. *Chapter 14* examines the Web-Based Instruction System from the point of its components and relevant issues within the context of the evolution of multimedia/hypermedia learning environments. *Chapter 15* describes video-conferencing applications at St. Joseph's University by highlighting the benefits of expanding program content, enlarging geographical reach, improving quality, and reducing educational costs. *Chapter 16* evaluates the training requirements of the network marketing industry based upon the fundamental needs as well as the availability of training resources.

The book presents a comprehensive overview of contemporary distance learning technologies, both in the sense of a product and a process. Therefore, the contents of the chapters deal successfully with a number of theoretical issues and practical considerations. Each chapter describes conceptual frameworks, guiding principles, critical steps, current technologies, and future trends in their respective areas. The case studies contribute to the development of an in-depth understanding of the important issues by relating theoretical explanations to practical challenges in order to create strong distance learning alternatives. In this respect, the book is a useful guide for those who are interested in technology-based distance learning, particularly policy makers, managers, and practitioners.

It seems that distance learning is gaining a great momentum in recent years to question the existing educational systems and develop new alternatives to long-lasting traditional practices. Every year a burgeoning number of educational institutions offer different forms of learning programs through the Internet. In North America alone, more than 150 accredited academic institutions offer distance learning programs both at undergraduate and graduate levels. For the year 2000, it was predicted that 3 million students in USA attended academic distance learning programs. In addition, thousands of employees participated in technology-based distance learning programs initiated by their own companies. Based upon the results of the scientific studies, distance learning systems are at least as effective as on-campus educational practices. Furthermore, they are more efficient due to the flexible nature of the systems.

All these facts and possibilities require that distance learning practices should be developed carefully and contemporary technologies should be part of the solutions. Lau's book does a fairly good job to emphasize the role and variety of technologies in distance learning systems. It describes what is necessary for effective distance learning in the fast-changing world of the twenty-first century. Therefore, both the academicians and practitioners working in the field of distance learning should read this book thoroughly at their earliest convenience.

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Reference: Lau, L. K. (2000). (Ed.). *Distance learning technologies: Issues, trends and opportunities*. Hershey, PA: Idea Group.