

REVIEW OF *TEACHING AND LEARNING AT A DISTANCE: FOUNDATIONS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION*

Teaching and Learning at a Distance: Foundations of Distance Education

M. Simonson, S. Smaldino, M. Albright, & S. Zvacek

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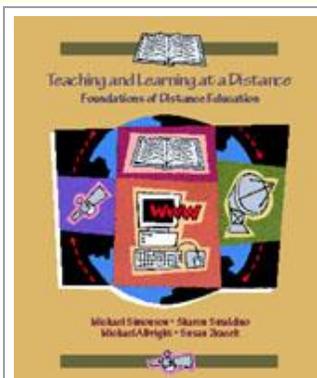
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Reviewed by Reviewed by Joy Egbert, Indiana University

INTRODUCTION

Distance education is the current hot topic for educators in all fields, including second and foreign language, and it was the focus of the CALL-IS academic session and other panels this year at the international TESOL convention. However, there are many obstacles to reaching a common understanding of what distance education is and how it should be carried out; these include inconsistencies in definitions and implementations among and within fields, and a lack of solid empirical research on the topic (see, for example, overviews by AAUP, 1998; Aoki, Fasse, & Stowe, 1998; Schlosser & Anderson, 1994).

As an experienced distance education practitioner and developer, I initially thought that *Teaching and Learning at a Distance: Foundations of Distance Education* would not offer me much to overcome these obstacles nor shed new light on the Hows and Whys of distance education. However, this text does so in several ways. First, it provides a logical common ground on which to base discussions of distance education, regardless of whether one's expertise is in technology, content, or teaching practice. The authors establish this basis by defining distance education simply as "institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated geographically, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors" (p.7). Second, by addressing the concerns of technology and content while focussing primarily on learning and students, the text speaks to all participants in the distance education dialogue. Finally, not only does *Teaching and Learning at a Distance* provide a very complete overview of what distance education is and what its benefits are, but it also presents specific examples of implementations, outlines for adaptations, and samples of classroom materials that can easily be adapted by distance educators in all fields, including technology-using language teachers.

DESCRIPTION

Teaching and Learning at a Distance is intended for students in a foundations of distance education class (to which it is extremely well-suited), but I highly recommend it for anyone interested or involved in distance education. The 12 chapters of the text are divided into two parts. The first part, *Foundations*,

includes chapters on history, theory, research, and technologies. The second part, *Applications*, contains eight chapters which include important information on copyright, the instructional design process, distance students, the details of teaching at a distance, and the use of the Internet for distance education. Each of the 12 chapters starts with a list of goals to help focus the reader and ends with self-test questions which relate to those goals.

Teaching and Learning at a Distance also has several supplements. The companion Web site (<http://www.prenhall.com/simonson/>) has links to related PowerPoint slide shows and study guides from the Nova Southeastern University site which university-level educators might find useful. The *Instructor's Manual* contains the masters of these interactive study guides to accompany many of the chapters. In addition, video vignettes are available from the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) (<http://www.aect.org/>).

EVALUATION

Focus

The most appealing aspect of *Teaching and Learning at a Distance* is that it is based on the sound pedagogy of active learning, but it does not prescribe a single "best" method for teaching at a distance. The authors take a student-centered focus, with the emphasis on who distance students are and what they need in order to succeed. This is in keeping with current educational emphases on learner construction of knowledge, which are supported by Duffy & Jonassen (1992) and many others. The authors emphasize the need to "distinguish between appropriate uses of distance education and those uses best met by other techniques" (p. iii). This point underscores the authors' belief that distance education is not effective for all learners in all contexts. It's refreshing to hear that some ideas are *not* a panacea for all of the ills of education!

Clarity and Style

The text is very readable. The authors untangle legal issues such as copyright very clearly, and a minimum of jargon is used. The goals at the beginning of each chapter and the subtitles throughout provide a clear path for the reader to follow.

Content

The authors' claim that this text *shows* rather than *tells* is justified throughout. It is very complete, and includes everything from an overview of distance education theories to examples of legible screen text sizes. The text does describe various technologies, but it maintains a clear emphasis on content, or "matter over medium." Retaining its emphasis on learning rather than technology, the final chapters describe assessments and evaluation of students and programs.

Scattered throughout the text are real case studies that make clear transitions between theory and practice. By including these anecdotes, as well as syllabus construction ideas, graphic design principles and practice, and principles of communication and their implementation, the text works both for teachers who are not instructional designers and for instructional designers who are not practitioners. Although I would prefer that the section on the elements of design were shortened and the discussion of Internet-based education practice expanded, the elements section is useful for those with no experience in the area.

One small shortcoming of the text is that most of the research it cites comes from studies of telecourses; future editions may include more Internet-based research as it becomes available. However, this focus does not make the text less useful for Internet-based distance educators, as the Internet and Web are addressed as media for distance education in chapter 10.

The most ineffective component of *Teaching and Learning at a Distance* is the self-test section at the end of each chapter. The answers to most of the questions can be found directly in the text (although an answer section is provided immediately after the questions). For the casual reader this is not an issue, but opportunities for more creative responses to the readings would need to be built by the teacher of a foundations course using this text.

Finally, the text is not discipline-specific in its examples or recommendations. Educators in specific fields such as language teaching can adapt the ideas, but a useful supplement to the text might be the inclusion of brief study guides for specific content areas. For language teachers, articles such as Barrera's *Distance Education: The Challenge for A Multicultural Society* (1993) would provide more focused reading in the area.

CONCLUSION

Overall, *Teaching and Learning at a Distance: Foundations of Distance Education* provides a clear and complete picture of what distance education is and what it can do for learners and teachers. This text provides its readers with a common basis for discussion of distance education and emphasizes learning over technology, showing us "how important and how much fun [distance education] really is" (p. iii).

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Joy Egbert is Assistant Professor of Language Education at Indiana University. She recently co-edited *CALL Environments: Research, Practice, and Critical Issues*, published by TESOL, and is an award-winning teacher, researcher, and curriculum developer.

E-mail: jegbert@indiana.edu

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