Book Review

E-Learning in the 21st Century: A Framework for Research and Practice, 2003.
D.R. Garrison and Terry Anderson. New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer. 161
pages. ISBN 0-415-26346-8

Review by Dirk Morrison

I will be the first to admit that I have, of late, grown just a little weary of the
rhetorical din associated with e-anything. From the constant barrage of mass
media hipsters selling their e-wares, to the virtual ivory e-towers of academia, the
buzz is that anything available or experienced "online" is somehow inherently
superior, or is at least cutting an edge somehow, somewhere. My trouble with all
this is that, more often than not, I am disappointed by the feeble and
unconvincing ideas and arguments brought forth to support the e-enthusiasts'
claims and assertions. Reading "E-Learning in the 21st Century" was, happily, a
welcome antidote to my growing cynicism regarding the "hoopla over substance"
problem so characteristic of discussions focused on technology in higher
education. The key difference, and in my view the primary contribution, of this
book is captured by the rest of the title: "A Framework for Research and
Practice." With this emphasis, the authors offer and deliver to the reader an
essential core of theoretical yet practicable ideas and principles so often missing
from other treatises on this topic.

E-Learning in the 21st Century is logically ordered and organized to present two
halves of a holistic perspective. Part 1 lays out the conceptual framework, the
critical theoretical core, across six chapters, four of which explicate the details of
the *Community of Inquiry Model*. In a nutshell, the model, informed by principles
of constructivism and philosophical perspectives of Dewey, clearly and elegantly
conveys the message that truly effective online learning environments will
necessarily include aspects of cognitive, social, and teaching "presence." Each of
these key components, is, in turn, duly expanded upon in separate chapters to

give the detail needed for a thorough understanding not only of the model but also the implications of such for practice. My only criticism of this section is that chapter four, which focuses on the technology of learning, seems misplaced amongst the chapters presenting an overview of the model and its details.

Part II of the book spends the next four chapters discussing how one might apply the conceptual framework presented to the practical realities and challenges facing those charged with developing and delivering quality online learning environments. The authors wisely first present to the reader a set of guidelines for practice, to included sections on learning activities, design considerations, and facilitating online discourse; most of these discussions are tied back to the components of the Community of Inquiry Model. The authors devote the next two chapters to a focus on assessment and evaluation, and organizational issues. In my view, these emphases are essential to any meaningful discussion of the considerations necessary to implementing a robust and sustainable e-learning agenda.

The final chapter, *Future Directions*, is perhaps somewhat obligatory in books of this sort and contributes most not by pointing out the obvious regarding developments on the Net, namely that volume, variety, and value-addition of information will continue to increase but rather by tying these to the changing needs and demands of e-learners. The addition of Appendix B (Methodological Issues in the Content Analysis of Computer Conference Transcripts) may perplex some readers as irrelevant, but any wishing to pursue investigations focused on analyses of online learning will find this useful.

While one could pine for a thicker volume, one in which the authors expand and elaborate on the many significant ideas presented here, this is not their purpose. This book concisely presents a solid theoretical framework upon which to ground one's research and practice in the arena of online learning. So, whether scholar,

practitioner, or a little of both, *E-Learning in the 21ˢᵗ Century* would make a worthwhile addition to your library.

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