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A Programmatic Approach to Planning, Design, Instruction, Evaluation, and Accreditation

Authors: Alfred Rovai, Michael Ponton, & Jason Baker (2008). *Distance Learning in Higher Education: A Programmatic Approach to Planning, Design, Instruction, Evaluation, and Accreditation*. Teachers College Press: New York. ISBN 978-0-8077-4878-7

Reviewer: Terry Anderson, IRRODL

I was quite delighted to bump into the 2008 text *Distance Learning in Higher Education* by well-known distance educators Alfred Rovai, Michael Ponton, and Jason Baker. The book is quite aptly subtitled *A Programmatic Approach to Planning, Design, Instruction, Evaluation, and Accreditation*. The book could have as easily been subtitled a **practical** approach because it speaks directly to those in the trenches of online learning, development, and delivery. Since the publication of Moore and Kearsley's two editions of *Distance Education: A Systems View*, I've thought that we needed a new and up-to-date introductory text that can serve both as a textbook for undergraduate and graduate courses on distance education as well as a practical guide to developing and teaching online. This book fits both needs very well.

I especially like the approach that moves from the big theoretical ideas, such as access, adult education, constructivism, presence, community, to the practical applications, i.e., how and why to assess students, evaluate programs, and achieve program accreditation. The book also does a commendable job of reflecting and interpreting results from the growing body of DE research literature. OK, I did check to make sure they covered some of my own work!! The authors provide an encyclopedic view that nicely focuses the major issues that have challenged and enticed distance education researchers for at least the past two decades.

I must confess to being surprised that the whole second chapter is devoted to gender issues – this from a text authored by three men – but they are no doubt very sensitive new age guys! The chapter overviews much of the research documenting the differences of approach, style, attitude to machines, and other variables found to differentiate males and females, but some of the data seems dated. For example, are the reports that spamming and bullying are a male prerogative still accurate? I would suspect that amongst today's Facebook and Myspace users, gender differences are becoming less stereotypical as both sexes gain mastery and learn to appropriate the technology to their social needs.

Given the predominate role of online discussion in much online higher education, I was pleased to see an extensive coverage of online discussions, from an overview of discussion development

models to the means to stimulate and moderate discussions. This chapter, like the others, is full of helpful hints, most derived from the research literature. For instance, the authors quote studies showing an increase in participation when online discussions are assessed by the teacher, but only for 10 to 20% of the course grade. Increasing this weighting does not result in a higher quality or quantity of postings.

There are however a few things that I don't like about this book. The first is the Americanization of the ideas and context, especially where legal or accreditation issues are involved. Distance learning is now, and always has been, an international phenomenon, so why do American authors write as if American copyright law and American systems of accreditation are both universal and understood (or even of particular interest) to everyone? It may be that the authors are writing only to an American audience; if so, this is a shame as they have much of value to impart to all of us. De-Americanizing and internationalizing the examples and discussion would add a useful global perspective to the text.

As well, I would love to see a chapter on the scholarship of teaching, action research, and design-based research. Although some of the chapter on course and program evaluation meets these needs, I think we must stimulate and develop a culture of practitioner research. Our field is growing in numbers, variety, and strategic importance, but this is growth that is not matched by the number of professional researchers who are focused on extracting and developing knowledge from our practice. I hope future editions of the book will encourage and assist distance education teachers, administrators, and academics to engage more productively in research of their practice.

In summary this \$49.00 (US\$ of course!) book will be a fine addition to the bookcase of any student or practitioner in the ever-developing world of distance and online education.

