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EDITORIAL

This issue of DEOSNEWS comprises two books reviews published in The American Journal of Distance Education in 1994. The first, by Thomas C. Reeves, discusses Reaching Learners through Telecommunications, a book described by the reviewer as "by managers for managers." The second review, by Fred M. Schied, focuses on a work with a much more theoretical orientation: Reforming Open and Distance Education--Critical Reflections from Practice. These reviews introduce readers to two publications that provide differing, but complementary, perspectives on the role and future of educational telecommunications.

REACHING LEARNERS THROUGH TELECOMMUNICATIONS.

Becky S. Duning, M. J. Van Kekerix, and L. M. Zaborowski (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993, 299 pp., \$34.95).

Reviewed in The American Journal of Distance Education 8(2):77-79.

by

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Reaching Learners Through Telecommunications is written by managers for managers. The focus is primarily on postsecondary education, although there are occasional references to business and industrial training contexts. Traditional academics may find the authors' frank exposure of many of the myths underlying the "telecommunications revolution" in postsecondary education to be harsh medicine, but they should take it nonetheless. Although intended primarily for managers of "telecommunications-based education and training," this book has important implications for everyone involved in higher education, implications that others--especially faculty and administrators--cannot afford to ignore. The book is divided into twelve chapters that focus on topics such as the assumptions underlying telecommunications-based education; guidelines for analysis, instructional design, implementation, and evaluation; options for managing, staffing, budgeting, and marketing; and policy issues regarding access, equity, and quality. The authors' biographical sketches indicate that they have a wealth of expertise and experience in each of these areas, and the overall practical orientation they provide is refreshing. Each of the twelve chapters of the book begins with a

"Myth" and a "Reality" statement. For example, the "myth" that introduces Chapter Two, "Guiding Assumptions of Educational Telecommunications," is that telecommunications-based education is accomplished by a single responsible organizational unit managing integrated technologies. The corresponding "reality" is that introducing and sustaining telecommunications-based education depends more on developing networks of relationships than on equipment.

This foregoing "reality" statement represents the primary message of this book, viz., the challenges managers of distance education face have much less to do with technical issues than with 1) issues of relationships among various stakeholders in the educational enterprise; 2) policies regarding access and equity; and 3) the complexities of defining and evaluating quality. This is not a book for those seeking "how-to" recipes for telecommunications delivery systems such as teleconferencing, computer-assisted instruction, or cable television. Instead, this volume encourages deep reflection on the basic values and practices of higher education in contemporary society and on the enormous potential and possible dangers that educational telecommunications present for changing these values and practices.

As an additional impetus to reflection, the book generates a basic, unresolved tension. On the one hand, the authors repeatedly stress the principle that telecommunications "programs that are in concert with the priorities of the [parent] organization stand a greater chance of acceptance, support, and participation" (p. 186). On the other hand, they admonish telecommunications managers to play activist roles in the political struggle to shift from the teacher and text-centered paradigm of traditional higher education to the learner and learning-centered paradigm of a universal access system. The question remains: Will telecommunications be simply a vehicle for expanding the range of educational "business-as-usual" or will it be the catalyst for radically changing the nature of teaching and learning in postsecondary education? It is unrealistic to expect that the authors of this book could or should resolve this tension. In the final chapter, they cite Tom Peters' (1988) unsettling but realistic contention that "predictability is a thing of the past," and they endorse Peters' view that technology is a wild card affecting everything and everyone.

Although the authors do not provide the easy answers that some might seek, they do provide excellent guidance to the burgeoning literature on educational telecommunications. Chapter Ten, "Sources of Information about Telecommunications," lists books, periodicals, reports, associations, conferences, and people that are valuable resources for managers of telecommunications-based education and training. Moreover, the authors suggest practical strategies for linking these resources to managerial concerns.

A minor weakness of *Reaching Learners Through Telecommunications* is the authors' neglect of computer-based communications as a method of increasing the interactivity of distance education without considerable extra costs. The Internet is scarcely mentioned and the development of new interactive access systems such as the "Virtual Campus" in Western Australia (Ring 1994) and elsewhere is not noted. The lack of references to computerized resources may be evidence that the authors are

following their own advice to managers to avoid investing their attention too heavily on any one technology in a rapidly changing telecommunications environment. Instead, they recommend continuously scanning the environment for key factors and technical developments that will shape distance education over time.

A more significant flaw is the lack of specificity concerning the innovative dimensions of teaching and learning that may be activated or enhanced through telecommunications. The authors admit that, despite a growing theoretical basis for alternative designs, "in practice adult educators continue to use rather traditional modes of instructional design" (p. 263). The potential of telecommunications-based education to transform higher education by emphasizing experiential learning, implementing constructivist pedagogy, supporting collaboration and cooperation, enabling learner control, and incorporating cultural sensitivity is not described in sufficient detail. The few concrete examples of new approaches seem to have been "sanitized" to protect the identities of the actual participants. The only "radical" vision of how teaching and learning might change is presented in Chapter Twelve in the form of a description of how "Linda Learner" might experience distance education in the year 2001. The gap between this vision and the reality of distance education today is enormous. The present reality experienced by far too many distant students is a video "talking head," poor visuals, limited interaction, and low quality audio. Despite the aforementioned weaknesses, *Reaching Learners Through Telecommunications* is a book that anyone seriously concerned about the future of higher education and the role of telecommunications in that future should read. The authors are to be especially commended for dealing with the complex and sensitive issues of access, equity, and quality that the use of telecommunications inevitably entails. The authors of this book are not just practical and competent managers; they are caring and ethical people, as well.

References

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REFORMING OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION:
CRITICAL REFLECTIONS FROM PRACTICE. Terry Evans
and Daryl Nation, eds. (London: Kogan Page, 1993, 240 pp., \$30).

Reviewed in *The American Journal of Distance Education* 8(3):81-83

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In *Critical Reflections on Distance Education*, published in 1989, Evans and Nation sought to examine the assumptions, contexts, motives, and prejudices accompanying engagement in various distance education activities. Their most recent publication, *Reforming Open and Distance Education: Critical Reflections from Practice*, is in many ways a continuation of themes developed in the earlier book: the central focus is again the concept of critical reflection. By critical reflection the authors mean a way by which people can "analyse elements of their lives, as individuals or members of small groups, against a broader theoretical framework created collectively" (p. 13). Unlike the earlier volume, which included only contributions from Australian distance educators, this publication has contributors drawn from a broader international context.

What makes this edited volume so different from most edited books is the process by which it was written. Usually in a book of collected articles, the editors invite contributors to submit chapters; they then review and critique the chapters and send them back to the individual authors for final revisions. Thus, an edited volume often seems to be no more than a collection of articles that stand by themselves, each addressing in an individual manner the book's broad overall theme. In contrast to this approach, Evans and Nation sought to apply their own intellectual process to the production of this book by critically reflecting on the process of putting together an edited volume in a collective manner.

Authors were asked to attend contributors' seminars at which drafts of each chapter were discussed. These discussions were recorded, thus giving the authors a record of the entire series of seminars. While there is a certain irony in having contributors on distance education meet in face-to-face sessions in order to create a community of scholars, the process seems to have worked quite well: the chapters in this book have a clarity and unity of purpose beyond what one usually finds in edited volumes. Moreover, the editors have avoided the intellectual trap that has snared many authors writing on critical reflectivity. In reflecting on the process of this collaborative project, Evans and Nation are doing critical reflection rather than just writing about it. Though not without its problems (see below), this approach has resulted in a book that is refreshing in its attempt to go beyond the usual simplistic theory-practice dichotomy to the realization that theory and practice are intimately and complexly interwoven.

Walker begins the book by placing open learning within present political and social contexts. The author points out that much of the present conceptualization of distance education is rooted in a Fordist or industrial conception of education. He notes, however, the concurrent emergence of a postmodern conception of planning that focuses on the limits of rational planning. Without succumbing to the temptation of simplifying these contrasting views, and by pointing out how these contrasting views can exist side-by-side in often contradictory ways, Walker concludes with eight statements and an emerging program of reform for distance education. Most interesting is his attempt to conceptualize traditional face-to-face instruction as problematic. As Walker states, "Classroom teaching, which is at the heart of 'proximal' education, is a highly problematic

enterprise created by historical circumstance. Distance education, in undercutting assumptions about teaching and learning in a classroom context, is a critical site for educational research" (pp. 33-34).

The succeeding chapters discuss how designing and teaching in distance education can be approached critically. True to the editors' intent, these chapters allow the authors to reflect on their own practice in light of larger frameworks while always remaining grounded in discussions of practice. Especially noteworthy is Burge and Haughey's chapter on "Transformative Learning in Reflective Practice," which attempts to incorporate some of the work of critical educators such as Paulo Freire, Roger Simon, and Henry Giroux into distance learning. While the theoretical discussion is necessarily superficial, the description of the process of integrating concepts of transformative learning provides a powerful analysis of the problems inherent in incorporating critical approaches into practice.

Critical educators have consistently highlighted the importance of race in any educational context. It is thus encouraging to see that Woodley, Taylor, and Butcher present a critique of the British Open University's policy and programs from the perspective of Black and ethnic minorities. The authors examine the O.U.'s liberal model of equal opportunity with its emphasis on access and discuss how the University has begun to adopt more radical models with a focus on redistributing educational opportunity. From a more theoretical perspective, Garry Gillard, in a fascinating analysis, deconstructs contiguity (his word for face-to-face instruction). By examining, for example, how the lecture became a privileged form of education, Gillard illuminates how distance education can become a liberatory process. While Gillard's analysis can be criticized for falling into the trap of setting up the binary opposites of face-to-face instruction and distance education, his chapter nevertheless provides a lively discussion that questions some of our basic assumptions. In their closing chapter, Evans and Nation discuss the future opportunities and pitfalls of distance education. They place educational technologies--by which they mean both machines and educational processes--at the center of their analysis and note that pedagogy and technology are, and always have been, inseparable in traditional educational settings as well as in the most technologically rich distance education environment. By taking the discussion of educational technology outside the paradigm of the educational technologists, thereby pointing out the social construction of technological processes, the authors have placed the debate on distance education within the broader debates surrounding education in a postmodernist age.

Reforming Open and Distance Education does have some limitations. Despite the collective nature of this endeavor, the quality of the chapters is uneven. The discussion of total quality management (TQM), for example, fails to connect this approach to the historical process which shaped Fordism, despite the fact that this connection is made numerous times in other chapters. Secondly, for a volume that is concerned with critical reflection, the near absence of feminist interpretations is surprising. Finally, although the editors claim that this volume provides an international perspective on distance education, the perspective is still quite limited: all of the contributors come from North America, the United Kingdom, or Australia. A wider and less Anglocentric group of contributors could have provided greater insight on practice in non-

Western settings. Despite these weaknesses, Reforming Open and Distance Education: Critical Reflections from Practice is a major contribution to the literature of the field.

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