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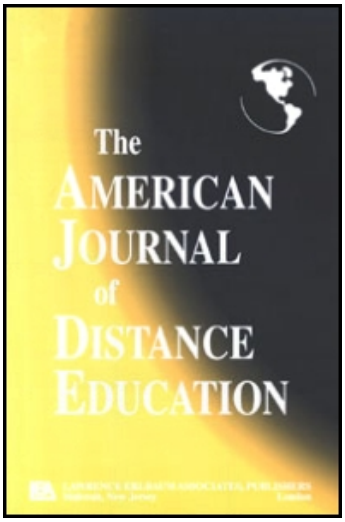

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The Perfect Online Course: Best Practices for Designing and Teaching Anymir Orellana, Terry L. Hudgins, and Michael Simonson, Eds.

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BOOK REVIEW

The Perfect Online Course: Best Practices for Designing and Teaching. Anymir Orellana, Terry L. Hudgins, and Michael Simonson, Eds. Charlotte, NC: Information Age, 2009, 558 pp., $82.50 (hardcover), $45.99 (softcover).

The title of the book, *The Perfect Online Course*, alone grabs the attention of a broad audience. In addition, most of its 558 pages and thirty chapters are sure to keep readers interested because of their rich content provided from diverse perspectives.

While reading the book, I found myself taking continuous notes on references to seek and read, methodologies to apply in studies or recommend that my students consider applying, and innovative practices to adopt or modify in my online courses. For me, as an online instructor and researcher in an educational technology program, the book sparked many ideas. Although there is, of course, no "perfect," single design for a course, most readers will appreciate the wisdom conveyed by the experienced distance educators who authored the chapters. Simonson wisely ends the book with the statement, "The key to an effective course is the direct, purposeful involvement of a knowledgeable teacher; one with content knowledge, teaching skills, and design experience" (550).

The Perfect Online Course will prove useful to educators in many arenas. Parts 1–3 will be particularly useful to instructors who plan to teach online courses yet have little or no knowledge of instructional design principles. Distance education researchers, instructional designers specializing in online instruction, and students in courses on distance education or educational technology will benefit from the entire book. K–12, college, and university administrators who are interested in establishing or improving online learning programs will also find the book to be applicable.

Reading the book in its entirety reveals the complexity of the issues related to designing effective online courses. Thankfully, no prescriptions are offered. Rather the various authors provide a wealth of theory, research findings, and perspectives regarding the relative importance of systematic design, interaction, social presence, and learning community upon which to generate one's own "perfect" course. *The Perfect Online Course* makes a unique contribution in that it provides a comprehensive exposition of the history, methods, models, and strategies considered by a wide range of expert online educators and scholars, many of the best in the field. Multiple perspectives are conveyed and

readers are left to negotiate meaning based upon their own experiences and contexts.

The book is divided into a preface, four parts, and a brief conclusion. The preface thoroughly summarizes the book's contents and I recommend that readers first approach the book by reading the preface to identify what chapters will be most useful to them. Part 1 convincingly argues that, when best practices are applied and online courses are well designed, they can be more effective for learning than face-to-face classes. Chapter 1 presents a condensed history of distance education and summary of best practices, whereas chapter 2 describes a media comparison study establishing no significant differences between outcomes of the same class delivered through three delivery methods: traditional classroom, instructional television, and the Internet. Such studies seem irrelevant to instructional designers in light of Clark's 1983 proclamation quoted on page 12 that "media do not influence learning under any conditions." However, perhaps public skepticism toward distance education described on page 40 in chapter 3 justifies pursuing such evidence. The authors of chapter 2 conclude that "instructional designers may need to work with instructors more closely to develop learner-centered and learner-driven activities" (p. 32). The remaining twenty-eight chapters describe ways to do just that.

Researchers and instructional designers alike seek to know effective design features and applications of technological capabilities. Several theoretical perspectives and research studies exploring these are presented in parts 2, 3, and 4. In the interest of brevity, I present highlights from the book here: chapters 11 and 26 combined provide a concise introduction to relevant foundational theory that will be of interest to most readers. Applications of constructivist learning theory are typically absent from most of the chapters in spite of their impact on the field. However, the focus on problem-based learning in chapter 26 adds a précis of one constructivist approach to course design.

An amalgamation of chapters 3, 6, 10, 13, and 19 provides an introduction and summary of instructional design principles that apply in online course design. Hirumi (chapter 3) provides five critical guidelines for creating effective courses and presents a table of events to include in courses for different types of learning outcomes. Similarly, Morrison and Anglin (chapter 19) provide minimum content requirements for different content types: presentation to the learner and generative strategies or practice that help the learner integrate the new information into their existing schema. In chapter 6, Zheng and Smaldino introduce and then discuss key instructional elements for designing instruction at a distance with an emphasis on interaction. In chapter 10, Hirumi presents a useful framework for designing, sequencing, and planning for online interactions. His excellent literature review, explanation of possible interactive structures in online environments, and suggestions for future research make much of what follows in the book regarding interaction repetitive. Kranch presents a realistic model for developing courses iteratively in

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chapter 13. Chapter 22 is of particular interest to me given my personal experience discovering the criticality of social presence for the effectiveness of my online courses. In it, Boyer asks, "What content framework is conducive for developing social, self-directed learning processes in an online course?" (p. 402). She finds that learning contracts, diagnostic instruments, and reflective components result in high expectations, high-quality work, and diverse products from students. Excellent chapters that may be of interest to a smaller audience are those addressing specifics such as optimal class size (chapter 7), team versus faculty developed courses (chapter 12), the use of project management tools when designing courses (chapter 21), and information architecture as it relates to interface design and navigation (chapter 18).

As a reader, I wanted further descriptions of principles of design related to effective presentation of learning objects and learner-centered, generative strategies. The focus of the references and discussions on interactivity refer in large part to human interactivity. But online instructors need guidelines for designing online courses that provide for learner interactivity with knowledge objects. Chapters 3 and 19 begin that discussion. Wheeler, Havard, Du, and Olinzock discuss how instructor-to-student interaction can facilitate problem-based learning and deep learning in chapters 26 and 27. However, for readers to deeply understand how to present effective learning objects in online courses, research on the attributes and designs of learning environments that engage learners with *content* using problem-based, project-based, or case-based learning strategies would be most helpful.

Overall, I find the book to be useful and foresee that a substantial readership will agree. I recommend at least parts of *The Perfect Online Course* to all the audiences described earlier.

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