

## REVIEW OF THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF ONLINE LEARNING

### The Theory and Practice of Online Learning

Terry Anderson (Ed.)

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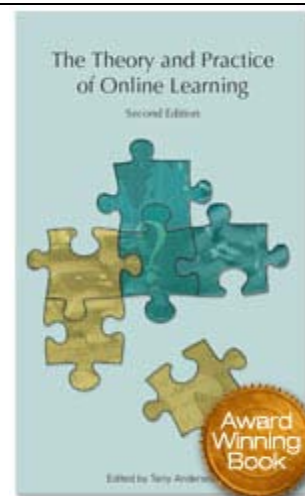
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### Review by Mandy Reinig, Pennsylvania State University, Altoona

Present-day distance education relies on a variety of technological tools, including e-mail, synchronous and asynchronous communication, specially designed websites and online modules. As a result, colleges and universities have to adapt their distance offerings in order to keep up with rapid technological changes. *The Theory and Practice of Online Learning (TTPOL)*, edited by Terry Anderson, examines whether colleges and universities are meeting the needs of online learners and whether they can improve the services they offer to these learners. The 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of the book explores additional technologies developed in the five years since the publication of the 1<sup>st</sup> edition such as increased use of social networking sites and audio and video support in the classroom, illustrated by experience gained in the distance education program at Athabasca University.

TTPOL addresses issues that need to be considered by administrators and educators when creating, implementing, and maintaining online courses or programs at academic institutions. The book will not only benefit administrators and educators, but will also be useful in graduate education courses by exposing future educators to the most important issues involved in distance education. *TTPOL* is divided into four main sections, each focusing on a particular issue. Each section contains four to five contributed chapters that describe the building blocks, tools, and information necessary for the creation and delivery of successful online courses.

The first section, *Role and Function of Theory in Online Education Development and Delivery*, contains four chapters that describe the educational theories and online learning philosophies that underlie many online courses. Chapter 1, by Mohamed Ally, discusses behaviorist, cognitivist, constructivist, and connectivist schools of learning, all of which have impacted the creation and delivery of online courses. Ally proposes a learning model based on these educational theories which details the components of a successful online course (Figure 1). Chapter 2, by Terry Anderson, explains the attributes of online learning, such as student centeredness, as well as the various forms of interaction which take place in online environments, such as student-teacher and teacher-content interactions. According to Anderson, all of these are enhanced by the semantic web to create an environment where advanced levels of learning can take place. Dianne Conrad, in Chapter 3, explores prior learning assessment and recognition within the online environment and the use of e-portfolios as an assessment tool. Finally, Chapter 4, by Heather Kanuka, discusses the philosophies of online instruction in terms of Dahlberg's (2004) three stances including uses, technology, and social determinism. In addition, she discusses various philosophies of teaching, such as liberal and radical, and the role played by technology according to these philosophies. It

is these theories that form the backbone of online education and not the technology itself (Bonk & Reynolds, 1997; Rovai 2002).

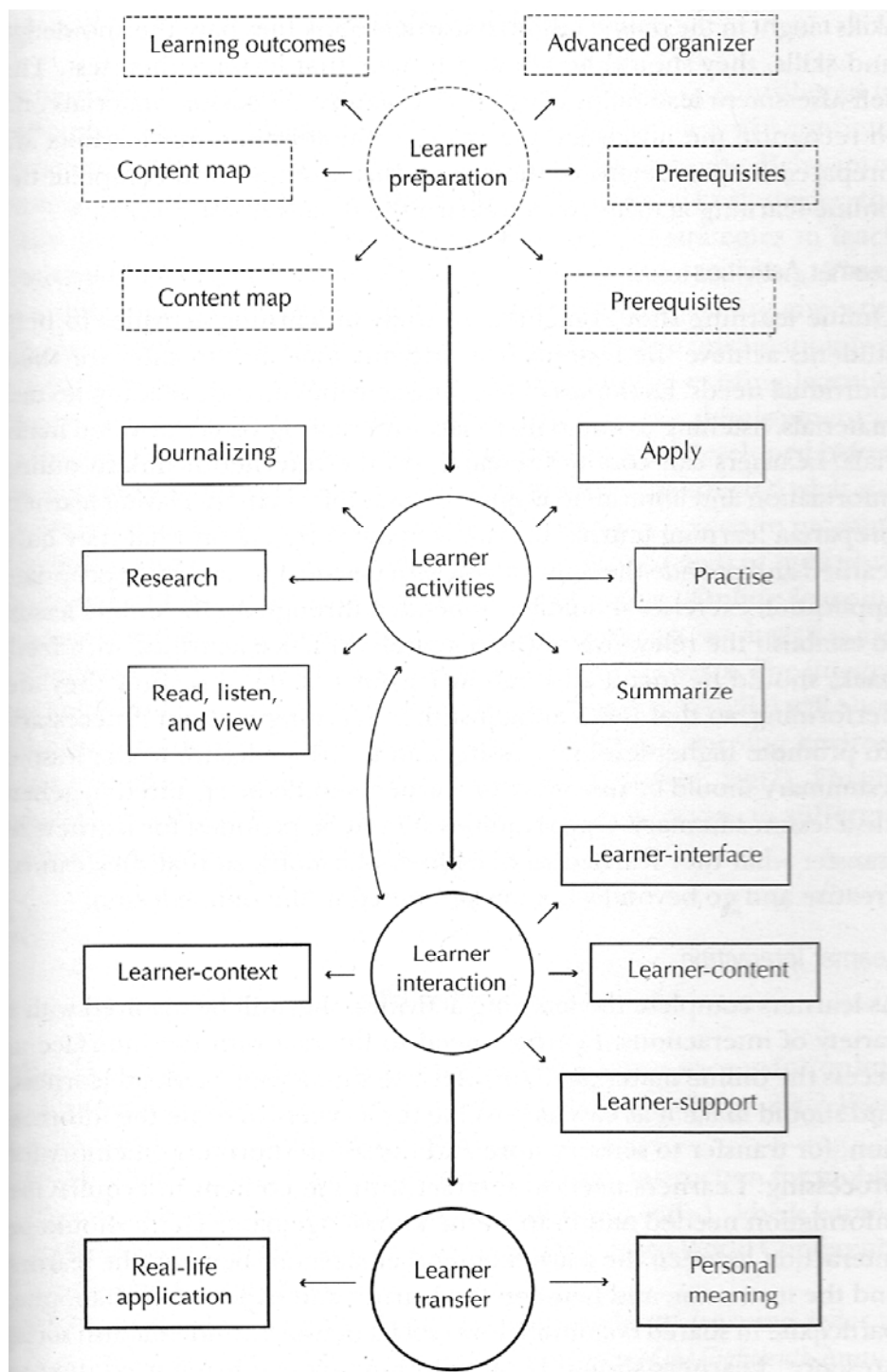


Figure 1. Components of effective online reading (p. 37).

The second set of chapters, Infrastructure and Support for Content Development, describes the necessary support and structures needed for effective course development. Chapter 5, by Alan Davis, Paul Little, and Brian Stewart, discusses the components of an online learning system and the issues related to

transitioning from traditional to online education. The authors discuss the need to understand students' needs and the desired outcomes before developing online courses. Rory McGreal and Michael Elliott, in Chapter 6, expand upon the previous chapter but exploring the technologies that are currently available for delivery of online courses, such as streaming video and wikis. They examine their educational uses and provide resources for readers to begin to explore these technological options. Chapter 7, by Patrick Fahy, continues this discussion by examining the strengths and weaknesses of both current and emerging forms of technology, as well as the issues that need to be considered when selecting a technological tool to use. The emergence and examples of programs using mobile technology are discussed in Chapter 8 by Maureen Hutchinson, Tony Tin, and Yang Cao, as a means of exploring the next wave of online learning. Finally, Terry Anderson, in Chapter 9, investigates the social challenges that instructors might face when teaching in an online environment. Anderson also provides examples of technology, such as blogs, [YouTube](#), and [Skype](#), which can assist in meeting with these social challenges.

The third section, *Design and Development of Online Courses*, explores in detail the components involved in the development of online courses. Dean Caplan and Rodger Graham, in Chapter 10, describe the necessary personnel, such as a web designer and faculty, required to conduct successful online courses as well as the components that need to be in place before online courses can be effectively and efficiently taught. Chapter 11, by Jan Thiessen and Vincent Ambrock, discusses the role and responsibilities of an online course editor and the value such a person adds to the course development process. Chapter 12, by David Annand, expands on the previous chapters by exploring the real costs of conducting online courses and discussing how to determine if an online course is likely to be cost effective. In the final chapter of this section, Nancy Parker focuses on quality management and what needs to be considered in order to provide quality online instruction. Parker also describes some of the legislation and policies that are in place, specifically in Canada, to maintain the quality of online instruction.

The final section of *TTPOL*, *Delivery, Quality Control, and Student Support of Online Courses*, contains five chapters that discuss that actual design of online courses and the implementation of some of the support services necessary for delivering successful online instruction. In Chapter 14, Terry Anderson explores issues related to "getting the mix right" (p. 348) in terms of creating a social, cognitive, and teaching presence in an online environment to be able enhance instructor effectiveness. The right mix is important in the development of trust among students, instructors, and the technology itself in creating an interactive environment (Doering & Beach 2002; Malhotra, Majchrzak, & Rosen, 2007). Chapter 15, by Alex Kondra et al. discusses the development of call centers for distance learners and provides an example of a successful call center at Athabasca University. In Chapter 16, Kay Johnson et al. examine the types of library support that online learners require as well as the creation of virtual library environments. Chapter 17, by Susan Moisey and Judith Hughes, explores the issues related to supporting online learners, including disability services, career advisement, and academic support to enable students to succeed in an online environment. In closing, in Chapter 18, Deborah Hurst and Janice Thomas examine the development of teamwork and group projects in an online course and provide two case studies of successful team building projects in an online graduate course.

Even though *TTPOL* provides a wealth of information, there are several areas where further information would have been helpful. For example this book focuses mostly on what is taking place in Canada, specifically at Athabasca University. It would have had a much wider appeal if it had also included chapters on online learning implemented at institutions in the U.S. and Europe, among other places.

In addition, the chapters focus a bit narrowly on whether or not online learning meets the needs of the students and on the importance of course design and content in conjunction with technological tools. However, the effectiveness of online courses and the actual compatibility of the students' and the university's needs are not addressed. Additional research, such as by Sampson (2003), which examined the satisfaction of students taking a distance education courses at a British university to determine if the online courses were meeting students' expectations, would be beneficial to understanding the

effectiveness of online education. Sampson's work demonstrates the importance of knowing if a program is meeting students' needs in terms of course content as well as student services.

By the same token, several chapters present detailed descriptions of how or why different forms of technology have been used, particularly at Athabasca University, but few chapters actually present statistical information on these programs. For example, it would have been valuable to know how many students are making use of the various call centers to determine how useful these centers are and what questions students typically ask. In addition, information on what types of online courses have been created, the number of students who typically take the courses, and information about the students' satisfaction with their online education would also aid in the understanding of the impact of and the need for online courses. Despite these shortcomings, *TTPOL* offers a good starting place for institutions interested in the development of online courses by providing useful information on the pedagogical applications of various types of technology and the need for support services tailored to online learners. With that in mind, the book contributes to the understanding of the development of online courses and of the need to adjust instruction and services to meet the needs of students in the age of technology.

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## ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Mandy Reinig is an Education Abroad Advisor and ESL instructor at Pennsylvania State University in Altoona. She recently completed her Master's Degree in TESL, and her thesis focused on the use of blogs in ESL writing. She is working on implementing other forms of technology into her teaching.

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