

Reviews

Bach, Shirley et al ed (2007) *Online learning and teaching* Open University (Maidenhead & New York) ISBN 0-335-21829-6 209 pp £24.99

www.openup.co.uk

In many ways, anyone contemplating a move into online learning can read *Online learning and teaching in higher education* as a cautionary tale. To quote from a case study close to the end, the book will ask you to “undertake specific analytical tasks”. Most useful for the teacher considering using online learning may be the ten initial steps, in the chapter on appraising the quality of online teaching and learning. Each step requires the thoughtful educator to address key issues before starting in online learning. On the other hand, for those of us who have been at this for a while it is a useful review.

The editors rightly point out that, when adopting any teaching / learning technology, there are desirable outcomes—and there may be some unintended outcomes that are less than desirable. Along the way, these present useful insights into the value of online learning. They have also included a number of URLs that provide supporting materials for their argument. The book takes a pragmatic approach to instruction: while it leans heavily toward constructivism, it has bits and pieces of behaviourism sprinkled here and there.

There is considerable discussion on effective online instructional techniques, with particular emphasis on online discussions and the roles teachers and learners might play in the environment. I was happy to see that the sometimes over-emphasis on student abuse of the online learning environment receives short shift here, with the authors finding “no real evidence of this” as compared to face-to-face instruction.

The short section on transformative learning particularly intrigued me. Also useful is the

case study on clinical decision-making and problem solving; this gives examples of activities and how they work within course management software. All in all, *Online learning and teaching in higher education* is a helpful overview of issues that we should address when planning to use online learning, and is particularly worthwhile for the newcomer.

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Blaxter, Loraine et al (2006) *How to research* Open University (Maidenhead & New York) ISBN 0-335-21746-X 287 pp £18.99
www.openup.co.uk

People undertake research at various levels of higher education in social sciences (the field of this book), and for different purposes. *How to research* offers practical advice at those levels for both “first time researchers” and the experienced. With anecdotes, case studies, examples, illustrations, and a dialog presentation, the authors help you understand the process of systematic research.

You can use the book in many different directions depending on your learning styles and needs. However, essentially, it presents a linear model of the research process. Each chapter has an annotated bibliography which should be very useful for inquisitive and knowledge hungry researchers.

First, and foremost, the authors guide you on how to get started with a topic. If you can't think of a topic, ask your supervisor, peers and friends; look at previous research, and so on—the authors say in a practical down to earth manner. The coverage of everyday research skills in chapter 3 (with links in other chapters) is very useful and interesting. Every

one of us faces the problem of lack of time for research, and Chapter 5 provides enough material on how to “manage your project”. Chapters 6 and 7 are about data collection and data analysis respectively. You can get something about everything related to these topics here, but for detailed statistical analysis you need other sources (listed in the book). Chapter 8 gives advice on writing the research report, how to develop an argument and the essence of academic criticising. The last chapter is all about how to give a finishing touch to the research work/ report; it includes psychological guidance on coping with criticism, referral or rejection of your work.

Running into its third edition, this hugely successful book is good reading for graduate students in social sciences, education, business and health care.

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Conole, Gráinne & Oliver, Martin (2007)
Contemporary perspectives in e-learning research
Routledge (Abingdon UK & New York) ISBN
0-415-39394-2 263 pp £24.99
www.routledge.com

Contemporary perspectives in e-learning research offers thirteen chapters, topped and tailed by an introduction and conclusions written by the editors. The contributions range widely across the themes and provide much food for thought.

The title however, is potentially misleading: the potential reader needs to be clear that the focus is almost exclusively on e-learning in higher education; the book ignores activities in schools and in commercial and industrial training. That is not to say that the book has no value for those working in schools and training as it is possible to see the parallels—they just require more work and imagination.

As someone who has one foot in academia and the other in training, I found much that was

interesting and helpful. I suppose it could be argued that, by making trainers think hard about the links with learning, they are more likely to value that learning. Perhaps ...

Throughout the book, there are boxes in which other researchers give their comments on the ideas presented. It is tempting to skip over these and concentrate on the main flow, but they offer interesting insights and oblique perspectives on the arguments and add significant value to the text.

All the references from the different chapters appear together in one large and comprehensive list. As we might expect, there are few references to research papers prior to 1997—only then did the term “e-learning” start to come into use. Yet, as those of us with greyer hair know, there was a great deal of research relevant to this area in the two decades from 1980 to 2000; this is largely unknown to contemporary researchers but forms (or, rather, should form) part of the foundation of our current views. This research will be the topic for a special issue of this Journal in 2008.

So, to buy or not to buy? *Contemporary perspectives in e-learning research* is a useful book for those actively pursuing research in this area. Practitioners might be better advised to persuade their libraries to buy copies.

Nick Rushby (received June 2007)
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English, Richard (2006) *Maths and ICT in the primary school* David Fulton (London) ISBN
1-84312-377-0 130 pp £16
www.fultonpublishers.co.uk

The past quarter century has witnessed a dramatic improvement in the educational possibilities offered by computers and communications (IT), in its availability in schools and in teachers’ technical power to use it. But to make a difference in education by exploiting the potential of IT also requires teachers to have a suitable pedagogical competence and a repertoire of ideas on how to use these tools in creative ways. Giving a contribution in this direction is the purpose of this book; it aims to

help teachers become aware of possible ways to use IT to improve maths teaching and learning in primary classes.

English's book starts by examining a number of reasons to use IT in school—from preparing pupils to be citizens in a technology-rich world to accessing and creating stimulating resources that allow you to achieve learning objectives more easily and quickly than with traditional means. Next, the author examines a number of teaching situations—namely

- using an interactive whiteboard (iwb);
- using a single computer to carry out activities with a whole class or with single pupils;
- teaching in the computer room;
- working with calculators, assigning out-of-school IT-based tasks; and
- introducing IT to the youngest pupils.

Each chapter includes a summary and a number of examples, and ends with references, suggested reading, and useful web resources. Throughout the book there are good teaching tips—such as how to achieve a balance between different ways of working or to select the most effective approach for a given learning objective. The book is deeply rooted in the UK school context, making reference to official documents and classroom arrangements that are clearly common in that country but not always in others (for instance, an iwb in most classrooms and a carpeted corner where learners can work sitting on the floor).

Despite the richness of its content, reading this book slightly disappointed me. This was mainly because I did not find the activities described very creative or innovative, though they are certainly interesting. I also found the tips very much in line with common sense and with the current good practice of maths education, which means, certainly valuable but not new. Perhaps I have already read too many books on IT in maths education? Anyway, I certainly don't want to discourage prospective readers: in particular, primary maths teachers not at home with IT who wish to make a start will certainly find this book a great help.

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Garnett, Steve (2005) *Using brainpower in the classroom* Routledge (Abingdon UK & New York) ISBN 0-415-34383-6 64 pp £18.99
 www.routledge.com

This single-author book aims to offer teachers a method to create stimulating learning activities—and by this means to accelerate and improve learning. Its starting point is an analysis of how the human brain works and how it can be stimulated. To this end, the book summarises the main results on brain functioning of the last couple of decades, pointing out that intelligence is not fixed from birth but develops through experience and learning. Different brain areas process different cognitive functions and all of them need use in order to make learners fully develop and use their brains. Hence, we need a variety of learning activities (concerning language, logic, numbers, images, colours, music and movement), including stimuli of different kinds (such as texts, audio, pictures and actions).

Next, the book presents five steps a teacher should go through in order to realise an informed diversity of activities apt to meet the different needs of all learners in a class. These concern:

- 1 the difference among individual learning profiles and learning styles;
- 2 the different kinds of intelligence reported in the literature;
- 3 gender-related cognitive differences;
- 4 the global organisation of classroom lessons; and
- 5 the setting of a physical environment.

All the chapters start with an analysis of the theoretical background, suggest some ways to apply it in a classroom, discuss a few case studies, and conclude with indications of web sites and readings for those who wish to go deeper into the chapter's topic.

This book has the merit of giving a concise overview of various theories related to learning and intelligence, and provides a good number of hints to make use of these in practice. Hence, it can have outcomes that are interesting and useful to teachers and parents who wish to support youngsters' mental development. It gives ideas but leaves to the educators the detail and development. For this

reason, I see it suitable in particular for people who have already some pedagogical experience that can help them to find their way among the many theories covered and to translate the suggestions into concrete activities. Novice educators, in my opinion, risk confusion by the variety of elements to take into consideration and of possible approaches to the study of cognition. They may wish to use this book not much as a practical guide but as a starting point to deepen their competence.

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Jacques, David & Salmon, Gilly ed (2007)
Learning in groups Routledge (Abingdon UK &
New York) ISBN 0-415-36526-0 346 pp £25
www.routledge.com

"We have tried to write a book that is both readable and practical: one that permits flexibility, yet covers most of the ingredients of this wondrous mix of human behaviours." (p 3)

And the authors have succeeded! The book progresses well from the theoretical underpinning of group behaviour to assessment within groups and practical check lists for leaders. The online learning points are well integrated and not viewed as add-ons. In its general framework, the book is extremely coherent with excellent use of bullet points, diagrams, tables and shading to encourage clarity of thought. Discussion points conclude each chapter.

The sixth chapter on group activities is particularly fine, with attention paid to group structures and activities, with symbols denoting suitability for equal opportunity observations and larger, online or international groupings. The authors outline the advantages and disadvantages of various systems throughout, often pointing out ways of avoiding disenchantment. For example, they discourage humour and irony in the online environment where visual cues are not available. They do not gloss over the difficulties of assessment of group work but suggest blended methods together with the use of peer reviews and checklists.

The book concludes with case studies and then resources for developing group learning. Here Jacques and Salmon cover leadership intervention techniques, such as effective questioning techniques and non-verbal cues for curbing an over-zealous participant. The book keeps its feet on practical ground, rooted in research yet encouraging branching out into the unknown through the use of group learning. So, whilst there may not be any startling new ideas here, the mix is satisfying and digestible. The authors do not regard learning in groups as a panacea but as a vector for this century.

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Kaptelinin, Victor & Nardi, Bonnie (2006)
Acting with technology MIT Press (Cambridge
MA & London) ISBN 0-262-11298-1 333 pp
£22.95
www.mitpress.mit.edu

What does activity theory (AT) mean to you? Triangles? Finnish surnames? Members of the e-learning conference circuit could be forgiven for thinking such things. The relevance of this book for educational technology stems from activity theory's flexibility as a conceptual framework and the insights it can offer as an analytical tool—it can broaden developers' horizons far beyond the four corners of their, or their users', screens. For example, the Activity checklist (Appendix A in this book) can help instructional designers and project managers consider the many aspects of context when designing learning materials.

Activity theory has risen to prominence amongst English-speaking academics over the last couple of decades as a promising if obscure (even obtuse) multidisciplinary theoretical framework: prominence due to the likes of Michael Cole, James Wertsch and Yrjö Engeström; obscure because most of AT's roots are Russian (and German before that); multidisciplinary since, as the career of A N Luria illustrates, the breadth of research domains which AT can successfully underpin is remarkable (Cole, Levitin & Luria 2005).

Prior to this book, budding English-speaking activity theorists had to resort to potted histories of AT at the start of articles, such as Engeström's of 2001. As I have sought to evaluate AT's potential for my own work I have often wondered whether learning Russian was a pre-requisite to a proper understanding of it! Thankfully, some of the key linguistic subtleties are being unwrapped in the literature: here *Objekt* and *predmet* are even explained (in Section III: Advanced Issues in Activity Theory). With its 43 pages, the third chapter, "Activity theory in a nutshell", may be considered a rather hopeful attempt without the additional supporting material of later chapters, but it is a worthy and credible account.

Other work, claiming to be underpinned by AT, leaves me with a sense that AT is merely used as a "flag of convenience". I want to ask the author, "Are you driving the theory or is the theory driving you?" There is considerable "social capital" to be had from wearing the latest theoretical fashion. It may make your being accepted for conference presentations easier, and it can be relatively painless compared to the earnest slog entailed in learning and building theory. For example, a prominent concept in activity theory is the mediating role of tools, which makes learning technology a likely domain for AT. But is picking up this one aspect sufficient to claim the AT tag? The question is made more difficult by the evolving nature of AT itself, but decades of research by brilliant and dedicated Russians must be worthy of more than a borrowed diagram (however powerful that might be). This potential threat to a research tradition is well put by Holmstrom (2005) (cited in the notes for Chapter 11, page 290):

"If a researcher does not understand enough of the theoretical tradition from its original setting, s/he is likely to open the work up to any of the same criticisms of that theory that have already been voiced in the original discipline." With AT it has been difficult to appreciate how much "understanding" is "enough". This book is a real step forward in clarifying that, as Tom Wilson affirmed in his warm recommendation of it. Although he found the book slightly disjointed, being made up, in part, of modified versions of the authors' prior work, I did not find this a problem.

The book has a good mix of theoretical discussion and examples of AT-based research. I especially enjoyed Nardi's ethnography about the role of "passion" in determining the shared object of a biotech company. But there are stimulating insights throughout the succinct elaboration of the history and current status of activity theory. If you are seeking a deeper understanding of AT and wondering where to start, this would be an excellent choice. It will also help bring you up to date with the debate amongst post-cognitivist theories, albeit with an AT bias.

Cole, M et al (2005) *Autobiography of Alexander Luria: A dialogue with the making of mind* Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ

Engeström, Y (2001) "Expansive learning at work: towards an activity theoretical reconceptualization" *Journal of Education and Work* **14**(1), 134–155

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Khosrow-Pour, Mehdi (2007) *Dictionary of information science and technology* IDEA Group Hershey PA & London) ISBN 1-5990-4385-8 880 pp \$495
www.igi-pub.com

It is exceedingly hard to know where to begin when dealing with such an unusual publication as this! So, starting with first impressions and moving deeper and deeper:

- This is a massive project, literally—at 3.5 kg, it weighs half as much as the reading lens edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED); the target market is clearly libraries, however, so maybe this is to reduce theft?
- Those 880 pages are large print and on quite thick paper, however—and over a quarter are references: every entry in this dictionary closes with a reference (some being well over fifteen years old). Even so, at 7 cm thick, the book could cope with being a single volume—but it is two volumes. The OED has way over 4000 actual pages of tiny print (23

being of references) to present its 17000 pages of text (so comes with that reading lens); it is 14 cm thick, so must sit on the shelf in two volumes. *OED* is for individuals, so can survive the microscopic approach, of course.

- Khosrow-Pour's book (he is the publisher's reference editor-in-chief, by the way) has a very high price indeed, well above that for that *OED*. But, as noted, his dictionary—let's call it *DIST* for the moment—is for libraries, many of which could afford it. Moreover, if you buy *DIST* you can spend another \$495 for unlimited online access for the book's lifetime (or half that sum for the same access for a year).
- Quite a lot of work has gone into *DIST* (though far, far less than into *OED*, which was first planned 150 years ago). But *DIST* has fewer than 10 000 entries, a small fraction of *OED*'s list, and *DIST*'s entries are brief—rarely more than, say, ten lines.
- *DIST* shows some problems with English too—often non-agreement between parts of speech. It is also not good to use upper case initials for dictionary headwords
- *DIST*'s entries are often less than authoritative—each comes with just one reference, and those 200 pages of references are to *IDEA* Group publications only. There are plenty of omissions, therefore—choosing a random page of a competitor shows these terms missing from *DIST*: hafnium, half duplex, hamming, Hamming code, handshake, hanging indent, hard copy, hard disc. Also, the S in *DIST* is far, far less well served than is the T—but information science (itself not defined here, but in essence the same as knowledge management) dates back centuries. There are errors too: AOL has far more than three million subscribers; initiating a funds transfer by phone is not necessarily eft; entities other than individuals can have know-how; a programmed instruction unit can be branching as well as linear; "synchronous" is not a form of on-line discussion ... There are no cross references other than from abbreviations, and even definitions of a keyword from two or more reference sources are treated as different though they say the same thing in different ways; also the editor does not consciously define technical terms used in an entry. Of the twelve definitions given for

"videoconferencing", for instance, five say the same in different ways, two describe "videoconference" similarly, and four are wrong; three of the technical terms in the first few lines are not defined, while two others have errors in their definitions.

Clearly, this book is not designed or appropriate for individual purchase. Is it worth its high cost to your library, however? That depends on whether or not the difficulties of that last bullet mean that most of your likely users will be less puzzled after using the book than before.

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Leberman, Sarah et al (2006) *The transfer of learning* Gower (Aldershot UK & Burlington VT) ISBN 0-566-08734-0 131 pp £45
www.gowerpub.com

Here we take transfer of learning to mean the extent to which an individual's learning impacts on activity that takes place later and in a different context. The concept is one that is of interest to managers, trainers and educationists.

The authors' definition of transfer is broad (and they include training as a subset of education). The breadth of canvas is both a strength and a weakness.

The first three chapters provide a review of the relevant literature which is impressive in its scope and captures a wide range of theoretical and practical perspectives, from management through professional practice to theories of learning. This section would form a useful starting point for anyone interested in this area. However, the sheer range of perspectives and the conflicting views on transfer of learning (and, indeed, whether transfer of learning is possible) made me feel that a narrower critical focus may have been better.

The authors point out that, despite the extent of the literature, there has been very little research from the perspective of the learner.

The rest of the book seeks to remedy this. Each author contributes a phenomenological case study drawing on three distinct areas of transfer in professional practice. The analysis of each study produces convincing evidence of transfer of learning. Only one of the studies involves students learning in a blended environment with significant use of email, conferencing and other on-line resources. In light of the way in which the authors demonstrate the importance of social context, motivation and other complex factors, it's a pity that there is no comment on whether these are influenced by an on-line environment.

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McKay, Elspeth ed (2007) *Enhancing learning through human computer interaction* Idea Group (Hershey PA & London) ISBN 1-599-04328-9 266 pp \$165
www.igi-pub.com

Enhancing learning through human computer interaction is a wonderful reference resource for anyone looking to the potential for improving education through the use of computer technologies. The authors address a broad range of applications for HCI within education, ranging from web-based and mobile learning, to computer mediated communication and collaboration, to the use of HCI in lectures to engage students, to the innovative use of software in classroom-based exercises.

The book, which is written in an academic style, comprises a number of chapters from various authors around the world, providing theory, insight and ideas for applying all forms of HCI to education. Most chapters are based around case studies, providing very practical examples of how HCI has been used to great effect in various academic establishments throughout the world. While the intended focus of the book is Higher Education, only the content relating to change management seems to be HE-specific, addressing HE politics, funding and infrastructure amongst other topics. Most of the examples, however, could be applied or adapted to other levels of education.

It is worth noting that the purpose of this book is not to serve as an eLearning "How to", and so the implementation of HCI in all its guises is either ignored completely or given only cursory attention. Instead, the case studies presented throughout the book demonstrate the huge potential for HCI in education and the significant range of possibilities it has to offer. As such the book represents an excellent reference for anyone looking to use HCI in their teaching, providing a wonderful source of inspiration and ideas. Furthermore, the extensive list of references provided on a chapter-by-chapter basis will provide an excellent starting point for anyone looking to develop ideas into practical, well-designed solutions.

Refreshingly, the book emphasises over and over the effort that can be involved in using HCI, focusing instead on the pedagogical value that HCI can bring to teaching as justification for its use. In this way the book may help to dismiss the oft held view in management that HCI and eLearning are time and resource saving tools.

In summary, this book is an excellent source of inspiration on how all forms of HCI can be used to transform education and would be recommended reading for anyone involved with the implementation of HCI in education, from technologists to teachers.

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O'Donnell, Angela M et al ed (2006) *Collaborative learning, reasoning, and technology* Erlbaum (Mahwah NJ) ISBN 0-8058-4788-2 395 pp \$45
www.erlbaum.com

This well presented book of fourteen chapters consists of papers presented at a Rutgers University invitational symposium on education, due to meet in October 2001 but delayed until May 2002 by the events of 11 September 2001. We do not know why it has taken so long to publish the outcomes.

Time is cruel to technologies as well as to the people who make and research them. All the papers concern data and technologies current in the late 1990s—so they feel at least slightly out of date, even if the reasoning processes they support or analyse have not aged. Yet, in fairness, this weakness is also a strength. That is because technology takes quite a low profile here—the book's focus is very much on how we can deepen and develop *thinking*.

Information technologies in this book support decision making or framing discourse in school and university contexts. While we would expect a lack of coverage of the trendy new social networking tools of the late 2000s, I was surprised that—in a volume about scaffolding and reasoning—there is not much about concept mapping. In any case, while knowledge is predominantly text-based, text-based online forums may survive long enough for researchers and practitioners—such as Angela O'Donnell and her erudite troop—to work out how best to design and deploy learning opportunities using them. Not that the writers limit themselves to online forums: they also consider *WebKF*, *TC3*, *eSTEPweb*, and so on.

However, their aim is the “nuts and bolts” of facilitating learning to reason and argue. If this is your goal too, Chinn's Chapter 14, “Learning to argue”, is especially worth careful reading. No-one could accuse these authors of mere techno-enthusiasm. Indeed, if you know someone who suffers with that, recommend Chapter 9. That is Jerry Andriessen's “Collaboration in computer conferencing” (now there's a mouth-watering prospect!); in common with other chapter authors, he does not smooth over the subtle complexities which can make or break productive collaboration.

This is a meaty and stimulating collection that grapples with the heart of what many of us aspire to witness in learners when we try to get them working together through or at computers. It's a pity about the age, but that is not a critical drawback.

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Pivec, Maja ed (2006) *Affective and emotional aspects of human-computer interaction* IOS Press (Amsterdam) ISBN 1-58603-572-X 317 pp €95

www.iospress.nl

The eighteen papers in this edited collection originate as contributions to an interdisciplinary European Social Funding workshop held in 2004. The papers appear under three headings: Game-based learning, Motivation and learning, and Emotions and emotional agents. The aim of the workshop and the underlying rationale for the choice of papers was to bring different disciplinary perspectives to bear in order to “open the gates for evolutionary change and new research directions in technology-supported learning”.

I came to the book with a strong interest in learning theory and the role of emotion in learning—but limited knowledge of the literature concerned with game-based learning and human-computer interaction. The specialist in these fields will find this collection useful, but from a more generalist perspective I was struck by how little connection the authors make with the literature outside their specialist fields.

The initial section on games and simulations is disappointing. The papers consider both the potential of commercial gaming techniques for the creation of rich learning environments and the potential of commercial games for education. The evidence of success at present on this basis seems to be limited. In a chapter in the section on motivation and learning Heller *et al* provide evidence of the need to integrate cognitive and emotional/motivational aspects of learning in models for adaptive online tutorial systems.

The final section of the book deals with the extent to which one can design learning environments to enhance self-esteem. The role of empathy in online characters is discussed as is the effectiveness of intelligent tutoring systems which can take the emotional state of the user into account.

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Reynolds, Rodney A et al ed (2007) *Handbook of research on electronic surveys and measurements* IDEA Group (Hershey PA & London) ISBN 1-591-40792-3 392 pp \$175
www.igi-pub.com

This “handbook” comes in three parts. Part 1 (22 chapters) covers the design and use of online surveys and measurements; Part 2 (eight chapters) describes appropriate software for disseminating and handling the responses to them; and Part 3 (26 chapters) discusses a set of actual surveys which you can use.

I studied this book with great interest because I now use electronic surveys in my research. Part 1, therefore, was of most interest to me; Part 2 covers material that is too technical for me (my department provides me with the technical support); and Part 3 was of general interest, but only in so far as one or two chapters discuss questionnaires that I might find useful in my work. Others will no doubt find other chapters in this section of relevance to them.

The chapters in Part 1 provide clear guidelines on how to design and administer electronic surveys, and discuss their advantages and disadvantages. Most of this material will be familiar to those who already use such instruments. Much of it is at a rather general level, but useful for beginners. I personally would have preferred more detail (for example, on the relative merits of wording Likert-type questionnaires from positive to negative (strongly agree to strongly disagree) or vice versa, on the number of choices to use in such scales, and on using scales from 1-7, say, when 1 means first, or best, rather than lowest or worst).

The advantages of using electronic questionnaires explain why I am using them now. They are easy to disseminate, and cost little to do so, and so on—though they are perhaps more tedious to assemble. In my own case, one particular advantage is that I can sample people from a wide range of interests and nationalities that I would find difficult to do using paper-based methods. A further advantage—one I have not yet explored—is the automatic scoring and analysis of the data provided from the returns.

The disadvantages, too, reflect my own findings. Response rates are generally low, the

samples taking part are ill defined, and they are self-selected. In one chapter, for example, only 84 members of a group of 500 had e-mail addresses. These 84 were approached, and only 23 replied (some after prompting). Nonetheless, like many writers in this field, the author discusses the results from these 23 respondents as though they were representative of the full 500.

One particular thing that I did learn from this book was to pay more attention to the ethics of using electronic questionnaires. Two chapters advocate clear rules in this respect.

Regrettably, of the 26 chapters in Part 3 listing work with different scales, only two include the actual scale being described, and only ten more provide a website or e-mail address to obtain it. Most, but not all, of the other chapters in this section say that a copy of the scale is available from the authors, but there are no e-mail or postal addresses provided for any of the authors throughout the whole of the text. Two further criticisms are (i) that chapter numbers are given in Roman numerals—which makes it difficult to find your way around—and (ii) the index is feeble—there are only two entries under the letter J and three under H.

One major virtue, however, is that the publishers allow free on-line access to the text by libraries that purchase a printed copy. (That may go towards explaining the very high price, though that must put off individual purchasers entirely.)

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Weller, Martin (2007) *Virtual learning environments: Using, choosing and developing your VLE* Routledge (Abingdon & New York) ISBN 0-415-41431-8 167 pp £24.99
www.routledge.com

In this helpful volume, Martin Weller takes us through the rationale behind the introduction of VLEs (saying interesting things about the shifting aims of universities along the way), through the process of selecting a VLE, to its implementation and future-proofing. I

particularly liked the useful chapters on standards and specifications and on open source options—although I was less convinced by the chapter on affordances and patterns.

Weller's explanation of learning design is the best tutorial I have yet encountered on the subject. I would have welcomed some more case studies and perhaps more depth within the four case studies that *are* included.

The book is very readable: Weller has an easy style and it flows well from one topic to the next. My overall impression is that this is a book written by someone who knows what he's talking about and moreover is well practised at explaining the subject to others.

The book is particularly relevant to me at present because we have just procured and implemented a VLE for the UK rail industry (except in training we tend to use the term 'Learning Management System'). We used our experience of developing and using VLEs over the past 32 years but it would have been helpful to have access to this book a year ago!

The focus is primarily on VLEs for higher education but the author indicates that he does know that such systems are in use elsewhere and the links to training are relatively easily drawn.

So, should you buy a copy? I suggest that *Virtual learning environments* is a "must have" for all those developing, procuring or implementing a VLE in their organisation—whether they are in higher education, in training, or elsewhere.

Nick Rushby (received June 2007)
Editor, *British Journal of Educational Technology*

Wellington, Jerry (2006) *Secondary education: The key concepts* Routledge (Abingdon UK & New York) ISBN 0-415-34404-2 193 pp £14.99
www.routledge.com

In a book that aims to list and explain a selection of key concepts for secondary education students, there will always be complaints about what is omitted or included. If you don't find your particular hobby horse you'll be

annoyed, and if you find something you see as a transitory educational fad you'll think it a waste of space. Jerry Wellington recognises this early in the piece: "I will certainly be criticised for including certain terms and omitting others but I had to stop somewhere" (p viii). The rationale for his choices was to include the concepts he finds "interesting and important and [that] may be of lasting significance".

How well does he achieve his goal? Many of the concepts that educators, and those with a general interest in education, would expect to find in the *List of Concepts* are there: "assessment", "case study", "core skills", "curriculum", "critical pedagogy", "gifted and talented", and (bravely) "post-modernism", for example. But if you look for "literacies", "online learning" ("e-learning" and "ICT" are included), "outcomes", "standards" or "vocational education", as I did, you will not find them. Also, this is a very UK-centric list—and educational concepts that are dominant in other English-speaking countries don't always get a mention.

Wellington's treatment of the concepts that he *does* include is lucid, accessible and, on the whole, helpful. He is not afraid to include his own views where he considers this pertinent, and in the main offers a reasoned, sensible account of a range of concepts and their histories. His decision to add references and possible websites to each entry for further exploration adds a useful dimension to this volume.

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Also received

Please note that mention here does not preclude later fuller review.

Astleitner, Hermann & Herber, Hans-Jörg ed (2007) *Task- and standard-based learning* Peter Lang (Frankfurt & New York) ISBN 3-631-55135-5 113 pp £16
www.peterlang.net

Sub-titled "An instructional psychology perspective", this useful little book glances at how

instructional psychology (educational psychology this side of the Atlantic) relates to research into the effectiveness of task-based learning and to how we can relate that to absolute standards. “This side of the Atlantic”, yes, but all the writers here *are* on this side, all but one being from Austria.

The book is truly a small one, and offers only small glimpses into what is in fact a complex field of study. It comes to no conclusions, though its thesis is clear—that we can base individualised learning resources and activities on research into task-based learning—and, to a good extent, it stays on that theme. While the book lists its target audience as researchers, learning resource designers, and teachers, in practice it will be of interest only to the first of those. This is because it doesn’t draw conclusions, practical or otherwise, and there are few clues to guide one through it. For instance, there is no index and the contents list is not very helpful to the browser.

Butcher, Christopher et al (2006) *Designing learning* Routledge (London & New York) ISBN 978-0-415-38030-0 218 pp \$31.95 (boards \$145)
www.routledge.com

Sub-titled “From module outline to effective teaching”, this is a very straight forward guide to curriculum and resource development; its concern is higher education, but it applies to work at all levels, for face-to-face and odl. It is very concise and compact (but, even so, the hardback version is somewhat over-priced), so it covers a lot of ground—including alternative views and approaches—in a small space.

This is the sixth book in the publisher’s series of “Key guides for effective teaching and learning”. Maybe it should be the first one, for course design comes before the other topics (assessment (2), quality teaching, good lecturing, working with small groups, and using IT in support of teaching)? Or maybe not—having the core text appear after the satellites provides a great opportunity to include in the former full reference to the topics and points in the latter. Not here, though: this book appears in satellite-less vacuum. Indeed, there is so

little mention of the subjects of some of the other books that a stranger might wonder why those other books appear at all if they are so unimportant. (Examples are group working, the lecture, and the role of IT.)

If that makes you think there is nothing of value in the book other than quality of teaching and assessment, I am sorry. In fact, Butcher and his colleagues provide a very useful—and directly practical—coverage of the essential steps of course design that I shall use as the basis of such activity in future, turning to other support resources only (I suspect) rarely. Time will tell: but at the moment, *Designing learning* scores very highly in my mind.

Elston, Carol (2007) *Using ICT in the primary school* Paul Chapman (London, & Sage Thousand Oaks CA) ISBN 1-4129-3001-7 142 pp £17.99
www.paulchapmanpublishing.co.uk

Somewhat hastily written, but (even so) attractive and readable, this book tries to summarise quickly and non-threateningly the ways in which computers and communications can improve the quality of teaching and learning in the primary sector (Years 0—6 inclusive in UK). The target audience is teachers and trainees in this sector, of course, but also IT coordinators and, especially, classroom assistants (for these people are nowadays a powerful albeit frustrated resource).

Elston effectively and firmly covers the needs of the National Curriculum for the whole of the sector from reception classes onwards, giving plenty of examples of how one can best use still scarce resources to focus and accelerate learning, directly or indirectly. There is little theory (though, unusually, there is a history of educational IT in the sector)—the author concentrates on making what works come clear and attractive. Possibly the treatment is too concise?—there are some (good) examples given that may not mean much to the inexperienced.

Otherwise, this is a helpful book with useful annexes and a great index.

Petrina, Stephen (2007) *Advanced teaching methods for the technology classroom* Information science (Hershey PA & London) ISBN 1-5990-4338-6 393 pp \$74.95
www.igi-pub.com

Any book with a chapter sub-heading (Page 135) “The ecology of design and problem-solving” deserves a special look. This book *does* deserve a special look, but to this reviewer the whole chapter with that sub-heading embedded in it was a particular eye-opener. That is Chapter 5, “Creativity and ingenuity, design, and problem-solving”, a third of the way through the book; here Petrina thoroughly compares the approaches embodied in the design and problem-solving cycles—among “the most used and abused approaches to technology studies in ... schools”. Mind you, in Britain at least, neither cycle is commonly found with meaning at the core of the practical curriculum or of lesson plans; indeed, that either approach is, should and must be cyclic seems to pass most teachers by.

Petrina is unusual throughout this impressive work in taking a technology-wide view, so all that he explores applies as much to the subjects called technology and information technology in primary schools as to the same at post-graduate level (where we may now call them engineering and software engineering, for instance). Specifically to *BJET*, it applies as much to educational (or instructional) technology as put across—explicitly or implicitly—in teacher education and training programmes. Indeed, it is entirely possible—and offers much of value—to treat any subject of study at school or university by working with the design or problem-solving cycle.

This is not an easy book to read, and it is not always clear where the author is going. But it is worth scanning, then reading, then studying,

then returning to again and again. Eye-opening it is, yes, but it can also open minds and education systems...

Woollard, John (2007) *Learning and teaching using ICT in secondary schools* Learning Matters (Exeter) ISBN 978-1-84445-078-7 186 pp £17.50
www.learningmatters.co.uk

This is the latest of a number of books for teacher training courses in England and Wales, covering what future teachers need to know about the National Curriculum and also providing very good preparation for their own “National Curriculum”—the professional standards framework (latest, 2007, version too). The book’s title shows that John Woollard (rightly) goes further than he need—he encapsulates the requirements within a well-crafted coat of QoLTA, namely quality learning, teaching and assessment (though, to be honest, there is less on assessment than one would expect from such a competent author). Because of this, Woollard gives us a book which is not only a sure success with its main market of trainee teachers in England and Wales, but a very useful IT-based QoLTA approach to what learning—and therefore teaching—can be about.

All secondary school teachers (and their managers) would benefit from working with it, and in plenty of other countries than England and Wales. And if those teachers and managers can’t work on their own, the book forms a very clear and effective guide to in-service training courses, much like the best of the so-called NOF programmes in the same countries a few years ago.

The book is well written and well illustrated, includes plenty of activities, thought triggers and attractive references, and has an excellent index.

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