
Learning Networks: A Field Guide to Teaching and Learning Online,

Linda Harasim, Starr Roxanne Hiltz, Lucio Teles and Murray Turoff. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1995. ISBN: 0-262-08236-5, 329 pp., \$35.00 (US)

Reviewed by Jean-Marc Guillemette

If you are interested in using computers and communication technologies in your courses, seminars or workshops, but don't really know what's involved or how to go about it, then start with this book. It provides an up-to-date description and discussion of the terms, concepts and issues related to learning networks. In the authors' words, 'learning networks are groups of people who use [ComputerManaged Communication] networks to learn together at the time, place and pace that best suits them and is appropriate to the task'. In short, the book deals with organizing and presenting courses online.

It is divided into three parts regrouping a total of eleven chapters. Part 1, The Field, includes three chapters that create a framework for understanding learning networks, both by defining key terms and concepts, and by providing examples of some of the current or recent projects. Chapter 1 focuses on fundamental terminology and concepts, and sets the stage for more detailed discussions in subsequent chapters. Chapters 2 and 3 respectively, review projects carried out for K- 12 education and then for higher education/professional development. While the authors describe rather than critique the projects, the reader can gain valuable insights from lessons learned in these projects.

Part 2, The Guide, is a more practical, 'how-to' description of developing and implementing learning networks. Chapter 4 starts by describing seven learning approaches that 'are common in educational computer networks': 'electures', ask-an expert, mentorship, tutor support, access to relevant information (e.g., databases), peer interaction and structured group activities. The remainder of the chapter highlights the issues to consider when conceptualizing the networked learning environment, including the use of on-line conferences and metaphors intended to help students unfamiliar with this approach make the transition from conventional classroom environments to an electronic environment.

Chapter 5 provides guidance on getting started with implementing a network learning system. Chapter 6 offers a series of suggestions on how to organize teaching on-line. The need to change one's concept of teaching, from the passing of information to moderating and encouraging interaction between students who assume greater responsibility for their learning, is emphasized. Chapter 7 goes on to explore the student's point of view, and in particular what students need to succeed with online learning. Four factors (access, attitudes, motivation and regular use) that contribute to student success are discussed, complemented with a series of good suggestions to help students get the most out of learning online. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 each end with a convenient 'Checklist for Actions' that summarizes the chapter's main points. These checklists are likely to become quick references for

those working on their own projects. The final chapter of Part 2, Chapter 8, takes a candid look at what may go wrong with learning network projects and how to deal with various problems.

Part 3, 'The Future' is a combination summary, review and look ahead. Many of the points already introduced in previous chapters are repeated, at the risk of being overstated. The authors, however, are quite convincing in suggesting that learning networks are here to stay and that they will replace many of the learning activities we currently take for granted. In particular, Chapter 11, The Epilogue, is a list of e-mail messages that highlight how the concepts and practices of learning networks are already creating changes around us. The eleven chapters are complemented with a series of seven appendices that provide additional and useful information on services online (e.g., commercial services, online resources, sample course descriptions, etc.).

The tone and style of the book are pleasant, thus making the book easy to read. Technical terms that may be new to some readers are well defined and explained, and often illustrated with examples. The book is therefore quite 'readable' for newcomers to the field without becoming over-simplified. It does live up to its title of 'field guide': concepts are generally well described using examples from actual projects, with both positive and negative aspects receiving equal treatment. There are also many practical suggestions of what to do, what not to do and how to avoid problems.

On the minus side, a number of key issues in computer-mediated communication, particularly when such communication reaches across countries and cultures, are not addressed in this book. In particular, little is said about how interaction between teacher and students, or how the design of learning materials distributed online must take into account factors such as learning styles and cultural differences. From this point of view, this is not an instructional design book (nor do the authors claim it to be). Also, while repetition has long been known to contribute to learning, there are times when too much repetition from chapter to chapter takes away some of the reading enjoyment. Certain points in particular (e.g., why learning networks promote active learning, or how using students to grade the work of other students can be beneficial) are discussed in different chapters creating an uneasy feeling of *deja vu*. While these may be key concepts, the repetition sometimes borders on overkill.

Nevertheless, the book remains, in my opinion, a 'must read' item for anyone wishing to become acquainted with learning networks or wanting to review what is currently happening in this field.

REVIEWER

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