

than a cursory look at this book.

REVIEWER

Earl R. Misanchuk is Professor of Extension, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 0W0.

Distance Education: A Practical Guide, by B. Willis. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications, 1993. ISBN 0-87778-255-5, 138pp. (CDN \$38.95)

Reviewed by Richard A. Schwier

In deference to the writing style Barry Willis uses in this book, I would like to make three recommendations before the substance of the review:

- If your professional life touches distance education in any way, buy this book;
- If your professional life does not touch distance education in any way, buy this book for someone else whose life does;
- If you are looking for an expansive treatment of the philosophy and issues surrounding distance education, buy a different book and put it on your shelf. Then buy this economical treatment, and read it.

The remainder of this review will describe *Distance Education: A Practical Guide* and discuss why I make these recommendations.

Willis wrote this book for two primary audiences. The first is faculty engaged in distance education, presumably in post-secondary institutions. Most of us have encountered faculty who are superb scholars, yet know little about teaching and next to nothing about distance education. The bulk of this book addresses their needs. The second target group is administrators involved in policy and program development. Although administrators will be interested in most of the same information as faculty, the book also treats several important organizational and policy issues for this group, such as academic legitimacy and tenure. After reading this book a couple of times, I would add at least two secondary audiences for the book not mentioned by Willis. One is instructional designers who often work very closely with subject matter experts in the design and delivery of distance education courses. They will find

this a valuable reference tool for finding quick answers to many difficult questions SME's ask. The other is teacher educators. Many teacher education programs now include a brief treatment of distance education, usually as an elective or as a portion of a general pedagogy course. This compact book would be an excellent reference for instructors in these programs.

Willis includes two stated purposes for the book:

"To provide a practical foundation for planning, developing, and implementing effective distance education programs.

To offer suggestions, advice, and encouragement for those accepting the challenge offered by this potentially effective form of instructional delivery." (p. 4)

Distance Education: A Practical Guide has eight succinct chapters and a brief "Glossary of Selected Distance Education and Telecommunication Terms."

Chapter 1 provides a definition and overview of distance education. The chapter includes arguments for how distance education differs from traditional teaching models and why it is an important approach for modern institutions. Chapter 1 further acknowledges the historical and international roots of distance education—a discussion in which Canadian initiatives figure prominently.

Chapter 2 discusses research in distance learning, first summarizing a few general principles derived from research. It then describes some of the comparative media research and why it uncovered few significant performance differences. After discounting this avenue of research, Willis provides 17 very useful factors which do influence instructional effectiveness.

Chapter 3 offers advice about the key players in a distance education program, from students to administrators. Willis emphasizes integrated participation and communication among members of the distance education process.

Chapter 4 discusses the important component of faculty development and especially factors which can improve the effectiveness of in-service training.

Chapter 5 deals with the systematic instructional development and evaluation of distance delivered instruction. Willis offers a generic model of instructional development in the chapter and outlines the major points one would consider in the process.

Chapter 6 describes media — the teaching tools of distance education. Various media are listed, and Willis suggests that only by selecting media which meet student and instructional needs can the unfortunate and expensive cycle of technological growth, demise and revival be avoided.

Chapter 7 briefly summarizes strategies for teaching effectively at a distance. The chapter offers advice for meeting student needs, course planning and organization, teaching strategies, and interaction and feedback.

Chapter 8, "The Future of Distance Education" discusses trends and needs in the areas of research, delivery, evaluation, technological integration and academic policy.

Throughout the book, in both statement and tone, Willis emphasizes the importance of examining technologies of learning over electronic technologies—especially whiz-bang delivery technologies. I found it especially inviting and refreshing to find a treatment of distance education which made only passing reference to satellites. In fact, Willis rails against being distracted by the trappings of distance education because teaching and learning will inevitably suffer if the focus of the learning enterprise drifts away from the learner. He warns vocally of the danger of selecting and purchasing hardware and then attempting to fit instruction to it. He also suggests that while distance education is often considered unique, successful distance education differs little in substance from other approaches. He states, "In reality, the novelty of distance education is more perception than reality." (pp. 40-41)

Another refreshing aspect of the book is the homage Willis pays to international players in distance education, and the contributions made by countries other than the United States. One might speculate that this is because an author from Alaska is geographically separated from most of the rest of the United States. More likely, it is a tribute to a scholar who is vitally interested in what makes distance education work. Willis specifically mentions the Open University (United Kingdom), Athabasca University (Alberta), the Open Learning Institute and the Knowledge Network (British Columbia), the Alberta Educational Communications Corporation, the University of Quebec, and the University of Queensland (Australia).

Much of the material in this book will be familiar to readers with a background in educational technology. For example, the instructional development model Willis proposes is well-worn territory for instructional designers, and there is not much new offered here. But it is an important component of the book for his stated audiences. Many administrators and faculty have little acquaintance with models of systematic instructional design, and Willis' model offers a useful compression of ideas.

Readers familiar with Fleming and Levie's (1978) *Instructional Message Design* from the same publisher will find Willis' approach to be reminiscent of that earlier work. Willis often offers statements of general principle, followed by brief explanations or elaborations. This format is extremely readable. A reader can scan major points, and stop to graze on additional information from time to time. In other places, bullet-form lists pepper the pages with key points. In few places will the reader find extensive prose, elaborate arguments or extended discussion.

These approaches result in a crisp and highly approachable treatment of distance education. Willis' writing style is unpretentious and economical. His tone is optimistic, yet realistic. Willis does what so few of us have the courage to do: he makes a point and then shuts up. I'll demonstrate what I've learned from his book and do the same.

REVIEWER

Richard A. Schwier is Professor in the Department of Communication, Continuing and Vocational Education at the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 0W0. He is currently on sabbatical leave.