

# Book Reviews

Mary Kennedy, Editor

***Empowering Networks: Computer Conferencing in Education*** by Michael D. Waggoner (Ed.)- Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications, 1992. ISBN 0-87778-238-5 (CDN \$42.00)

*Reviewed by Zopito A. Marini*

Computer technology has made it possible to reduce the once-imposing barrier of physical distance between people to the point where it is no longer a factor in the exchange of information. Interestingly, while it has empowered people by reducing the obstacles associated with great physical distance, computer conferencing has also generated the potential to dis-empower people by creating other types of obstacles related to psychological and social distance.

*Empowering Networks* contains 8 chapters, each describing a computer conferencing project aimed at facilitating the educational process over varying distances. Most of the chapters use a case study approach to their presentations by including background information on the project, a nuts-and-bolts description of the hardware and software used, and an evaluation of the project. These chapters provide a panoramic view of the possible uses of the computer conferencing technology. There are two additional chapters which are meant to provide an opportunity to reflect on computer conferencing. For example, the commentary by Donald P. McNeil, in the second-last chapter, describes the danger of over-optimism and identifies the possible failings of the technology. The last chapter, by Thomas J. Switzer, contains a well-thought-out prescription for making this technology work.

The strength of the book lies in the diversity of the projects presented, which is evident in the varying degrees of sophistication of the applications, as well as of the range of physical distance bridged between people. The reader

is provided with descriptions of rich and diverse computer conferencing environments; and, for the most part, the presentations are sufficiently detailed to provide enough information to assess the merits of the project, or even to duplicate it.

Although I believe that it has considerable merit, this book has two major shortcomings; one is the lack of consideration given to theoretical issues and the other is the lack of connecting links across the various projects. In regard to this last issue, it is rather ironic that, while it can be considered a strength, the dimension of diversity can also represent a weakness, particularly in the way it is handled in this book. A case in point are the last two chapters, which could have been used to provide these links. Both reflect on the technology in such a general way that they appear not to be grounded to any great extent in the projects described. Whereas it might have been the case that it was difficult for McNeil and Witzer to have access to a draft of the 8 chapters before writing their own, I believe that the text would have benefited immensely from a reflection grounded in the actual projects presented in the book. The reader would have profited from a discussion linking all the projects together by examining the similarities shared by them, as well as any differences.

As for the other shortcoming, the book reveals a general lack of recognition of the important role which should be accorded to the use of theoretical frameworks. As stated by Marini, Mitterer and Powell (1991, *CJEC*, Vol. 20, pg. 171-187), the importance of adopting, or at least beginning to adopt, a theoretical disposition in the application of computer technology is critical for the future development of the field. Computer technology will not provide the answer to educational problems if we cannot define those problems in precise terms. Until there are more robust attempts to use relevant theories from disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and computer science, the application of computer technology to education will not get past the case study approach.

While a case study may be a good starting point, in order to advance research in this area (which is one of the stated objectives of this book) a more concerted effort has to be made to use approaches and procedures which are driven from the "top-down". It is only then that the field can move from a descriptive to a prescriptive phase. I would also suggest that, unless we get to this stage of development, we are bound to be "wildly optimistic" and possibly "wildly wrong" about the future applications of computer technology.

Consider, for example, one common observation related to a number of projects. Namely, that unless the technology is easy to use there is resistance from the users in implementing computer conferencing. This may indeed come as a surprise to computer "technicians", but it is not at all surprising if we look at the literature on risk-taking. Whether we like it or not, for most people using a computer for the first time is a risky enterprise, with all that it entails. For a novice, there is potential loss of control over the work environment; self-esteem could suffer; and there are a host of other negative aspects related to poor interaction with a computer. This is what I mean by psychological and

social barriers. The field has succeeded in removing the barrier of physical distance, however, we have a long way to go to reduce psychological and social distance between people and technology. If it is to improve the educational process, computer conferencing must empower users not just in the dimension of physical distance, but also in other dimensions.

Even though it has some shortcomings, this book is worth- while for the reader who is looking for some good suggestions for developing a successful computer conferencing application, as well as some very good descriptions of a number of actual, implemented projects.

#### REVIEWER

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