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Teaching at a Distance with the Merging Technologies: An Instructional Systems Approach

Abstract

A review of *Teaching at a Distance with the Merging Technologies: An Instructional Systems Approach*, by Thomas E. Cyr with Eugenia D. Conway.

Teaching at a Distance with the Merging Technologies: An Instructional Systems Approach

Thomas E. Cyrs with Eugenia D. Conway.
1997. Center for Educational Development, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, New Mexico.
ISBN 0-9628477-3-9. 468 pages.

The improvement of teaching skills has long been recognized as an important ongoing effort among educators. The rapidly increasing use of distance education and new instructional technologies can be seen daily in schools at all levels. This book combines these topics in a "how to" format which demonstrates the application of instructional design in the context of today's evolving delivery systems. It is written for active practitioners in distance-learning environments utilizing any type of delivery format. It is also well suited to graduate and upper division students in any field of education. The information is organized using a variety of methods and strata that may be difficult to synthesize for those without some prerequisite knowledge.

Each chapter begins with key points, learning performance objectives, and technical vocabulary. The opening page of each chapter also provides an instructional systems approach model, with the relevant area highlighted. A table at the bottom of the page identifies the major delivery systems to which the chapter's information may apply: compressed video, videotape, audio, computer mediated learning, Internet, print, etc. There are diagrams in the sidebar of many pages that show a relationship between ideas, products, and results described in the text. In addition to all this, the book makes abundant use of clip art and isolated quotes, which may be distracting to all but the most visual learners.

The chapters are arranged under major sections including, Planning and Organizing, Production and Presentation, Course Administration, and Evaluating Telecourses. Some of these are

much more thorough than others. Occasionally, topics, chapters, and even sections are only touched on superficially. For example, the Evaluating Telecourses section contains only one chapter with a few pages of text. This is a subject that needs more attention, particularly in light of comments made much earlier in the book regarding Teleclassroom Deficiencies:

"A review of existing teleclassroom courses over the past several years identified the following deficiencies:

- a. Technical difficulties, both audio and video.
- b. Poor course organization. Traditionally taught courses were simply replicated in front of a TV camera.
- c. Talking heads. The instructor simply talked to the cameras. Few and inadequate visuals were used.
- d. Poor or improperly used visuals. Most visuals were not in a TV format (3x4 aspect ratio) and writing or printing was often illegible.
- e. Poor and uncorrelated handouts. The use of handouts is often a last-minute thought. When used they usually present a very general outline that is difficult to follow and requires extensive note taking.
- f. Poor presentation skills. Presentations are often barely audible and at times inarticulate. In a review of satellite instruction, Albright (1988 January) noted that "there were great variations in quality from one course to another . . . much of the instruction was quite uninspired . . . boring . . . there was a pathetic under-utilization of the capabilities of this medium . . ." (page 239).

In general, the more completely a subject is addressed the more useful the information is to the reader. I found some of the twenty chapters within Planning and Organizing very applicable, including "The Interactive Study Guide," "Constructing a Telesyllabus," "Using Interactive Television," and "Engaging Students at Field Sites." The latter chapter includes 150 brief examples of methods for involving students in active learning. This "everything but the kitchen sink" approach is commonly used in the book. Some examples may seem far-fetched or inappropriate but there are often practical ideas as well.

Technical information is well described. For example, a part of the "Graphic Design Principles" chapter addresses Text on Television and Computer Screens. The authors discuss factors of size,

font, alignment, capitalization, color and contrast that are accurate, easily understood and applied. This is followed by a closing part of the chapter, Ideas to Apply in Faculty Development Workshops, which provides examples and opportunities for practice by the reader and for use during in-service training.

Ideas to Apply in Faculty Development Workshops is a closing part of every chapter. Some of these ideas may not match your personal style, but it is always good to have choices. The last part of each chapter is the bibliography. These citations can be quite extensive, at times numbering over 100 per chapter, and are a valuable resource for further reading. The book ends with a compilation of the chapters' technical vocabulary as a glossary. Although its format will not appeal to everyone, *Teaching at a Distance . . .* can be a useful reference work for faculty and production staff involved with distance education.

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