BOOK REVIEW

Handbook of Distance Education, (4th ed.)

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New York: Routledge, 2019, pp. 579, ISBN: 978-1-315-29613-5

The self-identified purpose of the *Handbook of Distance Education*, (4th ed.) is the same as that of the three earlier editions, i.e.,

> to provide access to a broad selection of the scholarly and research literature, organized in a way that will enable students and practitioners to identify sources relevant to their particular needs, as the first step leading to their personal, in-depth, follow-up literature research.

The first edition was produced in 2003 and this fourth edition was produced six years after the third edition. Readers of earlier editions will note a similar thematic structure, but in this edition the sections on learning and teaching have been combined. In many chapters, authors reference earlier versions, briefly summarising how they have built upon the previous work to include more recent research, and in some cases referring readers to specific aspects of previous reviews which they do not repeat.

Part 1 looks at the historical and theoretical foundations of distance education. The section begins with an introduction to early research and the evolution of research institutions focused on distance education, and professional associations of distance education practitioners, followed by a deeper look into the work of several pioneer theorists. The next three chapters each address a theoretical framework: Moore's theory of transactional distance, Dron's discussion of independent learning by contrasting independent learning with what it means to be a dependent learner, and the Community of Inquiry. A chapter on why gender still matters in distance education follows. Finally, a discussion of meta-analyses and qualitative and systematic reviews concludes that the time for comparisons between the effectiveness of distance education compared to traditional methods of delivery is over. Research now needs to focus on understanding how to do distance education, online learning and blended learning well.

Part 2, the largest section, summarises research on teaching and learning. The section starts by reviewing research on cognitive information processing, student satisfaction, student persistence, motivation, and how to work with these learner characteristics when the learner and the educator are not in the same physical space. This is followed by a look at how academic libraries support distance learning, recognising the blurring boundaries between serving distance learners and on-campus students. There is a review of the ethics of the student-teacher relationship and the responsibilities of each, particularly in response to changing institutional priorities and an increasingly global, cross-

cultural teaching-learning context. Other chapters look at blended learning, mobile learning and use of social media, concluding that the research is still young and inconclusive about these relatively recent options for distance educators. This section also presents four different instructional design frameworks. Part 2 ends with reflections on diversity, specifically whether or not technology is enabling or disabling for learners with disabling conditions, and culture inclusivity within collaborative inquiry-based learning.

Part 3 on management, policy and administration touches on topics relevant to distance education that do not fit under teaching and learning, i.e., leadership, needs assessment and strategic planning, quality assurance, copyright and evaluation. Other topics covered include US federal policy on distance education, the future of work in a globalised world with an emphasis on the relevance of MOOCs for continuous learning, and factors influencing the participation and motivation of faculty in mainstreaming online learning in US higher education institutions.

The final section is titled "Audiences and Providers". Without expressly saying so, this section recognises the over-representation throughout the rest of the book of research related to North America, particularly the United States, and to higher education. Six chapters each cover one of six non-higher education sectors: community colleges, continuing professional development, the US armed forces, private and for-profit higher education institutions in the US, the corporate sector and the K-12 or compulsory sector. A separate chapter discusses research into teaching university science online. The last two chapters of the book are devoted to distance education in two other regions, Latin America and Asia.

How well does the *Handbook* achieve its stated aim of giving readers a broad base of scholarly literature so that they can then springboard from this to "identify sources relevant to their particular needs"?

It depends.

If one's interest is in the North American, particularly the United States, higher education system, the answer would be a definite yes. Ninety percent of the contributing authors are North American, and all but seven of the 69 authors work as academics in universities. Of course, as researchers, it is possible to work in one sphere and know about research in other spheres, but the overwhelming sense throughout the first three parts of the *Handbook* is a focus on scholarly literature related to higher education in the United States.

If, as in my case, one's interest is in distance education related to technical and vocational education and training (TVET) in the developing world, sources are much less "relevant to my particular needs".

Is this because higher education in the United States is the focus of the world's scholarly research into distance education, or is the *Handbook*'s emphasis the result of its authors' bias? I suspect it is a bit of both. Barbour's review of K-12 distance education grapples with this reality. Although based in the United States, unlike most other contributors he includes reviews of literature from other developed countries (Canada, New Zealand, Australia and those in Europe). He then notes the predominance of K-12-relevant published research as being United States focused. However, he does not make mention of the published research, such as that in the Commonwealth of Learning's *Journal of Learning for Development*, on open schooling in Asia and Africa. While this is also distance education, it tends to be

a different model to that being discussed under "virtual schooling" for developed countries, and so is of less interest to those researching in developed world contexts. If aware, he also may view this as "published literature in the field", as opposed to "literature that is actually based upon research".

When considering my own literature base and why it is not represented in the *Handbook*, I realise that much of it is not published in peer-reviewed journals. Therefore, it does not meet the criteria used for "scholarly research" used in the *Handbook*, thus, limiting the relevance of the *Handbook* for me. Also, relevant papers may not emphasise distance education, because they are more concerned with workplace learning, or flexibility, or labour market needs. The chapter on corporate education acknowledges this challenge, outlining three different key sources of research for distance education in the workplace. They clarify that they have primarily reported findings from peer reviewed publications; have included some findings from applied research done by professional and trade associations, think tanks and trade publications; and have excluded research by private analysts for investment purposes.

Having said all this, the *Handbook* brings together a significant body of research from which every distance education practitioner can benefit.

The theoretical frameworks and instructional design strategy sections are universally helpful. While they tend to have been derived from Western higher education cultural contexts, they offer frameworks and strategies which have been proven somewhere. These theoretical frameworks provide a base from which to apply theory in practice, generate hypotheses for research, and test their relevance and reliability in other cultural settings — both in different countries and in different education sectors.

Similarly, the topics in the section on teaching and learning offer useful starting points for researchers and practitioners in other regions of the world, and for other education sectors. This is a rich section which offers an interesting range of things that others have deemed worthy of research, as well as their conclusions, thus far, and references for deeper understanding. It seems reasonable to assume that factors such as cognitive load, motivation, persistence, scaffolding, and how to develop social, cognitive and teaching presence will be relevant across contexts, even though the specifics of how to do this well are likely to be different depending on culture and education setting.

Part 3 acknowledges that the research is limited, even in the North American higher education sector, for topics related to management and administration. However, again, what is there gives useful frameworks for thinking about such topics as leadership or strategic planning. Again, in Part 4, the individual chapters are a once-over, light inspection for the specific education and training sector or region under discussion but they do provide a good starting point for those who see themselves there.

So, in conclusion, the *Handbook* does an excellent job of sharing the United States' higher education case study. Like any case study, there is much to learn from it. It provides a solid starting point for distance educators working with the 92% of the world's population living outside North America and the growing number of educators using distance learning with the 93% of the world's population not attending university. Distance education is crucial in solving the education challenges facing these populations. My hope is that distance education researchers can increasingly work within diverse contexts to build a broader body of scholarly literature, so that in the fifth edition of the *Handbook*,

readers from across the world in K-12, TVET, and corporate settings, as well as higher education, can identify sources relevant to their particular needs.

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