Reviews

BRABAZON, T. (2002). *Digital hemlock: Internet education and the poisoning of teaching.* Sydney, Australia: University of New South Wales Press (pp. 224).

I admit it—I assumed that Brabazon's book, a critique of "Internet education and the poisoning of teaching," would be sensationalist and ill-informed. On the whole I was incorrect. I'm still committed to the effective use of e-learning in education, but I am now the wiser for having been strapped in place and taught a thing or two by a clear-minded critic of the administrative agendas that still exist in tertiary institutions (and governments) today. Far from being a naive technophobe throwing stones from the safety of an ivory tower surrounded by the barbed wire of electronic ignorance, Brabazon is an informed, dedicated, and experienced university lecturer who passionately believes in academe and the life-changing potential of *real* education. Her book is hard-hitting, direct, and scathing to those who view online learning as the automatic saviour of a tertiary sector supposedly in crisis, and as a means to making teaching and learning a politically correct partnership between educators and students. Brabazon is not alone in her criticism of online education but she is certainly a most militant critic, drawing extensively from her expertise as a lecturer of cultural studies.

It is difficult to disagree with her central thesis. E-learning has been heralded as a silver bullet to kill the monster of expensive and inaccessible education.

According to Brabazon, however, the recoil of the discharge destroys things that make real education so, well, *real* and multi-sensual. The passion of the informed and paradigm-destroying educator is lost. As a result, Brabazon explains, valuable aspects of education have been sacrificed in exchange for virtual benefits. Brabazon sees danger in the content transfer mentality that technology is subtly introducing and identifies a disenfranchising of the critical academic in the process. Not all of Brabazon's criticism is targeted at online education. Her main broadsides are aimed at those who would try to make education more market sensitive, student centred, textbook oriented, vocationally driven, and "revolutionary." These, she points out, compromise true education which is critical sensitive, academically centred, perspective oriented, understanding driven, and evolutionary.

The central thesis is sound but unfortunately Brabazon's critique of online education is neither entirely accurate nor well-balanced. Her writing style is well-oiled but many of her arguments, particularly those relating to online pedagogies, are not. The natural progression of e-learning has been away from virtual campuses and online content toward more interpersonal mixed-modalities. Still, there are some administrators and decision makers who have not yet grasped Brabazon's core message which makes her work useful to the wider e-learning community. The gems from her work include:

Technology in—and of—itself means very little. It becomes useful when situated in educational theory and a context. Therefore, attention is required on the relationship between theory and practice—research and application—in childhood, adolescent and adult education. (p. 69)

And again:

[In online education] the content of the course is the imperative. The form of lectures is inconvenient, rigid or inefficient. The world wide web [sic] becomes a way to present the content of a course at the convenience of the student. There is little sense of the integral role of format, tone, texture and content of the learning experience. To emphasise content above form is to suggest that format is not actually part of the structure . . . the signifier (form) and the signified (content) are inseparable. (pp. 78–79)

Brabazon is not a lone voice here. E-learning practitioners who are plugged into education theory (and who are familiar with the emerging principles of e-learning practice) have been self-consciously aware of Brabazon's arguments for some time. It is decision makers and those educators and proponents of e-learning who tend to lack these theoretical foundations who are continuing to compromise teaching and learning in the ways Brabazon describes. By way of example, I was recently asked to prepare an editorial on the topic of Internet learning and where it might lead. In my article I warned that pedagogy was still paramount and that technology needed to be subservient to it. Pedagogy, I wrote, is more important

than technology and until this is widely realised we cannot use technology effectively. The editorial was rejected because the readers of this particular journal were interested only in the innovative. Ironically, at the time effective pedagogy in online education was quite innovative!

While the journey through *Digital Hemlock* is a rewarding one, the path is not entirely clear of hazards. The greatest flaws in the book are that Brabazon is comparing the ideal university lecturer with mediocre online experience, and she has a very lecture-centric view of education. Readers need to keep these in mind as they progress through the pages. Consider this:

The aim of an education is to unsettle assumed dominant ideologies and initiate cross-cultural communicational skills and meta-learning. The foundation of this process is the lecture system. (p. 135)

Online education is done extremely effectively through such well-regarded institutions as the Open University and University of Phoenix, who have built their virtual education on a firm foundation of learning theory. My own postgraduate experience was a life-changing one with many similarities to the vignettes Brabazon includes in her book, even though my M.A. was online and delivered entirely at a distance. In her passionate defence of face-to-face teaching, Brabazon inadvertently neglects the power of effectively designed and delivered online distance education and implies that the classic lecture represents the pinnacle of teaching. Unfortunately these errors have, in my

opinion, compromised the overall integrity of her work.

Perhaps the greatest irony of *Digital Hemlock* is that Brabazon herself models the style of online tutoring that is the antidote to her hemlock. Throughout the book there are examples from her own online interactions with students which demonstrate how a brilliant, critical, and inspirational lecturer can have a brilliant, critical, and inspirational online presence.

In sum, *Digital Hemlock* aims its high-calibre critique at poor online education and the move toward content-based digital education. Fortunately e-learning practitioners and proponents have for the most part already moved away from Brabazon's targets, but admittedly some have not. *Digital Hemlock* is worth the read. Although Brabazon is using live ammunition, it is improbable that you will feel the numbing pain of a direct hit. More than likely you will hear a series of distant ricochets.

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PAECHTER, C., EDWARDS, R., HARRISON, R., & TWINING, P. (Eds.) (2001). *Learning, space, and identity.* London: Paul Chapman Publishing, in association with The Open University (pp. vi, 186).

The focus of this book is in the title: the central relationship between learning, space, and identity. The editors and various contributors draw attention in a variety of contexts—some of them autobiographical—to the physical, mental, and emotional experience of learning in particular spaces and situations. A message that comes through clearly in this volume of essays is that, through the widespread availability of new technologies, we have the possibility of becoming disembodied identities online. The authors remind us that, in spite of the technological changes shaping learning, we are all "fundamentally embodied" and this embodiment is reflected in how we learn. Accordingly, it is argued, "We need to approach the use of new technologies both with a sense of excitement and with critique."

This collection of essays is about changes in how people learn with reference to new technologies and the educational opportunities that come with them. In the introduction, the editors explain that learning no longer occurs predominantly in educational institutions. It is lifelong and occurs in a wide variety of spaces and locations. The relationship between learning, space, and identity thus has changed.

The complexities of this relationship are explored in this very diverse collection of essays which centre on the "information age" and the "explosion of information" available to people with Internet access. A central concern guiding the contributors is the effect that information and communication technologies (ICT) will have on learning in the twenty-first century. The introduction of new technologies and the possibilities of creating virtual presences in virtual spaces are considered in relation to traditional ideas that learning is something that happens in the mind —something that only happens to embodied learners occupying particular spaces. As embodied learners, it is argued, learning experiences involving mind and body shape who we are. Virtual spaces allow powerful alternative

expressions of identity and may affect how and what we learn.

These ideas are explored in an opening essay on identity in the context of the shift from the industrial to the knowledge age. The second essay considers theories of learning—symbol processing and situated cognition—and how these relate to knowledge and to learning situations. In learning to take part in particular social practices, it is claimed, we contribute to the development of the practices. The following chapter provides a personal insight into learning from the perspective of an autistic person, focussing on what it is to be social and to comprehend the realisation that other people have thoughts and feelings and minds beside, in this case, the author. This chapter points to the enormous difficulty of learning when it is difficult to understand social situations and the significance of human speech. Another level of learning is explored in a subsequent chapter that introduces a culturally different situation in which the process of teaching and learning music is important for imparting cultural knowledge.

The importance of ICT is explored in several chapters, including one by Seymour Papert of MIT, on changes in space/time relations on learning and identity. Papert outlines his personal development and the ways this brought him to an understanding of the importance of certain ICT tools in children's learning. Of interest to many readers will be his observations on the role of computers in classrooms and the ways they can change how children learn. Another chapter considers a dimension of school life that has not had a lot of attention—the use of space in primary classrooms. In spite of the widespread

introduction of computers to classrooms, the ways space is used in schools has not changed a lot. The need to reconsider the architecture of schools to adapt to new ways of teaching and learning using computers is highlighted as a neglected area of educational reform. One notable chapter addresses claims that online learning can transform education by promoting student-centred communication and collaboration. In an examination of a situation in which sociocultural relationships inhibited the potential for change using ICT, it is demonstrated that the use of new technologies, in itself, is not necessarily able to transform ways of learning.

This collection of essays examines important relationships between embodied learners and new technologies. It focuses on the physical, mental, and emotional experiences of being a learner in learning spaces that have been made possible through online learning and the advance of the Internet. As such, this book will be of interest to students of communication, online learning, and the place of ICT in schools.

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PERRATON, H., & LENTELL, H. (Eds.) (2004). *Policy for open and distance learning.* London: RoutledgeFalmer/ Commonwealth of Learning (pp. 192).

This book's title has us believe it is about policy matters for open and distant learning. The introduction is about planning. This minor matter signals to the Australasian reader that they might be in for a bemusing read. The Commonwealth of Learning is a highly respected international body sponsored

by the Commonwealth Heads of Government. Despite having chapters contributed by Australian authors such as Colin Latchem and Yoni Ryan, their experiences in policy practice in open and distance learning play little part in this book. This is not surprising. The views in this book are very English in perspective and, to that extent, this perspective colours the majority of the chapters.

The recent (2004) *Report on Borderless Education,* conducted in conjunction with the Commonwealth Vice-Chancellor's Committee, identified that Australasia leads the world in its uptake of open, distant, and e-learning. The English have a different experience, based very much on the work of the University of London, which has been engaged in long-distance education since the 1850s, and the Open University (OU) of the United Kingdom, which uses primarily correspondence methods to teach its students. The OU (UK) model stands outside traditional university policy and practice in the United Kingdom. The recent failure of the U.K.'s e-university, an attempt to establish an alternative approach to teaching and learning, shows that the English views on open and distant learning may not have policies and practices that are appropriate in the twenty-first century. One of the more unusual claims made in the book is, "While open and distance learning may have an indirect role in expanding and strengthening the teaching force, it has not generally been perceived in a way of offering basic education" (p. 10). Perhaps the authors might recall that the New Zealand and Australian Correspondence Schools have offered "basic" education since 1921 and have engaged in successful teacher education at a distance since at least 1910. The editor eventually mentions New Zealand's correspondence education on page 13. The author, when discussing tertiary level open and distance education, again ignores the antipodean experiences, placing emphasis on the U.K.'s Open University. Nor does the editor see fit to mention experiences such as the New Zealand Open Polytechnic or TAFE Open Learning in Australia. It is not that this review is being hypercritical of the book, but it is flawed in its use of examples by ignoring the obvious, highlighting the marginal, and over-emphasising the experience of the U.K.

The section on students in open and distance learning, authored by another U.K. academic, examines a potential range of students in open and distance learning with the claim, "This section looks more closely at Britain, a country where distance education is highly developed" (p. 5). One might ask if a country with one open university and no distance learning on a large scale at pre-school, primary, or secondary levels is "highly developed."

A chapter on the Asian experience of policy in open and distance education is illuminating. The editor's introduction points yet again to the OU correspondence model as a filter used to examine non-western educational experience. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the section on staffing is a valuable contribution to the book, especially in the light of convergence between classroom-based and more flexible approaches to learning.

When discussing "resources" for open learning, the chapter very quickly moves from international declarations to funding sources and thence to planning issues about resource use. Not much

headway is made in policy issues. Perhaps the author might have devoted some time to identifying what policies governments adopted and why, and then examined the implications of the policies for resource allocation as determined by a planning process. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Part three of the book is devoted to process in open and distance learning. Here, the well-known and respected authors Rumble and Latchem examine organisational models. The book is worth acquiring just for this chapter. It notes the inevitability of most traditional tertiary institutions becoming involved in mixed-mode provision and that economic and structural issues will vary according to each institutional circumstance. The authors caution against allowing disreputable operators to exploit students, while at the same time recognising the important role open and distance learning plays in giving access for the remote and disadvantaged to educational opportunity.

The chapter on the choice of technology, tables 8.1 and 8.2, provides a useful guide on the relative merits of technologies and a hierarchy of use for computers in educational communication. The accompanying cost discussion is valuable for institutional managers who are new to this area of activity. One issue not covered in the chapter is that of "lost opportunity" cost, i.e., what would an institution lose if it did not adopt these technologies. Perhaps this is an interesting discussion for another book?

In the chapter on globalisation, Yoni Ryan looks at the question of policy for open and distance learning, especially for developing countries. She addresses the spectre of low-quality provision by proposing the use of the Commonwealth of Learning or the World Bank Global Learning Network as a repository for quality assured learning programmes. This theme is expanded by Andrea Hope's consideration of quality assurance, looking particularly at the role played by aggressive organisations seeking to capitalise on educational service delivery to less well off countries. She points, *inter alia,* to the Canadian regulations governing learning technologies being used in distance education. Her discussion on student support for distance or virtual students is valuable. This chapter demonstrates a depth of understanding about institutional systems and their weaknesses, which are rarely addressed by internally focused managers. Institutions moving towards blended learning and teaching models should be aware of the issues Ryan raises.

Robinson's chapter on governance, accreditation, and quality assurance in open and distance learning appears to contain an unstated fundamental assumption. It is that open and distance educational provision is so different from face-to-face institutional approaches that very different practices of governance, accreditation, and quality assurance are required. Here again, we see the ghost of the Open University of the U.K. Practitioners from South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia know that open, distance, and flexible learning is deliverable within existing institutional settings and conforming to the same practices and policies. That having been stated, it would be to the advantage of many institutions to adopt the stringent requirements they seek to impose on the distance education ones. Consequently, this chapter is informative and a valuable guide on management matters.

Reza's chapter on the benefits of open and distance learning raises a number of important questions, valid not only in the ODL environment, but also in the general educational context. Reza links policy to outcomes. This linkage raises a related question: Are inputs linked to outputs as strategies are to outcomes? If this relationship holds, it provides valuable insights for researchers examining policy, strategy, and outcomes in education. As Reza clearly identifies, improved policymaking requires research about data management, graduate outcomes, completion rates, and what effects these variables have on institutional performance.

The chapter by Butcher and Roberts on costing takes the standard distance or correspondence mode categories for materials development and argues for building a financial planning culture. This approach is common in distance learning, but it might be novel for some face-to-face teaching institutions. They might do well to emulate it.

Lentell's conclusion to this book identifies critical policy issues for open learning. These are listed as: identifying target populations; choosing a system for development and delivery; technologies; business planning, materials development, student support, recruitment, assessment, quality assurance, assessment, evaluation, and management. Each of these issues applies to face-to-face institutions and, to the extent that blended learning is increasing in use, so the rigor and transparency of the open learning models might be applied across many institutions.

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