



## *Review*

### **Teach Beyond Your Reach: An Instructor's Guide to Developing and Running Successful Distance Learning Classes, Workshops, Training Sessions, and More**

*Robin Neidorf. Medford, NJ: Information Today, Inc., 2012. 214 pp. ISBN: 978-1-937290-01-6. \$29.95.*

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With wisdom, insight, and liberal dollops of humor, Neidorf has successfully updated her recipe for effective distance teaching methods. She walks readers through the design, development, and implementation of a distance learning course, often employing techniques that incorporate some traditional teaching methods while completely tossing out others. From the beginning, and rightly so, she stresses that distance learning courses are about the students; students are individuals with their own experiences and interact differently in distance learning courses than traditional students. The focus is not on pedagogy but on andragogy: engaging adults of different generations, different learning styles, and different motivations all in one virtualized space.

To that end, Neidorf describes the tools at the distance educator's disposal, how they work, and the types of interaction for which they work best. She gives a crash course in instructional design from learning objectives to activity-based learning to assessment and explains why these are important using Gagne's conditions of learning. Offered are examples of syllabi and other course documentation as well as tips for writing lectures and for saving time that do not include simply slapping PowerPoint slides up on Blackboard.

The final chapters address what is not covered in many library school information literacy instruction courses: classroom management. Engaging students, managing conflicts, and building a community are essential to the distance education classroom. Students can't sit in the back and watch as they can in most traditional classrooms if they want to be successful. Neidorf borrows many traditional classroom concepts here to facilitate that interaction. Be predictable, prepared, and plan ahead for technological failures and moments of "life happens." Be responsive, hold office hours, and provide timely and specific feedback on assignments. Other best practices, such as making the most of asynchronous classrooms and moderating conflicts in which the participants have never laid eyes on one another, are specific to distance learning but no less valuable. Most valuable of all, however, are the chapters that show a distance educator how to coax individual learners out from behind their screens and into a collaborative community of exploration.

Neidorf often puts the principles she preaches into practice within these pages; she often repeats useful tips (one of which was keep repeating anything important) and uses her own experiences to make herself human and better transmit information to the reader just as she explicitly suggested doing in preceding chapters. Many of the strategies she uses can be translated to the traditional classroom and are especially applicable when using the team-based learning method.

Some things to consider, however, are the limitations of Neidorf's methods. Multiple times she makes reference to having other people on an instructional design team, such as a graphic designer or computer specialist. Few schools are large enough or wealthy enough to have these teams or to hire outside consultants to build them. Much of the focus regarding distance learning is the money-saving factor; many schools operate distance education courses to save money, not spend it. In these cases, the distance educator acts alone, and more focus should have been given to managing all aspects of a distance course oneself. Additionally, much of the book's focus on community and fostering interaction is rather unsuitable for larger courses. The techniques Neidorf outlines would, as she said herself, work for 40 to 50 students at the maximum. With the recent explosion of massive online open courses (MOOCs), it will be interesting to see how these strategies are adapted to support a course of a thousand or more students. In a few years' time, the third edition of this book may bear little resemblance to the second.

What Neidorf provides here is not necessarily innovation but the foundation for innovation. All new ideas build on old ones; these platforms give rise to creative opportunities, which in their time become the platforms for newer ideas. Neidorf lays out the basics, providing general outlines of different distance learning tools, strategies, and assessment methods without specifications of particular systems or individual techniques. It is up to the distance educator to take these basics and effectively teach beyond his or her reach in new ways.

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