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March 24-28, 1987

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**British Journal of Educational Technology**

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**IN REVIEW/CRITIQUES DE LIVRES**

**The Role of Technology in Distance Education**

A.W. Bates (Ed.)

Reviewed by D.R. Garrison

Distance education is characterized by mediated communication between a noncontiguous teacher and learner, facilitated by means of technologies ranging from print to microprocessors. Many recent technological developments have intensified the problem of distance education practitioners attempting to understand and use these technologies appropriately. An overview of distance education technologies and their application is the subject of *The Role of Technology in Distance Education*, edited by A.W. Bates. The stated purpose of this book is "to deal with practical matters arising from the use of various technologies in distance education."

The intended audiences for this book are staff working in "specialized" distance teaching institutions, and "staff in conventional institutions who are now considering the possibilities and practicalities of off-campus teaching." Since the vast majority of applications are drawn from the Open University setting, distance education practitioners from similar specialized institutions would likely gain the most from this book. Also, some of the detailed descriptions of the technology itself might be of greater interest to administrators and academics than to distance education teachers.

The hard bound book consists of 19 chapters organized under four headings—Introduction and Overview, Media in Course Design, Media in Course Management and Presentation, and Selection of Technology and Course Design. The vast majority of chapters are exclusive of illustrations and the text is small and compact. Most chapters have a good reference list for those who wish to do further reading.

The first part of this book—"Introduction and Overview"—consists of one short chapter giving some background to the Open University (OU), a discussion of some general developments in distance education, a presentation of four major technological trends since the establishment of the OU, and finally, a statement regarding the purpose of the book. This four-page chapter is insufficient in setting the stage for such a large amount of technical information that is to follow. The discussion of developments in distance education and technology is seen almost entirely from the perspective of the OU. In addition, there is no discussion as to the structure of the book or rationale for why the technologies are categorized as they are. Why the technologies are seen as either "Media in Course Design" or "Media in Course Management" is not readily apparent and the classification does little to assist the uninitiated to organize this technological complexity.

In the second part, under the heading, "Media in Course Design", are chapters
nature of tutor, students, media, and text. The critical and selective role of students and tutors in using media is also discussed. This discussion is placed in context by considering the tutor's role from a broader perspective than just media. "Media Resource Centres" is the final chapter of this section and is an excellent discussion of the support such centres can provide the distance learner from the print, electronic, and human interaction perspectives.

The fourth and final section consists of two chapters concerned with the "Selection of Technology and Course Design." Chapter 18, "Pedagogic Differences Between Media," attempts to address "the question of which teaching methods and channels of communication to use, in order to achieve a given set of educational aims." The chapter provides "a simple taxonomy of courses, educational aims and teaching strategies" with regard to media. Although the author states that this is just a beginning to the discussion, it represents the best and most important chapter of the book, given the title of the book. The last chapter, "Putting it Together: Now and the Future," is largely a discussion of the advantages and limitations of technology now and in the future. The greatest problem the author identifies is "deciding which media to use, and the different ways in which each medium should be used so that they complement one another."

The Role of Technology in Distance Education is a useful and informative book that looks at a broad range of technologies associated with distance education. The book is recommended as a reference for teachers, administrators, and academics involved with the delivery of education at a distance. While more space than necessary was spent describing the characteristics of the technology rather than practical matters arising from its use, it did attain its stated purpose. This book is likely the best comprehensive overview of technology in distance education, notwithstanding its publication date and recent technological developments.

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