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**Book Review**  
***Distance Education: A Systems View, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (2005)***  
**Michael Moore and Greg Kearsley**

reviewed by  
**Rosemary Du Mont**  
Kent State University

Everyone knows that distance education (DE) has helped enormously to provide access to educational opportunities for many who would not otherwise be students. Some educators have a grander vision of the importance of distance education. They think that it changes the view of education itself, of what it is that education is supposed to accomplish, and of the kinds of approaches that might be taken to achieve educational goals.

I share this vision. For me, modern distance education is not only a faster, more efficient, and more technological version of an educational model that has been around since the Middle Ages; it has the capacity to change the nature of the educational process itself. I hold this view in spite of the fact that neither I nor most of the other educators of my generation ever took a course via distance as part of a degree program. Distance education in my era focused on correspondence courses at the college level taken by a small number of people who couldn't access a campus or attend a class on site. Courses offered in this way generally weren't needed by students like me, whose college education emphasized a residential experience and lectures delivered to students by faculty members in classrooms in real time.

Still, from time to time as I moved through my academic career, I needed to acquire knowledge on a topic, and starting in the 1990's, I began considering distance education as a viable option for my own learning. It was an exciting day for me when I signed up for my first distance education course delivered over the computer, before the days of HTML and the web. After I registered by mail, all I had to do was log in at my desk and, presto, course content in the form of pages of text popped up on my computer monitor.

Michael Moore and Greg Kearsley have written a second edition of their book about distance education that examines it from its correspondence school days to its technological present. The book's publisher, Wadsworth, describes it in their PR release as "the most comprehensive and authoritative text on the subject...The authors apply their long and broad experience to the task of selecting from, and clarifying, information on the theory, research, and practice of distance education, including how to design and teach courses, the technologies employed, characteristics of learners, organizational structures, and policy perspectives."

Moore and Kearsley offer many reasons for the need for the new edition of their book. They note that distance education is growing in importance, stating that "the field has indeed grown in scale and significance, even more than we anticipated." They observe in the first few lines of the book that "the last 10 years have brought a sea of change in the extent to which the practice and study of distance education has become accepted, both in academic and in corporate training contexts." Their goals are to provide "newcomers to the field" a description and analysis of the evolution of distance education over the past ten years, presenting these "on a foundation of established theory and the principles of good practice" in an "introductory user-friendly textbook."

Moore and Kearsley are leaders in the distance education field and well positioned to write such a book. Moore is known in academic circles for leadership in conceptualizing and developing the scholarly study of distance education. He established The American Center for Study of Distance Education at Penn State and founded the first American journal on the topic of distance learning, the *American Journal of Distance Education*. Greg Kearsley is currently an independent consultant specializing in online education.

The central theme of the book is stated in the preface. It is “in both its study and its practice, distance education is best understood and best practiced when it is viewed as a total system” (p. xix). The authors suggest that it is not enough to know only the history, the theory, the principles of instructional design or the organizational structure within which distance education functions. Readers must understand “all the component processes that operate when teaching and learning at a distance occurs” (p. 9).

To understand what they mean by “system,” one can look at the boxes in the “systems model for distance education” in figure 1.2 on page 14. Listed across the top of the large boxes are headers labeled content sources, program/course design, delivery, interaction and learning environment. In systems parlance, these items are called “inputs”. Now look at the small boxes at the top of the figure. They are labeled needs assessment and prioritizing, resources, personnel, control and policy. These might be categorized as processes. What is missing from this model is any sense of connection between the input and processes. It is instead a rather static model; the boxes are not linked in any way and there is no suggestion of how these various inputs interact with each other to produce outcomes.

But wait. On page 19, the notion of input and outputs is finally introduced. Figure 1.3 itemizes them. It is stated that all the factors listed in the input column affect in some way the output variables. If we could superimpose figure 1.3 over 1.2 in some manner and show how one impacts the other, then we would start to build a standard systems model.

Be that as it may, systems thinking is problematic as an overriding approach for the topic of distance education because it does not help us appreciate the importance of DE as a constantly changing enterprise and does not equip us – any more than other conventional books about DL do – to understand the complexities of the DE enterprise.

Addleson, in a provocative undated essay on “exploring systems thinking,” suggests that systems thinking focuses on plans, goals and ideas but does not encourage thinking about how knowledge is used and shared.

In order to see how a systems view can be a misleading one for DE managers to adopt and for students of DE to study, consider the sorts of issues or problems that may occupy a DE manager’s time.

Here are some typical DE management problems:

- A university has formed a for-profit DE initiative and it is floundering.
- The faculty do not seem interested in participating in a university’s DE effort.
- Expenses associated with the DE effort have affected its ability to continue and thrive.
- Deadlines for the developing and offering of a DE program have come and gone and the program is still not ready to deliver.
- Marketing efforts have not brought in a lot of “new” students; in fact the preponderance of DE students is also taking courses on campus.
- The entry of a for-profit competitor threatens a local university effort.

What DE decision makers may do in any of these cases depends on how they see them or understand and define the problem. Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross and Smith (1994) suggest a checklist to help guide action in response to such organizational problems. I will summarize these questions and put them in the context of DE:

- Are you willing to examine and challenge your sacred cows related to teaching and learning with DE?
- What kinds of structures have you designed to support such challenges?
- When people raise potentially negative information, do you shoot the messenger?
- Does your DE organization show capabilities it didn't have before?
- Do you feel that your institution is "qualitatively different" than it was before DE was instituted?
- Is the knowledge developed in launching and maintaining your DE program accessible to all in your educational community?

The key to answering these questions by DE managers and by students participating in DE is embodied in a key argument: DE organizations are products of the ways that people in them think and interact. In order to institute, develop and grow DE efforts, you must give people the opportunity to change the ways they think about teaching and learning and interact with each other. No one person can train or command someone else to alter their attitudes, beliefs, skills, capabilities, perceptions or level of commitment to DE.

Thus, instead of focusing on DE as a system, looking at DE from a "learning organization" perspective has real merit. The idea of a learning organization recognizes relationships and involvement of people with each other in a way that conventional management thinking (including systems thinking) does not. The notion of organizational learning can strengthen the study of DE by helping students consider those tangible activities that change the way people conduct their work in a DE environment. Through considering the adoption of new ideas about teaching and learning and investigating the support of innovations in infrastructure and new management methods and tools, students can develop new perceptions about organizational change. That is the message that Moore and Kearlsey are attempting to impart. "Distance education is about change," (p. 14) they state. Yet a sense of the dynamism inherent in change is just not present in their book. The systems view on p. 14 is very static. By breaking DE down into its constituent parts "like a machine," to quote Addleson, the reader is led to believe that he or she can understand exactly and completely how DE works. Once this knowledge is obtained, one may be led to believe that he or she understands what DE is as a system.

In contrast, a learning approach suggests that what is important about DE is people with their different and changing perspectives as they create and maintain the DE enterprise. DE should be seen as a creative process, where everything that happens in all parts of the DE organization influences what gets done and how well it is done. What counts, according to Addleson, is diversity of experience, new insights, the learning that goes on when people meet and discuss projects, problems and programs. If developing a DE course, program or institution is about collaborating, but people have different points of view about how to bring that course or program or DE institution about, then understanding what it is to work with and bridge different and sometimes opposing points of view is a significant part of the knowledge base for those learning about the DE environment. What helps to develop a good understanding of DE is a person's ability to interpret and make sense of different stories, gain insights and draw inspiration from a variety of points of view.

Two final observations: First, there are references to a variety of websites throughout this book. A number of the URL's listed represent dead links, making this feature of the book unsatisfactory. Checking URL's at random, I found that on page 158 there were two dead links and one redirect. On page 159 there was one dead link. Flipping to page 180 there was one dead link; on page 181 two dead links. If the authors had noted when they had last accessed all of the links listed (which is a requirement of many bibliographic style forms), that would have at least provided some value. But there is no such information. Second, though this book has a 2005 copyright date, some of the information is really quite dated. On page 213, there is a description of the Technology Literacy Challenge Fund; the final year for this federal program was 2001-2002. Its successor program is entitled Enhancing Education Through Technology (EETT) and is part of the No Child Left Behind Act (neither are mentioned in this book). On page 214, discussion of developments related to the digital divide, which the reader assumes is current, makes reference to a federal report which was actually distributed in October of 2000, though that date is not referenced in the text.

I cannot recommend using Moore and Kearlsey's book as an up-to-date overview of DE. However, there is another book about distance learning. It was prepared by faculty and staff at Athabasca University in 2004 and is entitled *Theory and practice of online learning* (see [http://cde.athabasca.ca/online\\_book/](http://cde.athabasca.ca/online_book/)). It covers a huge range of topics and can be downloaded as a book, or parts of it can be used separately. It is free and available to all who want to learn about this subject. If one wants an overview of DE, this free resource is more than satisfactory.

## References

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