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Editorial

The Handbook of Distance Education

At the time of writing this editorial, I received an advance copy of the *Handbook of Distance Education*, a book of fifty-five chapters and 896 pages, edited by me with the assistance of Bill Anderson of Massey University. I was asked by the online journal Distance-Educator.com (<http://www.distance-educator.com>) to respond to some questions about the book, and what follows is a slightly edited version of the interview.

Michael Grahame Moore
Editor

Distance-Educator.com: As its editor and after many months of planning, research, writing, and editing, you have just succeeded in publishing the American *Handbook of Distance Education*. What are the distinguishing features of this *Handbook*?

Dr. Michael Grahame Moore: The *Handbook* was conceived as a follow-up to the first-ever compendium of scholarly articles, which is a book I edited that appeared in 1990. That book was called *Contemporary Issues in American Distance Education*, published by Pergamon Press. It is now out of print, but I think it was a really important book because it presented, for the first time, in thirty-two chapters, ideas of all the people who were involved in scholarship and research in distance education. In fact, I think that book was a significant contributor to establishment of the field of study as we now know it, because until then many of the people making up the field of scholarship did not themselves recognize what they had in common. The new *Handbook* is intended to meet several purposes, but one reason for producing it is to record the state of the art, a decade or so on from that first collection of scholarly work. And by the way, several of the authors from that first book feature also in the *Handbook*.

Distance-Educator.com: When you were conceptualizing and developing the *Handbook*, whom did you have in mind as its readers?

MGM: The book is unashamedly academic because I believe quite passionately that the current exuberance for practicing distance education in

the dark, uninformed by theory and research, is tragic, particularly from the point of view of the students who are being served up with programs that fall far short of what informed people should be able to deliver, but also for administrators and policymakers who have put far too much faith in new communications technologies and missed the point that good-quality distance education requires changes in organizational structures and pedagogical methods. I believe in the traditional role of the academy as a place where new knowledge is developed and also disseminated, and in our case what we know about is how to organize and deliver good-quality distance education, so it is up to us to spread this knowledge, by means of journals, conferences, and in this case a major publication. So, I asked each author to review the research as well as practice in that part of the field he or she was most knowledgeable about and to comment on the research, including giving ideas for further research. I think the structure I gave the field in the Pergamon book still holds up today, and so we have sections on theory, organizational structures, pedagogies, and policy issues, as well as a section that reviews the main sectors of practice, including the increasingly important field of international practice. So, to summarize in reply to your question, the book is by scholars and academics, aimed primarily at scholars and academics with the intention of stimulating and supporting further research, but with the definite hope that the research will provide guidance for better practice than much of what we see around us at the present time.

Distance-Educator.com: In a recent conference you referred to a conceptual confusion in the field of distance education. What did you have in mind when you made that statement?

MGM: People are just confused about what distance education is, and this is a shame. Distance education has the potential of delivering more educational opportunities to more people than ever before, to do so at lower average cost, and, what is most important, to be of higher quality than most people can get in other ways, but we aren't doing it, partly because people don't understand what is needed and don't know what distance education really is. Most of what is happening in the name of distance education is simply traditional pedagogy and traditional structures of higher education with the addition of new technology. And people are proposing new names for this old wine in new bottles, such as e-learning, asynchronous learning, distributed learning, flexible learning, open learning, and so on. All this *is* part of distance education, and none of it alone is distance education. But so many people describing distance education are like those trying to describe

the proverbial elephant from their contact with one bit of it, and they are all describing different parts. Yet there is enough sound literature and theory in distance education for people to put it all together and make sense of all this, if only more attention were given to training, to developing courses, and of course to publication. That is one reason we have produced the *Handbook*: to bring together the real authorities and to try to bring a bit of order to the discussions.

Distance-Educator.com: To what extent do you think the *Handbook* addresses this issue?

MGM: Well, as I just said, I hope it does, though I am well aware that to some extent even with the kind of control one can exercise as an editor, there is a limit to what can be done to establish a sound conceptual framework in a book that contains the views of over fifty authors. Because I picked them all, I have to believe that most have a fairly sound theoretical understanding, but it is true that some are stronger than others. But that's the opportunity for the educator, isn't it? I mean, we have to keep nudging people forward and keep trying to do better. When I look at the *Handbook* and think back to when I started in this field, thirty years ago, the progress we have made was beyond our wildest dreams back then. So, although I remain a critic, I am also very proud of our authors and our students and what we have achieved in our field.

Distance-Educator.com: Who is the publisher of the *Handbook of Distance Education*, and how can we find more information about it?

MGM: The book is published by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, and the best way of getting more information is to log on to their Web site, <https://www.erlbaum.com>. A search for "distance education" brings up a description of the book and offer of a hefty discount to individual purchasers, at <http://www.erlbaum.com/shop/tek9.asp?pg=products&specific=0-8058-3924-0>

Note: This interview was originally published 17 February 2003 in the Daily News from Distance-Educator.com and is available online at <http://www.distance-educator.com/dnews/?name=News&file=article&sid=8485>