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500 Tips for Open and Online Learning

Phil Race

London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2nd revised edition, 2005, 188pp. ISBN-13: 978-0415342773 (pbk)

The first edition of this book was *500 tips for open and flexible learning*; now it's *500 tips for open and online learning* – reflecting the huge growth and interest in online learning. Phil Race, though, hasn't forgotten non-electronic learning. The book covers many aspects of open/online learning, from the basic 'what is' type questions, to the more practical 'how do I?'. As with Race's other books, he's not really expecting anyone to read it from cover to cover; it is designed for dipping in and out of.

The book starts out with a 'what is' section, covering the viewpoints of all stakeholders. There seems to be a slight emphasis towards training and those learning at work, though clearly much is applicable to all learners. There is, for example, a linking of open learning to large group teaching – which many lecturers now experience. At the end of this section, Race lists all those types of students for whom open learning can derive most benefits, though he adds 'The list in fact embraces most learners' (p.7), which it does!

The book then moves on to what I suspect is more what most readers are looking for: the more practical 'how to' ideas. Recognising that there's a lot of reinventing the wheel, and, in the same way that most face-to-face courses will use existing text books, rather than develop purpose-written support material, Race gives ideas for evaluating existing material, both print and computer-based.

Most, though, will probably want (or feel that they ought) to produce their own material, and hence that's what the bulk of the book concentrates on. It's made clear, though, that many of the techniques for developing new material can be applied just as well to adapting existing material. For anything computer-based, though, it's necessarily generic, so to implement the ideas, you will have to use either the software company's information, and/or published books. Throughout this section, it's what the learners are doing that is emphasised, rather than what they are reading. At this point, it might seem that there is perhaps more of an emphasis on assessment, rather than learning, but assuming that there is good learning (through experience), then you need to have good strategies

for ensuring that learners have learnt it. Although there is a section on multiple choice, other assessment methods that can work online are suggested – helping developers get away from the ‘read/multiple choice’ pattern, which can dominate poorly designed (boring) online materials. Clearly, as both online and offline materials are being covered, there isn’t the depth of coverage that is given in books such as Horton’s *Designing Web-Based Training* (2000), but on the other hand, Race’s approach is in many ways more open, and less prescriptive, so suits more styles than Horton’s, that, as the title suggests, is purely aimed at training materials.

As Race moves towards looking more at the technology that can support learners, he makes the point that ‘because television is a pervading influence in most people’s lives, there is a tendency to forget most of what we see on television screens’ (p.97). The suggestions for using video that follow again emphasise the need to engage, and how that might be achieved.

One section that I felt could have been enlarged on was that dealing with all the interpersonal aspects – supporting the learners, supporting the tutors, giving feedback, etc. There must be very few people who haven’t misinterpreted an electronic message. However, as this is such a large aspect of really good online learning – the support that learners/tutors/mentors etc. give and receive - it’s probably better to have a book such as Gilly Salmon’s excellent *E-Moderating* (2000) or Preece’s *Online Communities* (2000) as a back-up to Race’s book.

The two appendices are also useful, the first being a checklist of all the points to look for when evaluating resources. The second is the only ‘human’ part of the book – i.e. personal comments from both satisfied and dissatisfied e-students and e-tutors. Hopefully, should readers have taken notes of the ideas in here, their own students/tutors/personal feelings will fall into the former, rather than latter, category!

Overall this is very much a ‘handy hints’ book; it’s ideal for dipping in and out of, and should be of use to all staff, be they geeks or technophobes.

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