Introduction

Information and communication technologies (ICT) are creating exciting opportunities for educators and learners alike. These technologies are helping overcome the constraints of time and place and are increasing access to learning opportunities that would otherwise have been restricted to those geographically close to educational establishments. It is therefore timely that a series of texts introducing some of these technologies should be published. The series is designed primarily for educationalists working in schools, colleges, universities and business, who are wanting to explore the application of learning technologies in their work. It is the result of a joint project developed by Roberts & Associates, Knowledge Connection Corporation, the Office of Learning Technologies at Human Resources Development Canada and Chenelière/Mc Graw Hill. As reviewed, the series comprises the five texts listed above.

Series Presentation

The various authors have considerable experience in the application of learning technologies which is well reflected within the material. However, given its Canadian origins, some of the terminology used could confuse. Attempts have been made in the various texts to address this point and the authors’ succeed in the main in presenting material that is applicable in a wide variety of settings and across boundaries. The texts are well designed and written in an informal and jargon free language. They are typical of good distance learning materials and are suitable for the complete novice and experienced user. Design and layout is consistent throughout the series and is reader friendly with plenty of white space and appropriate illustrations. Each chapter presents broad educational goals allowing the reader an opportunity to identify the learning outcomes of the text and its use from a practical perspective. Chapters are well referenced drawing on both printed text and Internet based sources. Although some of the references are a little dated, all the URLs tried gave access and linked the reader to various resources, discussion forums or institutions as appropriate. Undoubtedly, these build upon and enhance the utility of the series.

Additional Resources

The companion multimedia learning materials comprise two videocassettes and a floppy disk containing a fully functional “web site on a disk”. These materials are referred to within the texts and are a valuable addition to the printed materials. The videocassettes are associated with ‘Audio and Audiographic Learning: The Cornerstone of the Information Highway’, and ‘Compressed Video Learning: Creating Active Learners’. Though well produced, their main function is no more than to help the reader visualise the technology, its use, and intricacies. The floppy disk on the other hand, associated with ‘Networked Learning: The Pedagogy of the Internet’,...
provides additional material to that presented within the text and has ‘hot links’ to all of the URLs mentioned in the text. This is a truly valuable resource that should not be over-looked. Its format is clear and well structured and serves as a good example of web site design. Both the novice and experienced user will find plenty here to ‘bookmark’ or assign to their ‘favourites’ list.

Use of Case Studies

A common feature of each of the texts is the use of case studies that focus on the experiences of others that have had success with networked learning. These case studies have been wisely selected and reflect a diversity of ages, places of study and types of learning experience. They offer a personal and balanced perspective that would, undoubtedly, enhance the experiences of future users. Essentially the result of interviews with the participants involved, they include a wealth of tips and advice to assist the reader who is thinking of utilising such activities within their teaching. Bias towards Canadian examples is quite natural considering the origin of the series. Even so, it does not detract from the usefulness of these exemplars although the overall attraction of the series would be enhanced if more case studies from Europe and Australasia were included in future editions. Useful and welcome additions to the accounts cited are the contact details of each of the participants. It seems a general feature of Internet based learning that both established users and relative newcomers are more than willing to share their experiences and knowledge with others.

Specific Comments

There are a number of points to raise that refer directly to specific texts within the series. In respect of Learning on the Information Highway - A learner's guide to the Technologies, there are a few concerns, although that may be too strong a word. Firstly, the apparent contradiction as to whether 18 or 19 learners will tell their stories and a missing line of text on page 42 should have been avoided before publication. Secondly, the authors’ definitions of audio and videoconferencing suggest that these technologies are used to link people at three or more sites. However, both modes of conferencing are only point-to-point without the use of a bridge, or a special multipoint version (such as Polycom MP or Sony Contact). Unfortunately, this definition also appears elsewhere within the series. And lastly, as frequently happens with texts discussing current and emerging technologies, the authors could not have anticipated the explosion in the availability of free internet service provision (ISP) which dates their definition of an ISP as a company providing the service for a fee.

Classrooms with a Difference: Facilitating Learning on the Information Highway includes a ‘Resource Kit’ that gives working examples of student handbooks for the variety of learning formats presented in its second section. The detail and the cost to provide such material would be prohibitive for most institutions, nevertheless, the reader will find some useful gems that can only improve the quality of student information when using learning technologies as a component of the course design.

The final part of Networked Learning: The Pedagogy of the Internet takes the reader through the issues involved in utilising networked learning and offers useful advice regarding the various options. The section concludes with the important topic of course evaluation and the assessment of learning. As with the case study approach described earlier, the text draws upon the experiences of others and presents a series of evaluation case studies taken from the literature. These are somewhat brief and serve mainly to summarise the findings of the original report. However, the complete reference of each is provided for the reader who wishes to follow any through.

In Compressed Video Learning: Creating Active Learners, the author refers to evaluative evidence (page 94) that suggests that there is ‘no significant difference in learning outcomes between classroom and any type of videoconference learning’. This finding is reflected in our use of the technology where a student cohort achieved 100% success rate in the summative assignment. In addition, comments of the external examiner to this course were particularly complimentary in terms of its innovation and the quality of the students’ work.

Conclusions

Overall, the texts communicate a very positive outcome to the learning experiences of users. Whilst this is, perhaps, to be expected of such a series, in many ways it under-plays the frustrations that can occur when difficulties arise with the technology. From personal experience, we know how frustrated students become, for example, when links are lost during a videoconference at which there is no one local who is truly ‘expert’ in the
technology. The local expert, in our opinion, is vital to the successful use and acceptance of the technology, even though the series implies that learners can quickly learn how to manage it. Still, the authors make no claims to providing detailed step-by-step instructions in the use of learning technologies or their trouble-shooting. Rather they explore the application of the more commonly used technologies in a wide variety of settings and the majority of readers will find something of relevance to the educational settings in which they practice.

As you work through the series you find yourself re-evaluating the way you present information and the effect this has on the student. In particular the importance of evaluating your learning style and comparing your approach to the learning theory presented in the texts. One major advantage of reading a text by authors outside of the United Kingdom is the different perspective given to learning strategies and theories, and how they are applied to the multicultural setting. The series certainly forces you to revisit your working philosophies and promotes critical reflection. Apart from the minor criticisms presented, the texts provide useful insights into the application of learning technologies and should prove to be a valuable resource for both the novice and experienced user.

Further information can be obtained about the series from:
http://www.RobertsAssoc.on.ca.