

Teaching for Learning

(Book review)

Reviewer:

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Textbook details:

Teaching for Learning
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The book “*Teaching and Learning*” is a valuable resource for distance educators and trainers who want to create relevant and intellectually challenging online courses. Nichols aims to share the best educational practices from traditional or face-to-face teaching and from the field of distance education. It is an ambitious goal that gives the book a distinctive purpose and helps the author strive for a comprehensive view of the educational process. The book provides practical guidelines for distance educators that are based on solid research and classroom experiences. The book is divided into three major sections: the teaching and learning process, universal principles of teaching and learning and the final section describes how educational principles can impact vital instructional issues.

The first section of the book covers the nature of education. Distance educators must create learning opportunities that foster deep learning within students. Nichols outlines six principles that promote reflective thinking and understanding in adult learners. The acronym VARIES represents the following educational principles: variety, access, reflection, interactivity, explicit and support. The six principles are key to the entire book and the author utilizes a variety of educational contexts and delivery systems to help instructors to implement the learning principles in their classrooms or training sessions. The second section of the book is devoted to expanding upon these principles by addressing each one in a practical manner. Nichols brings a good international flavor to his book that makes it quite useful for educators from a variety of educational settings. It is interesting and enlightening to read stories from his personal teaching experiences in New Zealand. This gives added value to the book to observe how the author has developed his philosophy of teaching using today’s technology.

The book discusses a host of practical issues such as how to facilitate online discussions. Educators must have social skills (i.e. encourage student responses), moderator skills (i.e. help focus students on meaningful issues) and support skills (i.e. synthesis online dialog). Nichols utilizes research from the best writers in the field. For instance, the author wisely cites Solomon’s (2000) work that addresses the need to help online instructors reach a diversity of students who have a variety of expectations, learning styles, computer and communication skills that influence their online participation in learning communities. Solomon has developed a five stage learning model to help train and prepare online teachers:

1. Access and motivation
2. Online socialization
3. Information exchange
4. Knowledge construction
5. Development

It is a creative model that reflects a positive progression in the quality and intensity of interaction between students and between students and their teachers. The educator’s role changes at different stages depending upon student needs and circumstances within the class. Therefore, it is vital to know their “audience” which is constantly changing from class to class. Nichols stresses the need to develop a healthy learning community by understanding the importance of cultivating a friendly and academically challenging class. The asynchronous nature of bulletin boards and online newsgroups does give the teacher the opportunity to help students who vary

in their learning needs and facilitate in-depth discussions. Instructors will need to have a consistent online presence with their students to provide the specific guidance to help them become comfortable working in cyberspace. The instructor must constantly promote and encourage active participation by all students. Obviously, this is a challenging goal due to absence of face-to face interaction. Yet, it is important that the learning needs of all students are addressed during a class. There is nothing worse than having a student feeling lonely and lost in an online class! Nichol's book contains a host of ideas to help instructors to provide the support and instructional strategies that effectively meet student needs.

The author strives to make the book a relevant resource for today's educators. Often, the most difficult challenge for distance educators involves creating reflective teaching opportunities for their students. It is not difficult sharing basic information and having students describe various aspects of a subject or topic. Yet, it is far more challenging to consistently foster high order thinking skills in the online environment. Nichols offers advice and teaching tips that tackles this complex issue. The book helps instructors become skilled facilitators who will be able to weave student contributions into a narrative that highlights course principles and theories. Teachers will notice a definite change in their students who move from being merely knowledge transmitters to creators or authors of creative ideas. The book describes an assortment of reflective strategies to stimulate critical thinking skills by having instructional exercises such as interpreting information at a deeper level. Then, students will be able to monitor and evaluate their own thinking skills by examining questions that require conceptual analysis. Nichols recommends using relevant case studies and a variety of problems and projects that have real-life consequences. Adult educators must offer illustrations and problems that bring a slice of reality into the classroom to enhance the student's motivation to learn new knowledge and skills. For instance, book reviews, journaling and essays are viable assignments when they are connected to personal and professional life experiences.

In closing, Nichols has utilized his rich background as a distance educator, course designer and participant in the post-graduate program in Open and Distance Education in UK's Open University to create an outstanding book. Nichol's research reflects an excellent example of how to apply universal educational theories and practices to Web-based educational courses. The author uses a holistic approach that integrates both independent and collaborative student work into online classes. Nichols should be commended for producing one of the best books in the growing field of distance education.

Reference

Solomon, G. (2000). *E-moderating: The key to teaching and learning online*. London: Kogan Page.