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Book Review: Robin Mason and Frank Rennie, e-Learning: The Key Concepts. London and New York: Routledge, 2006. xxxviii + 158 pp. ISBN 0415373077, \$24.95 (pbk)

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New Media Society 2007; 9; 1042

DOI: 10.1177/14614448070090060803

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untangle game studies' inherent complexity, but rather tries to see in it patterns of meaning interwoven among art, media and technology.

Robin Mason and Frank Rennie, *e-Learning: The Key Concepts*. London and New York: Routledge, 2006. xxxviii + 158 pp. ISBN 0415373077, \$24.95 (pbk)

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In the broadest sense of the term, 'e-Learning' consists of activities in which billions of people participate daily around the world. The routine use of the internet in particular and new media technologies in general has transformed learning practices and registered in theories of cognition and education over the last few decades. Robin Mason and Frank Rennie, the authors of *e-Learning: The Key Concepts*, are specifically interested in the growth of e-learning within higher educational institutions. However, in their detailed 'Introduction' to the list of key concepts associated with e-learning, they consider practices of e-learning in a wider context.

The book opens with a section on the definitions and history of e-learning in education and training, with particular attention to the UK and the US. Borrowing from Rosenberg (2001), they establish that 'e-learning refers to the use of internet technologies to deliver a broad array of solutions that enhance knowledge and performance. It is based on three fundamental criteria: 1) it is networked; 2) it is delivered to the end-user via a computer using standard internet technology; and 3) it focuses on the broadest view of learning' (p. xiv). As it turns out from the rest of the introduction, this definition remains broad enough to allow for confusions to emerge around various terms that are used to describe similar processes of electronically mediated learning. In an attempt to systematize these terms, the authors even include an illustration that visually models the various overlapping semantic domains of face-to-face (or f2f) learning, blended learning, distance education and e-learning as so many rectangles, all embedded in the largest category, 'distributed education' (p. xvii). The authors also list and try to distinguish from e-learning terms such as open learning, flexible learning, experiential learning, web-based learning and virtual university.

The fact that there are so many of these new concepts in use points to both the elusive nature and revolutionary potential of the educational practices that fall

under the rubric of e-learning. The authors, clearly committed to realizing such potential, assert that e-learning practices are aligned with constructivist educational principles. These envision shared responsibility for learning within the learning community and afford much more independence to the learner than the traditional, hierarchical learning environment that the authors associate with most face-to-face classroom interaction in higher education. Since the teacher is relegated to the role of facilitator, an e-learning environment is conducive to self-directed learning (p. xx).

In a fully electronic course or in blended courses where a course website, bulletin boards, chatrooms, blogging, wikis or multimedia material supplement in-class interaction, all traditional aspects of learning are subject to reevaluation. The book devotes considerable space to discussing one of the most important of these aspects: assessment. On the one hand, the web has created a range of collaborative, interactive and student-centered forms of assessment, which could teach students what traditional forms of assessment typically fail to do: how to evaluate their own learning. Feedback loops, which lead students to incorporate instructor feedback into their assignments; group assignments, which help students develop team working skills; and opportunities for students to engage in the construction of criteria for judging work, are some of the most effective assessment features of an e-learning course. On the other hand, online learning has made plagiarism rampant and more difficult to detect. In addition, the innovative potential of e-learning assessment techniques often remains unexplored by overworked instructors, who tend to fall back on or have to yield to the more centralized, centralized standards of face-to-face instruction at their institutions.

On the whole, the authors are resoundingly optimistic about the possibilities of e-learning. Some of the benefits they discuss in some detail include opportunities to work collaboratively, and as part of larger online communities; a new excitement about incorporating the possibilities of multimedia learning for both instructors and students; a shift in learning goals from memorizing facts to developing the skills to find, manipulate, analyse, synthesize and repurpose information; and the general move toward a student-centered, self-directed learning. They spend some time describing the technological conditions for creating virtual learning environments (VLE) and managed learning environments (MLE) – terms most often used in the UK – more often called course management systems (CMS) and learning management systems (LMS) in the USA. We are also reminded that, while the possibilities offered by these systems are seductive, they rely on the availability of cheap and unlimited broadband and the wide accessibility of wireless and mobile technologies and corresponding technical expertise on the participants' part.

The novelty of the terrain covered by *e-Learning: The Key Concepts* is reflected in the sometimes surprisingly eclectic selection of key concepts whose definition takes up most of the book. For instance, one finds 'constructivism', a term most often used in education, next to a general notion such as 'community' and to

rather specialized acronyms such as CMA (computer-marked assignment) and CMC (computer-mediated conferencing). It is useful to have technical, philosophical and ideological aspects of e-learning referenced in the same volume but it also makes one wonder how exactly to use the book. An encyclopedia would invite a selective reading of entries. But a reader is more likely to turn to three different, more traditionally specialized sources for pedagogical, technological and philosophical concepts such as those above. Even more likely, the reader would go to Wikipedia or some other online source to find all three at their fingertips, with several other linked sites to follow. This vague sense of contradiction haunts the volume: it is a hardcopy book of concepts emergent from a new field that is largely online and virtual, evolving so quickly that definitions can hardly keep up with it.

But for someone who is new to the field, *e-Learning* is a useful starting point. One of its strengths is the clarity and detail of the entries. All concepts are defined and cross-referenced in relation to others in a language that does not take the shortcuts online guides tend to. A list of recommended reading follows the entries, which provides succinct summaries of similar books available for further reading.

Reference

Rosenberg, M. (2001) *e-Learning: Strategies for Delivering Knowledge in the Digital Age*. New York: McGraw-Hill.