education review // reseñas educativas
editors: david j. blacker / gustavo e. fischman / melissa cast-brede / gene v glass

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

September 26, 2013 ISSN 1094-5296

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the
College of Education and Human Services of the University of Delaware
the National Education Policy Center, and the
Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University
Follow *Education Review* on Facebook and on Twitter: #EducReview

Phillips, Rob; McNaught, Carmel & Kennedy, Gregor. (2012) *Evaluating E-Learning: Guiding Research and Practice*. NY: Routledge.

Pp. ix + 207 ISBN 978-0-415-88193-7

Reviewed by Laurence Peters
UN Association Graduate Fellowship Program
Washington D.C.

E-Learning is now big business. The market is almost $50 billion worldwide. According to Ambient Research, 25 million post-secondary students in the United States will be taking classes online in 2015 as the number of students who take classes on physical campuses will decline from 14.4 million in 2010 to just 4.1 million in two years time. (Nagel, 2011) The sector has grown from early use of computers for corporate and government training in the 1960s to include schools and universities in the 1990s with the advent of the World Wide Web. Now in the 21st century it includes mobile gadgets and tablet devices. As Phillips and his co-authors state, e-learning should be

Citation: Peters, Laurence. (2013 September 26) Review of *Evaluating E-Learning: Guiding Research and Practice* by Phillips, Rob; McNaught, Carmel & Kennedy, Gregor. *Education Review, 16.* Retrieved [Date] from http://www.edrev.info/reviews/rev1254.pdf

considered primarily a branch of education, but increasingly it has become a branch of information communication technologies.

The rapid rise of e-learning together with its wide diversity of forms and formats have presented multiple problems for researchers, not least of which is to keep up with its chameleon-like changes. In the past, evaluators have tended to stumble around two kinds of challenge. The first we can label *missing the substance for the sizzle*. For example, when the personal computer came into widespread use in schools, educators were concerned whether the PC raised test scores, as if their very presence in the classroom had some kind of magic effect on student achievement, independent of other influences such as how they were being used.

The second mistake was almost the reverse of the first fallacy, the *myopic focus* on only one feature that made the technology application distinctive – whether it was the use of videos, or the use of interactivity and just focus on isolating that one aspect. The authors of *Evaluating E-Learning* want us to learn from that experience. They argue quite forcefully for the position that e-learning evaluation, "should focus holistically on evaluating learning environments, rather than just evaluating the technologies which contribute to the environment." This is a larger leap than it might appear since there are so many contextual elements to e-learning and each one of those elements brings different methodological traditions with them. You only have to start listing them to gain an appreciation for the challenges involved in e-learning evaluation: curriculum design; role of teachers; functionality of the learning artifact (typically the software). Not surprisingly it is easy to see how many of these variables can all too easily be overlooked when it comes time for administrators to make generalized statements about e-learning effectiveness.

Evaluating E-Learning provides, as the authors clearly intend, a needed treatise for doctoral academic researchers interested in becoming e-learning evaluators. The authors provide a roadmap to common terms of art, particular approaches and methodologies as well as an extensive list of references in a clear sequential and workmanlike way. Because the chapters and sequencing of information they

contain are constructed so well the reader can relatively easily see the differences between formative and summative evaluation and how evaluation changes over the life cycle of the e-learning evaluation. Concepts such as baseline assessments are well described as are the rich variety of qualitative methods.

The book's downside is that it reads like it was written by an academic committee intent on excluding as much as possible the real world's rough edges. Educational evaluation is presented as if it is a branch of zoology. The reality is that evaluators rarely get to frame their questions or advocate for the interpretation of their findings. Reading a book like *Evaluating E-Learning,* we can easily forget that evaluation is often a politically fraught activity, too often viewed as narrowly focused, unrealistic, unfair to participants, irrelevant to decision makers and too expensive. In my time in the US Congress and working for the US Department of Education, I became familiar with the art of selectively quoting from evaluations favorable to a particular agenda and ignoring others and the reluctance of educational developers to move beyond quoting one pilot study to justify large-scale public investments. The authors touch on an aspect of this neglect or disrespect for educational evaluation, acknowledging that it is "rare" for any e-learning project to be sustained over a long period and that E-Learning disasters are too often hushed up. However, they do not address the reasons why.

The authors' unwillingness to deal with such thorny issues as what might be the connection between the transitory nature of much e-learning experimentation and evaluation is consistent with the highly decontextualized approach they take to their subject. The book suffers from a turgid tone mostly as a result of a general failure to provide examples of what kinds of problem would be good to assess or analyze. Surely good examples abound, e.g., a) the use of certain kinds of software to teach remedial math, b) the use of e-books, c) in what areas the approach produce exceptional results versus mediocre ones, d) or even more basic questions such as what e-learning accomplishes that could not be done through face-to-face interaction.

The first chapter directed to teachers represents an effort to answer some basic questions. Teachers are taken

through a checklist of simple ways they might consider identifying a "problem or phenomenon to be investigated" and how they should go about creating an evaluation plan. The following chapter on the *Learning Environment Learning Processes and Learning Outcomes* (LEPO) Framework is strong on categorizing the variety of ways to conceptualize learning environments, distinguishing between such elements as learning processes (the activities) and learning outcomes. The language feels 10,000 feet or more above what an actual classroom looks and feels like. The authors prefer the desiccated language of the laboratory where teachers are referred to as "actors" who "interact" with "three components, the learner and the teacher" who "all interact with five more elements of the framework." What are we talking about here? Are we talking about students who are working for some or part of their time on learning modules via a computer with the teacher just observing? Is the learning module integrated into a Learning Management System (LMS) which is recording the students' responses. Is the teacher able to access those responses in real time? If so do they comment in any way on the students' progress? What the model does not seem to take into account is the quality of these interactions and how to measure them in any meaningful way.

The authors are simply content to describe their frictionless systems while acknowledging the fact that "the role of teachers as assessors of learning outcomes is not explicit in any of the models" and that not just at the university level there is "insufficient debate and recognition" as to the rich diversity of teaching. So while qualitative methods are increasingly seen as acceptable, there is little guidance on why or when to use them. Similarly, there is a lack of acknowledgement of the way that decision makers routinely dismiss qualitative evidence – or pilot experiments with small numbers – as hardly superior to anecdotal evidence. When the authors do provide examples, e.g., issues related to mixed methods, they suffer from the same lack of real world context that typifies the rest of the book. For example, the authors consider the choice of questionnaires versus the use of video stimulated recall. However, they only discuss the relative length of time it takes to design and run a survey as opposed to use of screen capture technology, failing to take into consideration what key questions would drive the

use of one technique rather than another. To the book's detriment, these kinds of working examples are largely absent from the narrative.

The book's major strength is that it provides a basic vocabulary for students in postgraduate courses so they can begin to understand the wide variety of tools evaluators now have at their disposal. If we are to build successful as well as sustainable e-learning models, this book reminds us of the complexity of the task and the necessity of evaluation attending to the multiple factors throughout the life-cycle of any innovation. The scale of the growing global e-learning effort currently transforming our entire education enterprise suggests the need for a shelf load of such books that can speak not just to novice doctoral students but to the range of professionals who must become more literate in evaluation methods and more engaged in their wise interpretation.

Reference

Nagel, D. (2011, January 26) Online learning set for explosive growth as traditional classrooms decline. *Campus Technology*. Retrieved July 15, 2013 from http://tinyurl.com/49cz7m8

About the Reviewer



Laurence Peters is currently directing the UN Association Graduate Fellowship Program in Washington D.C. His background is in educational technology and policy. He studied at the University of Sussex, where he received a BA degree in English Literature in 1974. He received his MA (Educ) degree from the University of London, Institute of Education (1978) and a PhD from the University of Michigan. After writing and teaching he gained a Law Degree from the University of Maryland in 1986 and became counsel to the Subcommittee on Select Education & Civil Rights for the US House of Representatives (1986-1993) before serving as Senior Policy Advisor to the US Department of Education (1993-2001). He has published *Global Education: Using Technology to Bring the World to Your Students* (ISTE, 2009) and *Scaling Up Success: Lessons from Technology-Based Educational Improvement* (Jossey-Bass, 2005) with Chris Dede and James Honan. His website is at www.laurencepeters.com

Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*.

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the
College of Education and Human Services of the University of Delaware
The National Education Policy Center http://nepc.colorado.edu, and the
Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University

Editors
David J. Blacker
blacker@edrev.info
Gustavo Fischman
fischman@edrev.info
Melissa Cast-Brede
cast-brede@edrev.info
Gene V Glass
glass@edrev.info

Follow *Education Review* on Facebook and on Twitter: #EducReview