The SAGE Handbook of E-learning Research, by Richard Andrews and Caroline Haythornthwaite

Dianne Conrad
Athabasca University

What is a handbook? Of the many definitions provided via Google, the notion of a definitive and concise collection of information on a subject makes good sense, as does Moore’s definition in the preface to his 2003 edition of the Handbook of Distance Education, where he describes a handbook as an “authoritative compilation reflecting the state of the art” (p. ix) of a particular field. My primary concern with Sage’s 2007 edition of the Handbook of E-learning Research is that it does not fulfill its role as a handbook. That said, and more will be said about that later, editors Andrews and Haythornthwaite have assembled a prestigious cohort of scholars and produced a handsome volume of over 500 pages.

The book’s contributors are well introduced in the first few pages. Contributing authors comprise an eclectic mix of cultures and continents: Reflecting the two editors’ constituencies in England and the United States, the 23 chapters feature 10 English-based writers, including 5 from the University of York; and 14 American-based writers, including 5 from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Those remaining include scholars from Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, Norwegian, and Japanese universities; 3 scholars are from the private sector.

The book’s table of contents outlines its five-part structure and lists the titles of chapters contained within each part. In order, the five parts of the handbook are: Contexts for Researching E-learning; Theory; Policy; Language and Literacy; and Design Issues. The book begins with a lengthy (52 pages) introductory chapter, written by editors Andrews...
and Haythornthwaite, toward the end of which they explain the “structure and limitations of the handbook,” noting that it was necessary to make choices on what to include, what not to include, and how to position topics that were included. Given the vast, multifaceted, and global nature of the field of e-learning, making the choices that structure the volume was, no doubt, difficult.

I dwelt on the authors’ geography earlier because issues regarding location and affiliation contribute to the character, and in this reviewer’s opinion, lingering questions, about the nature and purpose of the handbook. Similarly, I question whether the choice of topic sections reflects, in a balanced way, the e-learning field. Most noticeably absent, from a practitioner’s stance, is work that addresses research on the pedagogy of e-learning and on teaching practice. Overall, the material reflects a strong bias toward a scientific, technology-based understanding of the field. Of course we understand that e-learning is realized through the application or mediation of technology; much recent research, however, has expanded to include a broader range of topics that cluster around issues of knowledge, culture, learning, teaching, and theory. Only 2 of 14 articles published in the latest volume of the well-accessed online journal *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, for example, deal directly with technological issues.

The overall pitch of the handbook appears to me to be beyond the reach of the novice or even most graduate students (at least those I have taught.) I would also suggest that it is not a book for practitioners, by virtue of its elevated scope, advanced theory, and, in many chapters, very densely-academic writing style. That said, there is a wealth of knowledge contained in the book’s chapters, although some chapters are definitely more readable than others. Hoadley’s chapter on learning sciences’ theories and methods for e-learning researchers was broadly foundational in nature but targeted and useful. This is the type of chapter that I would expect to populate a handbook, as opposed to the more topic-selective chapters that appear to represent value-driven choices; some examples of those types of chapters include discussions on digital video (why digital video? Why not Wimba, blogs, or wikis?), bilingualism, professional development for teachers, or e-learning community case-studies within a specific graduate program.

E-learning veterans Hiltz, Turoff, and Harasim have contributed a broad-based chapter on the evolution of the field that they term ALN (Asynchronous Learning Networks). While hiving off ALN from the larger field of e-learning could be problematic for some less-experienced practitioners, the authors make clear the relationship of each subfield to the other—a necessary step in a compilation of discussions gathered in from so many different parts of the field. As a result of this diversity, the handbook sports a little “blind man and the elephant” ambience.

Melody Thompson’s chapter, “From Distance Education to E-learning,” tackles a philosophical and practical tension that continues to evolve with the field. As a seasoned distance educator, this reviewer found it comforting to see some of our fundamental issues—marginalization, the notion of “education versus learning,” language, epistemology, philosophy—reintroduced within a handbook’s mandate. Thompson’s chapter also explicitly addresses the field’s research issues, and, in so doing, helps to assuage this reviewer’s concern about the handbook’s titular claim to be addressing research. Few of the chapters in the book address “research” as an activity or enterprise: should they have? This researcher’s view holds that if the *Handbook of E-learning Research* simply presents researched data rather than investigating the science of research, the result becomes indistinguishable from any other edited compilation of e-learning writings.

Of the book’s five sections, I thought the policy section contained many of the book’s strongest pieces. Specifically, Gráinne Conole’s chapter offers an international comparison of policy and practice that is both
broad and deep, both theoretical and practical. Conole looks at policy directives in Africa, China, Australia, Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States. She considers cultural impacts, urban and rural divides, funding structures and organizational structures—and she also considers, appropriately, the role of research in the policy arena. Her contribution should be useful to senior academics and those with far-reaching policy interests. Michelle Kazmer’s chapter on community-embedded learning was also interesting to this reviewer because of its novel focus on learners’ community embeddedness in local contexts. Kazmer also ended her chapter by looking at research implications for her area of interest.

Further along in the text, in the last section on design issues, Stuckey and Barab’s chapter takes a more conventional approach to online community. I appreciated the centrality of their piece, evidenced by their plentiful references to the major contributors to this area of our field. Several chapters in the handbook, on the other hand, featured a much narrower range of references, focusing heavily on the proceedings of specific conferences or a specific journal.

And although Stuckey and Barab discussed aspects of community, as did Kazmer, the absence of a system of editorial cross-referencing among chapters, where readers might be directed to similar topics or issues located elsewhere in the text, left the two pieces unconnected.

In Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, each character perceives reality—and each other character—in a different way. Their readings of reality do not match up. Pirandello added explanatory text to the beginning of his work in an attempt to create a clarifying context. Although the handbook has many pages of explanatory and context-setting material at its outset, this reader struggled to understand the raison d’être of this collection of chapters that purport to constitute a handbook. Deep rather than “wide,” eclectic rather than comprehensive, the *SAGE Handbook of E-learning Research* should, however, provide scholars with a well-informed source of information on select areas of interest within the broad e-learning field.

**REFERENCE**
