

Book Review

Transactional Distance and Adaptive Learning: Planning for the Future of Higher Education

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Saba, Farhad and Shearer, Rick (2018). *Transactional Distance and Adaptive Learning: Planning for the Future of Higher Education*. 212 pages. Paperback: New York: Routledge.

ISBN: 9781138302327
ISBN-10: 1138302325

Keywords: book review, transactional distance, Michael Moore, adaptive learning

Michael Moore's theory of transactional distance (TDT) is a fundamental pedagogical theory and systematic way to analyze the practice of distance education. First articulated under that name nearly 40 years ago, TDT has by now attained the status of an essential distance learning theory, one that will not be unfamiliar to most working today in the field of online education. This new book demonstrates how this deceptively simple and elegant theory continues to hold currency in the midst of the disruptive and sometimes confusing changes we are witnessing in higher education.

The authors of this book, Farhad Saba and Rick Shearer, are well-known and respected figures in online education, and they bring rich experience and a depth of perspective that allows them to both measure the distance we have come in technology-mediated education and, at the same time, to demonstrate a heightened awareness of the perils and potential benefits of new communication and technology tools.

To provide a very rough summary for the purpose of this review, TDT rests on three essential but relative variables: structure, dialogue, and learner autonomy. *Structure* is concerned with the instructional design of a course and the elements potentially responsive to the individual learner; *dialogue* indicates the instructional dialogue between instructor and learner or between learners as a group as managed by the instructor; and *learning autonomy* is the degree to which individual learners are able to determine or control the path of their learning. Michael Moore himself provides a delightful preface to this book, succinctly explaining the theory, and neatly framing its history.

The authors have reintroduced TDT with startlingly fresh relevancy for some of the issues of greatest concern today. In short, the authors define the dilemma we face as the continued use of industrial educational methods in a postindustrial world and, through reference to TDT, attempt to indicate some pathways to transforming higher education for the better.

The strength of TDT as the authors see it is that it is a dynamic system, that it can be objectively measured, and that it is learner focused, with an eye to empowering the individual learner. The authors convincingly transport us from the theoretical basis of TDT to demonstrating that its systems dynamics approach could be applied on several different levels in higher education planning.

After providing an overview of TDT concepts and the broader context for the theory in Chapters 1 and 2, the authors have organized subsequent chapters based on a hierarchical model of technology-based higher education systems—starting with such matters as hardware, software, and adaptive learning; subsequently focusing on instructional systems and instructional design models; and then tackling complex areas of curricular, management, societal, and global systems in light of TDT.

Saba and Shearer consider structural changes in higher education and the ways these have combined with technological trends to pose both opportunities and complex problems. Using case studies at hypothetical institutions, they focus on situations as varied as cascading institutional changes resulting from a switch to the centralized use of one LMS; disappointing outcomes after moving a large enrollment general education class online; attempts to dramatically alter the curriculum of a school of professional studies; and meeting the challenge of globalization. These case studies serve to highlight and help contextualize the issues in each chapter.

The book is crisply organized, with introductory material and concluding summaries for most chapters, elucidating for the reader how each chapter's ideas build on the preceding ones. Topping out at under 200 pages of main text, with references at the end of each chapter, along with a helpful appendix selectively highlighting some key research, it is an enjoyable read, with the authors managing to bring clarity to even the most complex aspects of TDT's application.

Those completely new to distance learning theory will find in this book an easy-to-digest introduction to TDT concepts, while those with more experience with teaching and learning with technology will find the applications of TDT to current problems compelling and well argued. The last chapter provides a brief for strategic planning using systems dynamics modeling.

While adaptive learning is highlighted in the book's title, there is only one chapter dedicated to adaptive learning, but it is a hefty and in-depth section of some 37 pages, and it would appear that the reader is meant to find a more pervasive connection between adaptive learning and TDT throughout the book in regard to the potential of systems for dynamically responding to the needs of the individual learner.

Chapter 5 does an excellent job of defining adaptive systems technologies, explaining how they use data to dynamically respond to individual learners, and succinctly describing the various approaches and measures and the progress made in developing software to accomplish these ends. It examines the manifestations of such technologies as they range from intelligent tutoring systems to sophisticated simulations and games. The authors briefly discuss how such adaptive systems, some now available through software and textbook publishers, have begun to be adopted in higher education, and they present a realistic view of both the promise and limitations of such adaptive learning tools in what really is still an early stage in their development.

The authors make a point of associating TDT with what they term “postindustrial” and “postmodern” ideas. While the postindustrial system is characterized by the authors as providing a greater degree of autonomy on the part of the learner, one might quibble with the authors’ rather elastic use of the term *postmodern* to define what they call “an increasingly dynamic and non-linear system.” But once defined, their terminology works well enough in that it is applied in a consistent manner throughout the book.

Saba and Shearer provide some fresh thinking on how data on learning could be more effectively analyzed to provide insights for practical improvements. They make a persuasive argument for focusing more on individual student variation than drawing conclusions only from research of students as a group. In Chapters 7 and 8, concerning instructional systems and instructional design models, they urge the reader to avoid the tendency to assign bifurcated and diametrically opposed categories, such as learner centered versus instructor centered, constructivist versus behaviorist, and individual versus collaborative—the authors view these pairs, rather, as “two ends of a spectrum” (p. 100). They point out that TDT acknowledges the dynamic nature of instructional variables; therefore, “the primary issue is what serves the learner best in a moment of instruction” (p. 126).

Given TDT’s emphasis on the important role played by faculty in regard to dialogue with the individual learner, I had hoped to see more attention to faculty roles in the use of technology to enhance teaching and learning and as part of the discussion of the future of higher education. Perhaps the authors assumed that readers would intuit the important role and specific actions played by faculty in each issue discussed.

Faculty do appear as characters in the case studies, representing various points of view, but in their otherwise probing commentary on the changes in the higher education landscape, it seemed a missed opportunity that the authors did not directly address such issues as the diminished role of faculty with the growth of nontenured, part-time faculty (a trend we have seen growing for at least as long as TDT). They only lightly touch on the fact that the increasing disaggregation of roles in online education can sometimes render faculty peripheral to planning, course development, or student support efforts, or that technology is viewed by some within and outside of the academy as a way to replace, at least in part, those inconsistent and sometimes intractable, all-too-human faculty. The authors perhaps missed an opportunity to press the point that faculty are viewed too often as an obstacle rather than an essential part of the transformation and enhancement of education through the introduction of technology.

TDT as a profoundly humanistic approach would suggest that the opposite should occur and that the faculty–student dialogue, a key measure of transactional distance, could and should be supported by technology. The majority of students still value and want faculty directly involved in their education, even in instructional models where learner autonomy is high.

The book is a valuable reminder of the simplicity, elasticity, and strength of TDT to inform our understanding of teaching and learning with technology.

Overall, this is a book by authors who care deeply about the future of higher education, and the analysis, conclusions, and recommendations offered here are therefore ones that readers can take to heart.