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# Book Review of *Transactional Distance and Adaptive Learning: Planning for the Future of Higher Education*

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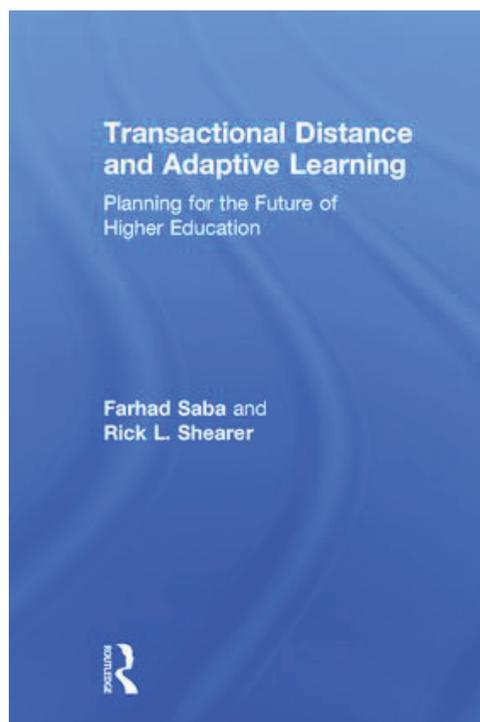https://dx.doi.org/10.5944/openpraxis.12.1.1079

## Introduction

The book is based upon one of the foundational theories of distance education: Michael G. Moore's theory of transactional distance (TTD). The theory, appropriate for all forms of education, proposes that learners' education experience (in the form of transactional distance) is determined by three factors: dialogue (reciprocity between teacher and learner), structure (flexibility to individual learners' needs) and autonomy (learner choice as to what, how and how much to learn). According to an insert on the book's opening page, the theory "provides a distinct analytical and planning foundation" for "transitioning from mass instructional and management systems in higher education to dynamic and transformational futures that focus on each individual learner".

The book is written for senior managers/administrators at all levels, though distance and online education theorists and practitioners will also do well to engage with this title for reasons explained below. Importantly, readers are advised in the forward (by Michael G. Moore) to consider the learner as an individual, and to put aside any assumptions about 'distance' referring solely to geographic separation. The book describes education not as it is but *as it might be*, drawing on reviewed literature and a systems view.

## Structure and content

The book consists of 13 chapters and an appendix. While most cited sources date from the mid-2010s and earlier, it is clear that the authors have a broad and well-informed perspective on the TTD and how it might be applied to education today.

After an initial chapter explaining the TTD and the relationships across its variables, the book adopts a systems approach reflected in subsequent chapters. Following subsequent chapters devoted to hardware and software and communications systems, the book introduces adaptive learning systems in the book's longest and (for me) most intriguing chapter. Saba and Shearer provide an important, optimistic and grounded treatment of adaptive learning system possibilities (Adaptive Hypermedia Systems, Intelligent Tutoring Systems, Adaptive Simulations and Serios Games) in the context of reductivist vs dynamic learner measurement, and cognitive load. The authors include an overview of current technologies and cite various studies attesting to their potential.

Further chapters address telecommunications, instructional, curricular, management, societal and global systems. A final chapter, 'From theory to practice', guides the reader toward system dynamics modelling and implementation in terms useful for readers at all levels of leadership.

## Overall impression and relevance to the field of distance education and e-learning

The book captures the *zeitgeist* of the challenges facing higher education in both its analysis and solution. In response to higher costs, rigid curriculum and mass education techniques the authors propose systems thinking, individualization, and dynamic relationships between learners and universities. The TTD is correctly presented as a useful framework for reconsidering higher education, more than 40 years after the theory was first published.

The book manages to avoid theoretical posturing by including chapters related to instructional design, curriculum and management systems. Case-based, problem-based and project-based methods of instruction are promoted as adaptive learning options, and the authors are careful to explain that such techniques must be based on the aptitude of learners.

Across the book it is easy to discern the theoretical depth and wisdom of the authors, both of whom have a deep experience in distance education and systems thinking. Non-binary thinking and a straightforward treatment of instructional models reveal the confidence of the authors' educational knowledge; false-dichotomies across various instructional design perspectives are dismissed in preference "for 'a dynamic balance between autonomy and structure' rather than 'a bipolar universe'" (p.104). Pithy, simplistic views and solutions are absent. In their place, readers will find a steady acknowledgement of the various challenges faced by higher education, and a way of thinking about the future that can only give the reader hope and direction. TTD, combined with systems thinking and an intelligent application of technology to instruction, is key to this way of thinking.

One specific aspect of the book that impressed me was the inclusion of curricular, management, societal and global systems alongside those related to instruction. Such elements are often overlooked in books of this kind, where teaching and learning options are presented as isolated as if they are independent of how universities function. Saba and Shearer are of the view that learner-administrator interaction influences transactional distance.

The authors are also adamant that TTD should be considered an individual, rather than collective, means of considering the student experience:

> The theory of transactional distance describes how the format of a course or a similar learning program would optimize transactional distance for each individual learner. As such, instructional design models that instructional designers embed in a course or a similar instructional-learning offering enhance or inhibit the ability of the instructor to structure a course commensurate to the aptitude of the learner for autonomy. Similarly, such designs assist or hinder the learner to exercise autonomy in relation to a course's structure (p. 100)

The link between instructional method and overall instructional context appears to be one of the authors' frustrations with the way institutions function:

> The ability of administrators to shape the learning space for optimizing administrative structure for each learner is limited when academic schedules are predetermined and curricula are fixed. Grounding the learner in a solid foundation that would serve her/him for years to come is difficult if not impossible if the primary intention of the university is to place learners on an assembly line made of courses in which they receive the same standard treatment regardless of their individual differences in mastering immediate learning objectives and reaching future lifelong goals (p. 149).

The importance of systems thinking is clear: methods of instruction, and the transactional distance they give rise to, are inseparable from the administrative – and hence societal and global – contexts in which they are applied. As mentioned, this systems lens is one of the strengths of the book and forms the basis of its structure.

As a final observation, the book makes use of a series of scenarios at the end of key chapters. Some of these are particularly hard-hitting (in fact, some were so realistic I could almost place faces to the names based on my own experience!) All will give pause to a reader intent on considering the role of TTD and systems improvement for their own university context.

The book makes an authoritative contribution to the field, positioning TTD as an enduring and critical theory while also exploring its application to the very real crisis of identity and method universities face today.

## Reference

Saba, F. & Shearer, R.L. (2017). *Transactional distance and adaptive learning: Planning for the future of higher education*. Routledge.