Melton, R.F. (2002). *Planning and Developing Open and Distance Learning: A Quality Assurance Approach.* London: Routledge. Pages: 240. Price: $28.95 USD (paper).

Reviewed by Sue Lloyd, Queen's University.

In his book, *Planning and Developing Open and Distance Learning: A Quality Assurance Approach,* Reginald Melton draws on his thirty-seven years of experience with the Open University of the United Kingdom (UK OU). His intention is to take the reader through the complex process of developing open and distance learning (ODL) courses, from the early brainstorming stage, to course delivery, and subsequent modifications. He focuses on the challenge of developing high quality ODL courses that meet the needs of the students. He believes that this can be done in a cost effective way. Melton identifies the potential reader as a novice ODL course developer. On the opening page, he states that his book "offers practical advice on how to respond to your students' needs, expand your audience and become cost effective without compromising quality." My intention, in this review is to explore the extent to which Melton's claim is defended.

The process of developing a course

Throughout the book, Melton emphasizes the need for careful and detailed planning at every stage of course development. He claims that the success of ODL courses can be attributed largely to the following elements: effective organization of the course, clear course structure, and well-explained instructions. The book's format and layout reflect these attributes, modelling Melton's advice to course developers. Consequently, readers know exactly what will be covered in each chapter, how the information is organized, and why it is presented in a particular way. Each chapter begins with an

overview that explains and identifies the subtitles that follow and ends with a summarizing perspective. Although formulaic in its layout, the book can be scanned easily for specific information.

Melton provides the reader with a clear process for developing an ODL course, from the preplanning phase (where the parameters and format are established), through the detailed development of the course elements, to a course evaluation process and post-course revisions. His attention to the preliminary stages of planning is particularly helpful. Critically, in my view, he stresses the importance of considering the skills the students will need to succeed in the course and how these skills can be assured before students begin the course. From my perspective, developers of ODL courses often overlook this crucial point. Melton's assertion that potential students be included early in the course development process, is a perceptive insight. He advocates early dialogue with the target group of potential students to ensure that their needs will be met in the course.

Melton's book includes useful resources for ODL course developers and designers. Frameworks into which a developer can insert their own material become useful guides as they sequence the courses' development. A particularly good example appears on page seventy-nine. Excerpts from already developed courses demonstrate how course instructions can be given in interesting and clear ways. The excerpt on pages ninety-two and ninety-three is an example. It is intended to help students choose an appropriate topic, by providing clear instructions and definitive parameters. These will enable students to make informed topic choices. This is one of many useful examples that appear throughout the book.

Meeting Student Needs

Traditionally, students in ODL courses have been viewed as separate individuals reading through recommended texts on their own without advice or assistance. This is not Melton's view of a student in an ODL course. He describes such students as dynamic

learners (with a variety of learning styles and needs) working with course tutors and fellow students in a variety of ways. Melton recommends that courses include tasks that provide an experiential approach (using the senses), a relevant context, and first-hand experiences. Here are two examples that Melton offers. The first from an earth science course demonstrates first-hand experiential learning. Students are provided with kits of rocks to study. They are asked to handle the samples of rocks as they listen to an accompanying audiotape that discusses the property of the rocks. In this first-hand experience, the students use three senses: sight (to view the rock samples), sound (to listen to the audio tape), and touch (to feel the rock sample). The second example, from a French course, highlights a task with a relevant context for learning. Students are introduced to work life in France by viewing a video, in which French people talk about their work as they describe their work routines, and give their own views on good and bad aspects of their jobs. Readers of this book who support Melton's experiential approach to learning will find the section on the use of media to support such learning, particularly helpful.

While Melton addresses learning styles and student needs throughout his book, there are two particular areas of student need that require more attention: exceptional learners and issues of cultural. Today, it is difficult to imagine a group of students that does not include exceptional learners with physical or learning challenges. Although many of his suggestions about careful sequencing of tasks and clear explanations would be helpful to exceptional learners, no mention is made explicitly of how to develop courses that would address the needs of exceptional learners or what accommodations for them might be required.

A useful addition to this book would be the inclusion of a discussion about cultural considerations and how these might affect the understandings that students "bring" to courses. There is no question that ODL courses offer opportunities for education

that are global and cross-cultural. Course instructors who have worked with students from a variety of cultures and backgrounds will know how enriching and thought-provoking these experiences can be. However, such teacher-student contacts can be challenging since students from different cultures may approach the same task with a variety of understandings about its underlying purpose. For example, students from cultures in which teaching and learning are mainly heavily content-based and teacher-directed may have problems understanding the pedagogical concept of the project work and negotiated learning opportunities that Melton advocates. Similarly, the methods of assessment that Melton describes on pages 156-163 may be completely alien to learners from some cultures. Some clarification is required that alerts ODL course developers to the needs of culturally diverse students and those with exceptionalities.

The Open University Experience

The long association that Melton has had with the UK OU and the experiences he draws upon, give rise to the strengths and the weaknesses of the book. The chapter describing the support that students receive at the UK OU is particularly detailed and contains an abundance of useful suggestions. Clearly, the UK OU has a highly developed and effective network of support for students, which goes beyond regular written feedback from instructors to include telephone calls, emails, and computer conferencing. The section devoted to the frameworks required to develop self-study materials, provides examples from the UK OU courses. The case-study examples of students choosing and beginning their courses, offer the reader valuable insights into aspects that must be addressed in the early stages of ODL course planning.

The author's focus on the UK OU limits the scope of the book somewhat. The process of course development described is based principally on the UK OU model, with its significant financial

resources and well-developed infrastructure. Although Melton mentions the possibility of a less elaborate and expensive course development process, he does not provide examples of more "scaled-down" models that would help the "lone" course developer who does not have a large team of professionals for support. While his rationale for a generous level of student support is persuasive, such support may not be possible for course developers who have fewer resources at their disposal.

Quality Assurance

The notion of quality assurance permeates the book, but takes on more emphasis in Chapter 9. At every stage of course development, Melton shows how to ensure that courses and student support are of the highest quality. The checklists he supplies and the advice he gives to ensure quality, are invaluable to novice ODL course developers. He offers advice on such relevant topics as monitoring the developmental process (developmental testing), designing questionnaires for course evaluation, interpreting data collected about student performance (grades and marks) and student feedback about the course.

Cost effectiveness

Cost effectiveness is a high priority issue for Melton. Frequently, he warns that there must be a certain number of students to ensure that the financial cost of course development is recovered. The chapter entitled "Institutional Support" provides specific advice about the factors upon which cost effectiveness depends. Perhaps this chapter deserves a location other than the final pages of the book. Determining what institutional support is available for the development of ODL courses is surely a prerequisite to the actual development of the course. Recognition of this reality would suggest its consideration earlier in Melton's book, rather than later. For instance, if efficient technical support is likely to be a problem

when the course is offered, overcoming that obstacle should be considered early in the ODL course development process.

Recalling his opening claim that his book addresses students' needs, cost effectiveness, and the course quality of ODL courses, Melton has dealt with these aspects convincingly. Despite the omissions (exceptional students and multicultural needs) noted earlier and an over-reliance on references to the UK OU, Reginald Melton's book is a worthwhile read for anyone with little or no experience who faces the task of developing an ODL course.

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Brabazon, T. (2002). *Digital Hemlock: Internet Education and the Poisoning of Teaching*. Sydney, Australia: UNSW Press. Pages: 240. Cost: $34.95 AUD.

Reviewed by Doug Symons, Acadia University and Visiting Scholar, University of Queensland.

Digital Hemlock reflects the concerns of many faculty as they integrate technology in their teaching in a pedagogically-sound fashion. Tara Brabazon uses a refreshing mixture of prose, research, and stories from her daily life as an academic to advance her argument that what is best about teaching in a university setting is under attack. While "under attack" is sometimes equated with either "faculty resisting change" or "union rhetoric," this is not the definition here. She is concerned with an attack on effective pedagogy to the detriment of student education, academe, and society at large. The fact that this book is written by an Australian within the Australian university system does not matter: the issues covered are global in nature, and seemed particularly pertinent to recent developments in Canadian universities.