Lessons from the Cyberspace Classroom: The Realities of Online Teaching offers readers a blend of theory, experience, practical examples and recommendations. The authors are experienced online educators and have also written Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace, 1999. The latest book provides useful insights into the nature and operation of cyberspace classrooms. In presenting their arguments, the authors draw upon their own experience, the experience of others, and the academic literature. At the end of each chapter, they provide practical tips, which can act as quick references when creating and/or enhancing an online distance environment.

The thesis of the book is essentially a distillation of what the authors have learned about online teaching over many years. Part One of the book, more general and conceptual in nature, is entitled "Rethinking Education for an Online World." Part Two, entitled “Teaching and Learning in Cyberspace,” is more focused and practical in its treatment of the subject.

In Part One, the authors identify a number of basic topics that must be considered when organizations, administrators, and educators proceed into the world of online education. For example, the learner-focused paradigm needs to exist throughout the organizational structure. Decision-makers at the highest level within an organization must commit to this paradigm, just as faculty members need to use it to guide the development and delivery of online courses.

From their experience and research, the authors note that discrepancies commonly do exist between faculty and administrators within an organization in terms of planning infrastructure, addressing intellectual property, and creating and implementing courses for the cyberspace
classroom. The gulf in understanding that may exist between these two groups frequently leads to further frustration and conflicts over the development and delivery of online distance courses.

The authors do promote the need for "an inclusive team or committee to develop policies and plans for the institution regarding online courses and programs" (p. 48). They also recommend that institutions "work toward the development of a shared vision and strategic plan around the use of technology in teaching and learning" (p. 48). This shared visioning and implementation, they argue, assists in ensuring ownership of such a project by all stakeholders within the organization.

In chapter one, the authors set the stage in terms of where online distance learning is today. They highlight what has occurred, what are some of the key lessons learned, and what needs to be considered for online learning in today’s society. Within this review, they identify a number of critical issues that are currently haunting online distance learning, and they examine these issues in later chapters. They conclude the book by briefly highlighting what they have learned and by looking into the future of cyberspace learning and offering some speculation on where it is heading.

In the five chapters of Part Two, the authors focus on specific factors and strategies that can be used to enhance the cyberspace learning environment. For example, they provide practical suggestions on how to transform a face-to-face course to suit the online classroom and how to customize a course for the educator who will be delivering it, and they examine the nature of a cyberspace learning environment. From these chapters, the reader gains a greater understanding of the dynamics of an online learning environment. They also offer numerous examples and tips that the reader can use to enhance his/her own online learning environment.

One of the main themes of this book is pedagogy. Having coined the term "electronic pedagogy" (p. 25), the authors stress throughout the book that educators and administrators need to understand the unique pedagogy that exists in an online distance-learning environment. The authors acknowledge that technology and content are only two contributing factors to online learning. But it is pedagogy, they stress, that most influences the learning experience. Within this flat-screen world, both educators and students must become more conscious of the communications environment, and they must be more attentive than in a face-to-face environment to the demands of effective communication.

There are three particular strengths in this book. First, the book provides a holistic picture of responsibility for a healthy online learning environment. Administrators, educators, and students all have key roles to play in the cyberspace classroom. The authors not only describe what is required for this environment to exist, they also discuss frankly the common problems and issues that arise. They outline various examples and provide useful suggestions in addressing these dilemmas. They examine, for example, the topic of difficult students and what happens when things do not work for educators. This type of discussion is liberating because it dispels the illusion that online learning is utopian. Rather, it presents a realistic picture of issues that instructors confront in the face-to-face environment that may also occur in the cyberspace environment. Educators in both environments need to be aware of and be prepared to address these types of issues.
Second, the authors examine various components associated with the decisions, development, delivery, and sustainability of a cyberspace-learning environment. They did not limit the scope of their work to one or two specific areas, such as instructional design and infrastructure decisions. These two items are large topics in themselves. Rather, the authors have examined a breadth of topics from a practical perspective to provide the reader with a greater understanding of the various elements that need to be considered when instituting and supporting online learning.

Third, this book has a practical focus. The authors have grounded the book in lessons learned from the literature and from experience. Each chapter ends with a concise list of tips based on the theme of the chapter. Online educators and/or administrators can use these lists as checklists as they develop and deliver online courses. The clear and concise points presented in the lists are valuable resources that can be conveniently accessed by the reader.

The practical suggestions and examples shared throughout the book facilitate the reader’s understanding of and buy-in to online learning. For example, the authors contend that faculty cannot be expected to know how to design and deliver online courses without training and support. To support this claim, they share various examples of how to assist faculty in developing the skills, knowledge, and attributes needed for online course development and delivery. One strategy they present is for faculty to experience an online training course. This will not only provide them with the opportunity to be trained in the specific area, but will also give them the experience of being an online student. This type of opportunity will give faculty members insight into the world of being an online student and will enable them to draw upon this experience as they develop and/or delivery courses.

A final practical focus example can be found in the Resource A section of the book. In this section, the authors provide a few examples to compare and contrast course syllabi based on the information presented in the previous chapters in terms of face-to-face and online courses. In addition, these examples can be used to guide a novice online educator as he/she creates a course syllabus for an online course.

This book provides a broad overview of a number of the key areas for cyberspace learning. For a number of topics, greater depth of discussion would have enhanced the book. For example, the authors provide references to people who have made web content accessible for disabled people. Given that online learning is available to all students, it would have been informative to provide additional resources and references relating to what can be done in both planning and implementing online courses for disabled clients. How have institutions and instructors accommodated disabled clients within the cyberspace classroom?

Intellectual property is a second example of a topic that needs to be further addressed. The key question confronting educators and administrators is who owns what? What happens when an instructor develops an online course and the institution assigns the course to another instructor? Or, can instructors who create courses take them with them when they leave the institution? Intellectual property is an interesting and challenging topic, whether in terms of face-to-face course content or distance-delivered course content. The authors discuss this topic generally and make the reader aware of its significance. They do provide a number of questions that both
educators and administrators should address. They briefly examine a number of models being used by universities related to course ownership. However, it would have been advantageous for them to address the success of these models. In addition, they could have provided additional information with regard to types of policies and agreements that are being utilized by institutions (primary, secondary, and post-secondary levels) for online courses. In addition, since the book is American based, it leaves the reader questioning the nature of standards or practices being used in other countries and institutions. Given the significance of this topic for educators and institutions, it deserves more extensive treatment than it receives in this book. These two topics are examples of areas that could have been addressed in greater detail.

In conclusion, Lessons from the Cyberspace Classroom: The Realities of Online Teaching is a user-friendly book. The book is suited for both undergraduate and graduate students and educators who want to investigate teaching in the cyberspace classroom. It is a book that novice online practitioners will access on various occasions as they develop and deliver online courses. In addition, experienced online educators will appreciate the wealth of information the authors present in this book.

Author Note

Jennifer Lock is a doctoral student in the Graduate Division of Educational Research at the University of Calgary. Her research interests are online learning communities and building capacity for online educators. She has worked as a coordinator of distance education and technology in a Canadian community college and has been involved on both personal and professional levels with distance learning for a number of years. She can be contacted through e-mail at jvlock@ucalgary.ca.