The great books of learning technology •

Nick Rushby Conation Technologies Limited

We've been re-arranging the office, putting in another couple of bookcases and generally moving the books, journals and printed reports about. That of course, has a knock-on effect on my study at home because the number of books expands to fill the space available to shelve them, and this poses the question of where to put specific books. Clearly, the most important and most used books need to be ready to hand. The very top shelves are reserved for the least used so that I am not standing on a chair too often.

I am fortunate in having inherited from various friends and colleagues, a small library of older books on various aspects of learning technology. Back in the late 1970s, when the CEDAR project was running at Imperial College, we had space in the College Library for a growing collection of books and reports and so I had somewhere to put them. Alas, when the project came to an end in 1984, the Library, under pressure for to find space for other materials, was forced to evict the collection. It was dispersed and I was able to appropriate some of the more important works. They accompanied me as I moved from office to office and now have a more or less permanent home in my study.

Our professional lives are punctuated by storage crises where, as we move jobs, move office, move home, or perhaps change the focus of our interests, we have to select which of the books we will keep and which will have to go – go to colleagues or a worthy cause, or be recycled to become ephemeral newsprint.

I find it terribly difficult to get rid of books. At a very early age my maternal Grandmother instilled in me an abiding love of books. I have real difficulty even in throwing away poorly written pulp fiction. So, things have to get pretty bad before I will even contemplate excluding a 'proper' book on learning technology.

Coincidentally, while I was moving round some journals, I came across an editorial that I wrote for Interactive Learning International back in 1990. That was on the subject of Great Books. I had recently visited Annapolis, Maryland in the USA, and found that St Johns College, one of the oldest educational institutions in the USA, was characterised by a curriculum that was focussed on the study of Great Books. Then, as now, I started to ponder on Great Books.

Some years ago, a colleague told me the story of how her father, fleeing from Nazi persecution, walked across Europe taking only his most precious possessions – a very few books. So, in extremis, what are the most important books in learning technology? What are the Great books.

I think my list would have to start with the Romiszowski Trilogy written in the period 1981-86. These three seminal books *The Design of Instructional Systems*, *Producing Instructional Systems* and *The Design of Auto-Instructional Materials* contain a complete curriculum for anyone entering the profession and a constant source of reference for the experienced practitioner. Then there would be Susan Markle's *Good Frames and Bad* which I have extolled in previous editorials. Jim Hartley wrote his book on the *Design of Instructional Text* in 1994 but it is still relevant today. The list would have to include Bloom's *Taxonomy*. I would also include Gordon Pask's *The Cybernetics of Human Learning and Performance* (which will always remind me of the time when he was my unofficial research supervisor), David Merrill's book on *Instructional Design Theory* and, less well known, Lev Landa on *Cybernetics, Algorithmization and Heuristics* which provides a different perspective on learning. Seymour Papert's *Mindstorms* qualifies as a book that changed the way in which we think about young children and learning.

The final book in my list is not on the topic of learning technology but is, nevertheless, invaluable as a guide on how to develop quality instructional materials. Dalh, Dijkstra and Hoare comprises three essays on structured programming. Read it and you should see its relevance to instructional designers!

You will note that there is nothing from the 21st Century in my list. That is not a reflection on the importance of books written and published in the past ten years, but my view that it is too soon to tell whether they will qualify as great. Most of them are too close to the technology they describe for us to be able to distinguish their potential greatness from the technology hyperbole. We will have to wait and see.