Recommended Reading

Thinking in the Future Tense:
Leadership Skills for a New Age
by Jennifer James
(Simon & Schuster, 1996, $23, 254 pages)
ISBN 0-684-81098-0

Reviewed by Amelia Tynan

What are the thinking skills that create visionaries? What skills enable people to welcome and embrace change rather than resist it? How will workers protect themselves from obsolescence and the anxieties of unpredictable and rapid change in the 21st century workplace?

Jennifer James’ new book, Thinking in the Future Tense, offers a provocative framework that addresses these challenging questions. The book is intended to teach the reader to adapt to change and to envision the future without losing touch with the past. James’ background as a cultural anthropologist is evident as she includes the perspectives of history, culture, myths, and symbols in her prescriptions for change. Rich with philosophical prose, yet not lacking in pragmatic insight, this book is provocative enough to warrant a double reading. James provides a rich blend of stories, tools, intellectual issues, and practical insights useful in our personal and business lives.

In many ways, James seeks to prove that growth stems from turbulence, not stability. She offers numerous examples of people and companies that became too comfortable with a successful pattern, wrongly assuming that it would remain stable and static. According to James, broadening one’s “futuristic” ability means challenging familiar thought patterns through the use of mind exercises involving extension, elaboration, reversals, symbols, anomalies, and other skills.

James’s definition of success includes many pauses along the way. What she calls the “dance of life” is shown in the organizational breakdowns now occurring in our changing marketplace, including higher education. Two steps forward, one step back; although this may appear to be failure or non-productive activity, in fact it is not. As we transform our workplaces, we will need the breathing spells provided by those backward steps. As James puts it, these are only hesitations, and the actual trend over a long period of time will be forward.

This is not a typical leadership or management book. The author’s cultural anthropology perspective is revealed in a full chapter on diversity and the multicultural workforce, and her storytelling style makes the text more energetic, visual, and imaginative. Harnessing the power of myths, children’s stories, and the arts is not staple advice one might expect from management literature.

This book is must reading for those concerned with change management. By opening a window in the mind, Jennifer James’ new book can help to ease the chaos and confusion created by constant change and may even restore a sense of security and competence, now seen with new eyes.

Reviewer Amelia (Mely) Tynan (tynan@arizona.edu) is Associate Vice Provost for Information Systems and Technology at the University of Arizona. She oversees the Center for Computing and Information Technology (CCIT) which provides facilities and services to support instructional and research computing, administrative computing, computer operations, user services, and telecommunications.

Distance Education:
A Planner’s Casebook
by John P. Witherspoon
(Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 1996, $17 non-members, 182 pages)
WICHE Publication Number 2A283

Reviewed by Judith Boettcher

What is distance learning? How does it differ from programs on campus? Defining distance learning and its place in the higher education landscape today is not an easy question. In Distance Education: A Planner’s Casebook, John Witherspoon expresses the viewpoint of many that distance learning is “no longer a marginal activity” but “a mainstream activity with a future that will change the academic landscape.”

The accessibility of new interactive communication technologies is dramatically changing distance learning, causing administrators and legislators to consider it as a possible solution to the rapidly rising costs of higher education. Given the possibilities, everyone wants to understand what is happening in the field, what might be about to happen, and what their institution should do.

Distance Education: A Planner’s Casebook is an excellent reference for this purpose. The book is roughly divided into three parts, with the introductory chapters providing basic definitions of distance learning and the current technologies. Chapter III is particularly valuable, as it contains a statement of Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Academic Degree and Certificate Programs. These principles are
excellent touchstones for quality when using electronic technologies in distance learning programs.

The major part of the book provides case studies of distance learning programs at twenty-one public and commercial institutions. Each case study provides useful nuts-and-bolts information, such as tuition and fee policies, program development strategies, ownership of courses, student services, organizational structures, faculty support and training, and faculty tenure policies.

The case studies are organized by their target populations and highlight the range of possible applications for distance learning opportunities—including traditional students needing more flexibility, rural students, two-plus-two programs with community colleges, professional degree programs, and links to K-12 institutions. This section also includes brief summaries of the new virtual institutions: Western Governors University, Mind Extension University, and Magellan University.

Some of the studies also provide insight into the issue of whether or not distance learning programs can reduce the cost of higher education programs, as is so widely desired. For example, it is apparent that many programs require the students themselves to bear a larger portion of the costs. It is widely perceived that this is an acceptable tradeoff for the convenience and flexibility offered by distance learning. Is this appropriate? Time will tell. In the meantime, this casebook is a handy reference and useful preamble for planning ventures into distance learning. I will be referring to it in the class I am teaching on distance learning, and will recommend it to my students.

Reviewer Judith Boettcher is Director of Interactive Distance Learning at Florida State University, where she is responsible for supporting the design, development, and delivery of distance and flexible learning courses and degree programs. She is also a professor in the department of Educational Research in the College of Education and teaches courses on distance learning.

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