Book Reviews

Conquering the Content

By Robin M. Smith, Jossey-Bass, 2009, 153 pages, soft cover, cost about $25, ISBN: 978-0-7879-9442-6

Conquering the Content is a useful book for any educator that has decided to teach a course online. The author uses a conversational tone throughout the text and makes the reader feel as if they have their own consultant in their office. The author is very up front that the text does not cover the technical aspects of putting a course online; rather it focuses on preparing the content for online delivery from an organizational and delivery perspective.

As an individual that has taught courses online and also prepares students to work in the area of eLearning, I found the text to do a nice job in pulling together many important concepts. The book is not theoretical. It is definitely a "practical approach" to preparing for online delivery and provides various tips, tricks, and ideas to help you accomplish the goal of preparing for online course delivery. Those familiar with distance education and online learning will see many familiar researchers quoted throughout the text. I found reference to these researchers to add credibility to the text.

The author takes a learner-centered approach in her recommendations for course development. I would argue that many of the techniques shared could be just as appropriate for traditional course delivery. While I can appreciate the author's effort to provide "action steps" for the reader, realistically, individuals who choose to read this book may not actually "stop and complete" the action steps. Regardless, these action steps provide an opportunity to pause and consider the concepts presented.

While many of the concepts are not necessarily new to the field of education (e.g., converting chapters into modules, developing naming schemes for materials, etc.), the author does a nice job of presenting these concepts in the context of preparing to deliver a course online. The author does address the issue of assessing students online, but this area appeared to be one of the weakest. Other than projects and quizzes as forms of assessments, this chapter did not share many new ideas.

The text is organized in a progressive manner that is easy to follow. Chapters 4 and 5 specifically address the organization of content from different angles. I found this section of the book to include critical concepts such as the prioritization of content and chunking of content. The last two chapters (Chapter 6 and 7) focused on the delivery of the course which included concepts such as the importance of consistency and navigation, and final steps.

The text is shorter than it first appears with only 100 pages dedicated to actual content. The additional 50 pages consist of worksheets and references. The text does a great job of providing a plan to tackle the development of a course for delivery online. While it does not teach you the technical aspects of online course development, at the end of the day, after reading and applying the concepts in the book you will be ready to either hire a technical person or attack the technical aspect yourself. The text is easy to read and can serve as a great resource.

Theresa Pesl Murphrey
Assistant Professor
Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, & Communications
Texas A&M University

Plant & Soil Science: Fundamentals and Applications

By Rick Parker, 2010. Delmar Cengage Learning, Clifton Park, NY, USA, 793 pages, hardcover, $94.71, ISBN 13: 978-1-4283-3480-9, ISBN 10: 1-4283-3480-7.

In this book, the author has done a wonderful job of splitting together the two broad topics, Plant and Soil Science, in such a way to allow the reader to percolate through. The author excels at being not over-do with up-to-date data sets to reflect the status of agricultural production. The reader will find this book refreshing and engaging.

This book reveals a wide range of issues related to Plant, Soil and Crop Sciences. It contains four parts consisting of 13 chapters of General Plant Science, nine chapters of Crop Science, and six chapters of Soil Science. The focus of this book is to show the audience a general understanding on the physical and biological aspects of plants and the environmental factors affecting them. The author clearly explains the most important aspects about plants and the difference between plant and crop. The information about Careers in Plant and Soil Sciences would be interesting for students with major in Agriculture, Environmental Science, Forestry, Forest Conservation, and Wildlife Biology and help them to make future plan better. For each chapter, the author provides summary, questions for review, and the application of the knowledge. The last one will help the instructor to create activities related to certain topics. The illustrations given in this book are excellent and stimulating, especially in the Plant Science section. In addition, the information in the appendix can enhance students' understanding and learning, because it has a variety of useful conversions, conversion factors, measurement standards, common measures, mixing guides, seeding guides,

row spacing guides, a guide to collecting, pressing and mounting plant specimens, and important websites. In general, chapters in this book give the audience a flavor of the multi-faceted dimensions of Plant Science.

Part I provides information on the plant kingdom, the origins and structure of cultivated plants and anatomy of plants. Each chapter has short introduction that helps the reader to focus on the discussed topics. This part introduces basic information of plants to what follows the other three parts.

Part 2 describes the fundamental of soil science includes soil formation and classification, soil fertility, soil management and agricultural practices, such as irrigation, organic farming and plant production with less soil. The author emphasizes the most important aspects in soil management to improve plant or crop production. Detail information on soil fertility and hydrology are presented to help readers understand the impacts of soil management on soil nutrients and water. For future iteration, the author may add current issues on soil biology or ecology, especially related to the role of soil organic matter and organisms for crop production.

Part 3 offers the issues related plant growth and propagation. In this part, the author notes how temperature and light relates to plant growth, the role of photosynthesis and respiration, as well as the information on the basics of plant growth, vegetative growth and plant propagation, plant pests and genetic engineering and biotechnology. In the last section, the author relates the biotechnology policy with public perception and the law. This is useful information as it covers a different perspective on biotechnology. This is also a part that would benefit from the inclusion of a broader discussion regarding to biotechnology in agriculture.

Part 4 "Crops – Applied Plant and Soil Science" is one of the most complete information in the book in terms of the broadness of discussion on crop management aspects. This part also serves as a strong introduction to crop management. For future considerations, the author may split this part into two distinct topics including the farming systems for each crop of interests and issues on sustainability and global climate change as related to crop production.

In summary, this book makes a substantial contribution. The author's attention to combine the complexity of Plant and Soil Science in one book offers significant simplicity for the reader. There is a need to incorporate the unique potential of agro-ecology and sustainable agriculture production in terms of P4F (Plants for Food, Fiber, Forage and Fuel) with current data. Finally, the book is overwhelmingly succeeds in presenting an overview of blended information on both Plant and Soil Science. It is a valuable publication and worth reading.

Iin Handayani
Department of Agricultural Sciences
Murray State University, KY

Tools for Teaching, 2nd Edition

By Barbara Gross Davis, 2009, Jossey-Bass,/John Wiley & Sons, soft cover, 608 pages, $50.00, ISBN: 978-0-7879-6567-9

Teaching has been described as an art and science that when combined can greatly influence students. If you are looking for a resource to help with the science of teaching then this text may offer great help in that endeavor. This text is designed as a resource that encompasses today's classroom from the start to finish. As the reader pours through the material covered in this book, many of the chapters draw your thoughts about how to incorporate techniques in specific settings and elicits anticipation to impact learning in the classroom.

The book is divided into twelve chapters starting with "Getting Under Way" and ending with "Finishing Up." As this resource moves from initial planning toward understanding the student body and most importantly applying specific classroom teaching techniques to achieve maximum learning. Importantly, the author defines strategies to use in today's classrooms regarding technology whether in the classroom or communicating with students.

The text is an excellent resource to be used when planning a course, techniques to be used to deliver materials, and working with students. The layout of the text depicts these categories with easy to find headers and sections on specific items. No matter what discipline the reader is involved in, this text outlines major competencies needed in and out of the classroom to incorporate the most effective teaching style for positive learning impact and effectiveness.

Many will find the layout of the chapters to be helpful when searching for specific topics. Each chapter begins with an overview before transitioning to general strategies. After the introduction of major thoughts, specific guides are discussed to address the needs of teachers. At the conclusion of each chapter references are listed for further knowledge acquisition if needed.

This is a good and thorough resource for faculty and guides new faculty as well as seasoned veterans through thoughts and concepts needed in today's academic setting. Although designed and written as a resource text, this book could be improved through concluding thoughts about the chapter. The layout of the text is an overview to specific strategies. No concluding thoughts other than those presented are discussed. Many instructors may not see specific strategies addressing their needs. Furthermore, if you adhere to a tendency to learn visually, this text may not be a great choice to aid in knowledge acquisition. Limited visual aids are used as this book relies heavily on textual illustrations. Although the explanations are easily understood and reference common uses, the visual learner will not find many instances where their style of learning is addressed.

Overall, this is an excellent reference text that guides present day classroom instruction while building on the use of technology present in many

institutions. The book can serve those looking for specific advice in teaching while addressing students' needs. The strategies for your teaching toolbox will be found in this all-encompassing teaching strategies text. The book outlines from beginning to end the thoughts guiding good instruction. The science of teaching is presented in a clear form which can aid teachers needing strategies to engage learners. Make ready the canvas of your classroom and add your artistic approach with these scientifically driven tools leading the teacher to solid performance in the classroom.

Don W. Edgar
University of Arkansas

Turnaround Leadership for Higher Education

By Michael Fullan and Geoff Scott, 2009, Publisher: Jossey-Bass/Wiley Publishing, San Francisco, CA, hardcover, 170 pages, about $35, ISBN 978-0470472049

This book is an interesting and easy read about leadership and key items for initiating turnaround leadership. In seven chapters it addresses some of the issues facing higher education today, and makes suggestions for incorporating change. The authors do a great job of including up-to-date research to validate and support each of their major claims. The target audience for this book is persons interested in leadership and effective change in the university setting.

Chapter 1, Universities and the Challenges of the Twenty-First Century, gives a synopsis of the broad change forces currently in play in the world today, and the specific correlated problems facing higher education today. It addresses items such as globalization of education, emerging technology and online university access, retirement of the baby boomers, needs and particulars of the generation Y and millennial students, graduation and retention rates, and changes in funding for higher education. By bringing to light each of these issues the stage has been set and the need established to generate positive changes.

Chapter 2, Failed Strategies, discusses some of the reasons that many universities are slow to make changes. The primary reasons being that they are hyperrational, prone to talk, individualistic in nature, and dominated by research. These attributes are coupled with varying cultures across the university setting which further complicate and restrict change. Too many times, leaders perceive that the way to make changes are by tackling the cultures of the university; more often than not, with extreme resistance.

Chapter 3, The New Agenda, puts forth four agenda items that the authors feel will help integrate change within the university setting. The four areas are (1) practical reasoning, (2) putting teaching and learning at the center, (3) inquiry, quality review, and implementation, and (4) change theory and leadership. Each of these components is discussed in the ways they can lead institutions to make positive changes in the university setting. There is much emphasis in teaching students how to be practical reasoners and integrate knowledge in the change process.

Chapter 4, Making It Happen: Building Quality and Capacity, presents six key ideas to consider in initiating change. First, change is complex and not a one-time event. Second, context counts. Third, there is a need to operate and make decisions based on evidence, not on anecdote. Requisite is some sort of tracking system to determine where to focus on needed change. Fourth, a need for focus on the outputs of decision, rather than just the quality of inputs. Fifth, it is better to be proactive rather than reactive. The sixth item to remember is that change does not just happen; rather it is led by people who understand and base their decisions on the preceding points.

Chapter 5, Leadership Capacity for Turnaround, discusses the skills that turnaround leaders possess and display. Turnaround leaders listen, link, and then lead. Additionally, they model, teach, and learn. Listening is critical in establishing an agenda that builds on other's ideas and builds buy-in. Linking is the next step of a turnaround leader. After listening to the issue, the leader makes decisions and works with others to fine tune it before implementation. Finally, the turnaround leader rallies stakeholders into action. Throughout this entire process, turnaround leaders often play the role of leader, or teacher, or learner.

Chapter 6, Leadership Selection and Learning, discusses the blunders universities make in selecting leaders. More often than not, university leaders have not received leadership training prior to their leadership position. It was suggested that more time is spent deliberating buying a million dollar piece of equipment than is spent reviewing and interviewing a potential leader who will draw a million dollar salary over the span of a few years and impact moral, positioning, and overall direction of a department, college, or university. The authors stress the need for critical selection and training of leaders in a university setting.

Chapter 7, Lead, Lead, Lead, is a mixture of review and cheerleading. It reviews the main points covered in each of the preceding chapters while at the same time strives to rally the reader into becoming a turnaround leader. It reiterates and entrenches a central theme for turnaround leaders, “listen, link, and lead; model, teach, and learn.”

Clay L. Rasmussen
Agricultural Education
Sul Ross State University, TX