Firstly I must confess that as a user rather than a researcher of on-line pedagogical tools I found this book hard work and in some places too much additional work would have been needed to do full justice to the material. However, that said, the editor must be congratulated on pulling together work across the whole spectrum of on-line education.

The text itself is split into four main sections: theoretical and pedagogical perspectives; design and learning environment; practice and professional development. In all these four sections run to 13 chapters plus a conclusion by the editor. The chapters, however, are more in the style of individual papers which gives the book more of a conference proceeding feel.

The first section develops the theoretical background stressing the importance of interactivity and engagement in the learning process. Working through the three chapters in this first section the reader is moved from a Kolb1 style experiential learning setting through person-computer interaction to the thesis that current taxonomies of learning are not adequate to cope with the complexity of e-learning. The final chapter in this section sets out a three stage system for classifying e-learning interactivity and its impact on learning.

The second section, of four chapters, explores the design of the e-learning environment. The first chapter develops the notion of using dialogue games as a means of creating an engaging learning environment. Using Wittgenstein2 as a starting point and using the software package InterLoc as an exemplar for a mediated educational dialogue package made this chapter particularly difficult for this reviewer. The remaining chapters in this section look at modelling authentic activities in on-line learning, the development and use of learning objects and the use of simulations for discovery type learning and the development of, without specifically referring to, higher order cognitive skills. This final chapter of the section also develops the PI theory for learning environments this may be known to the readers but was something else new to this reviewer. PI or parallel instruction was developed by the author of this chapter, Rik Min, and he is cited in almost half the references at the end of the chapter. However, as a newcomer to PI, I’m not fully informed by this chapter and more work would need to be done in order to fully comment on its applicability here.

With section three, of four chapters, I felt I was on safer ground. The section deals very well with the ideas of on-line discussion, peer learning and videoconferencing. The final chapter in this section may prove to be of particular interest to readers as it presents the pedagogic model developed for the University of the Highlands and Islands giving a clear pedagogic model for blended learning. The on-line, face-to-face, videoconferencing mix is, I am sure, an area many of us will be exploring through either interest or need in the near future.
The final section runs to just two chapters which explore the role of on-line facilitators and their professional development needs.

Having worked through the whole text I am now far more aware of my own developmental needs in terms of on-line or e-learning. Many reading this text may, like myself, be in the state of not knowing what I don’t know. This in itself is, I would argue, good for all of us as educators.

The final chapter of the text, conclusion, written by the editor attempts to summarise the thirteen previous chapters. The conclusion looks at the key issues, design of the learning environment, peer learning and professional development.

Taken as a whole this text would have something for everyone, staff and student alike, but it is more something to be dipped into rather than read through and don’t expect an easy read!

References