



Book review: Hughes, N. (2024) *Blended learning solutions in higher education: history, theory, and practice*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Blending theory and practice: a critical exploration of blended learning in higher education

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In *Blended learning solutions in higher education: history, theory, and practice*, Neil Hughes offers a comprehensive examination of blended learning's historical evolution, theoretical underpinnings, and contemporary practical applications in higher education. Hughes presents blended learning as a multifaceted approach to higher education delivery that is shaped by a web of technological, social, and pedagogical influences. The book questions assumptions about blended learning's inherent effectiveness, emphasising the variability in its implementation and outcomes across the higher education sector. Hughes foregrounds the challenges and possibilities of blended learning, particularly in the wake of the intensified demand for flexible educational models since the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of Hughes' primary contributions lies in his critique of the empirical evidence surrounding blended learning. He argues that while such evidence is often used to champion blended models, the research is often context-specific and lacks generalisability. By highlighting the limitations in the empirical support for blended learning, Hughes questions the validity of sweeping claims about its superiority over other learning models. His stance invites practitioners and scholars alike to reconsider the contexts in which blended learning can be genuinely impactful, rather than assuming universal efficacy.

Hughes uses a Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) framework to ground his historical and social analysis. This framework, heavily influenced by the work of sociologists Pinch and Bijker (1984), argues that human action shapes technological

progress rather than technological progress determining human action. Hughes uses this framework to interpret blended learning's emergence from debates about the future of teaching and assessment in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Hughes profiles the advocacy groups and stakeholders who shaped the trajectory of blended learning, particularly in North America, offering insight into the social, technological, and educational paradigms that coalesced to define its early forms. His analysis also explores how unexpected crises, disasters, and disruptions known as 'Black Swan' events have accelerated the shift toward blended and hybrid models of higher education delivery. His discussion of these events focuses on the global COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption to higher education it occasioned. He also examines national events such as South Africa's 2015–2017 student-led protests and the resultant closure of campuses across the nation. Hughes' discussion of these examples underscores the ongoing evolution of educational practices in response to global challenges.

Hughes demonstrates thorough engagement with existing research, using empirical studies and historical data to bolster his arguments. His scepticism towards generalised findings about blended learning's effectiveness is grounded in the examination of specific case studies and the inherent limitations of transferring results across diverse and disparate educational contexts. Through employing the SCOT lens, Hughes also transcends historical recounting, offering a nuanced sociological perspective on the emergence of blended learning. His analysis of multi-level governance structures and the growing complexity of technological infrastructure in higher education further enhances the book's relevance, especially as universities navigate post-pandemic demands for more flexible modes of accessing and engaging with higher education.

The book's critical approach to blended learning contrasts with more celebratory accounts, positioning Hughes' work alongside scholarship that critically examines the 'one-size-fits-all' nature of educational technology (e.g., Selwyn, 2021). His alternative perspective aligns with critiques that question the over-reliance on technology-driven solutions without fully accounting for the complexities of teaching and learning. Hughes, however, adds a further layer by exploring the sociopolitical forces that shaped blended learning's rise, an angle less frequently covered in the broader literature. This contribution situates the book within a growing discourse that calls for a more measured, context-sensitive approach to educational technology adoption.

Hughes' conceptualisation of blended learning as a socially and materially mediated practice resonates deeply with Learning Development, which often deals with the practical realities of supporting students and faculty within complex institutional frameworks. He introduces the MIRACLE (Mode, Integration, Research, Activities, Contexts, Learners, Evaluation) framework as a tool for designing and assessing blended learning models, which is especially valuable for practitioners seeking structured, practical guidance. This framework synthesises best practices from existing models, responding to the heightened demand for adaptable, research-based tools in an evolving educational landscape.

Blended learning solutions in higher education is an insightful and rigorous addition to the field, challenging dominant narratives while offering practical resources for educators. Hughes' work stands out for its balanced critique of blended learning's claims, its historical depth, and the actionable MIRACLE framework. This book is highly recommended for those interested in a nuanced, evidence-based understanding of blended learning's complexities and potentials in higher education.

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