Book Reviews

Andrew Higgins
Auckland University of Technology
Auckland, New Zealand

Stacey, E., & Gerbic, P. (Eds.). (2009). *Effective blended learning practices: Evidence-based perspectives in ICT facilitated education.* Information Science Reference: New York (pp. 359).

Current writing about blended learning falls largely into two categories: practice and strategy. Most falls into the practitioner category, as does this book.

In Australasia, blended learning found a natural home, perhaps because so many learning institutions have engaged in distance education. Consequently, staff are more comfortable using a range of alternative teaching strategies than might be the case elsewhere. As we would expect, this book about effective blended learning practices has some significant contributions from academics working in Australia and New Zealand.

The health of the university depends on, among other things, a close and effective cooperation between those who make policies and administer the institution, and those whose task it is to perform the essential functions of teaching, research, and community service. This book alerts senior managers to current activity in university blended learning. It is important to let senior managers in universities know what the current developments are, because it is they who make high-level strategic decisions and allocate substantial human and financial resources to meet the institution's strategic aims.

In some universities, staff engage in significant aspects of blended learning at the school and individual teacher level, as this book so well demonstrates. In due course, innovations such as blended learning reach 'take-off' and become ubiquitous. Serious buy-in is enforced on the management. Examples in this book show that staff and student demand for blended learning affects human resource managers, chief financial officers, and information technology directors, who often only find out about them after the event. *Effective Blended Learning Practices* alerts them to these developments in advance.

As the authors also demonstrate, some universities seek mandated top-down blended learning implementation. But this approach is less effective than

a more random uptake. Regardless of the approach used by institutions to engage with blended learning, this book shows how teachers form communities of practice using modern technologies to support and inform one another's endeavours. The range of such strategies is well covered.

Effective Blended Learning Practices, as with all similar academically based books, provides us with an excellent foreword and preface as to the nature and purpose of the work. Chapter 1, written by the editors, introduces ideas of blended learning practices to facilitate and support adult learners in different contexts.

The concept of blended learning is introduced to a discussion by defining the term. The definitions provided in the first chapter are necessary and sufficient. If I have one criticism of the book's structure, it is that the definitions carefully and extensively canvassed in the first chapter draw upon works that are repeated in definitions of blended learning in almost all of the other chapters. As a result, there appears to be a great deal of repetition of the definition of blended learning practices, drawing very often upon the same set of authors. Would it have been better to canvass the various definitions in the first chapter, and identify one or two definitions that would cover all the other chapters? Much of the repetition could have been excised from the following chapters, allowing them to focus more immediately on the issues. Of course, some academics enjoy discussions on the detailed points of definitions. But I think it would be fair to say that most school teachers and university academics are aware that blended learning involves some face-to-face activity and some use of digital communications technologies, and I wonder whether lengthy debates on the definition of blended learning add much to its practice.

The conclusions to this book cover the contents of its preceding chapters well. The recommendations for practice note that blended learning is indeed a practical matter, and the research within the textbook is highly applied. The editors particularly recognise the need for research into blended learning activities. Universities have taken to blended learning for a number of reasons. Philosophically, blended learning helps to meet some of the main points of the social justice agenda, such as access, equity, and participation. Digital technologies give people who might not otherwise have done so access to study at tertiary level. Equity means we can treat students who have different backgrounds, understandings, and cultures more appropriately to achieve the learning outcomes. In terms of participation, those of us who have taught seminars have seen many students sitting quietly and saying

nothing—perhaps because of shyness, a language barrier, or simply because they are inarticulate. Using digital technologies within communities of practice or within communities of learners allows these students to have a voice and to express themselves in their own time and in terms of what they regard as appropriate consideration of ideas, language, and expression.

It is sometimes said that changes in pedagogical practice move at the speed of a glacier. Conservative arguments often require that we conduct research into an activity before choosing to adopt it. If we have no research we can't adopt, and if it's not adopted there's nothing to research. Blended learning has spread like wildfire throughout the tertiary sector in the Western world. It has done this not only for the philosophical reasons given above, but also for the practical ones—because teachers can now reach out to their students in many different ways using digital technologies.

This book is a valuable addition to the growing number of works on blended and electronic or digital learning strategies within the tertiary sector. It should be strongly recommended to those who work in the field, and all those who wish to work in the field of tertiary teaching using digital technologies.

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Book Reviews

Mark Nichols
Laidlaw College
Auckland, New Zealand

Conole, G., & Oliver, M. (Eds.). (2007). *Contemporary perspectives in e-learning research: Themes, methods and impact on practice*. London: Routledge.

The title of this book, and the reputations of the editors and publisher (Routledge), all promise a rewarding experience. However, mine is a mixed response. The 15 chapters, each written by a team of authors, vary in their coverage and frequently overlap. While the opening and closing chapters provide very useful theoretical discussion, much of the middle seems disjointed and many important theories and studies in e-learning have been completely overlooked.

The book opens with a tantalising list of research questions on pages 16 to 20. Many of these questions have been considered in journals over the last decade or so and, in my view, each deserved at least a one-paragraph discussion and some explanation of where research has already provided some answers. That said, Chapters 2, 14, and 15 do provide useful material for those seeking to perform e-learning research and evaluation. Chapter 3 was a personal highlight, as it deals with policy matters and provides a useful insight into the heritage of e-learning. Chapter 5, which covers organisational metaphors and includes a commentary on the changing role of e-learning professionals, is thought provoking and a useful pointer to where any 'career' in e-learning might go.

Contemporary Perspectives in E-learning Research adopts the approach of a central narrative in each chapter, with 'dissenting voices' offered in call-out boxes from time to time. The use of dissenting voices is commendable, as the call-outs provide opportunity for reflection. Brief case studies also add flavour to the coverage. However, many of the middle chapters made questionable claims, and others provide somewhat patchy coverage or focus on very narrow avenues of research.

One example of a questionable claim is in Chapter 8. Here, Laurillard's criticism of the design of learning materials is questioned because underlying her critique is:

> the presumption of a deficit model of learning where the student is not yet considered to be an expert; and the presumption that completeness will be possible in the expression of a learning objective (p. 122).

Laurillard's proposal that, firstly, students should be regarded as future rather than current experts and, secondly, that learners following a particular learning process *can* achieve particular learning outcomes, seems to me fundamental to the purpose and role of higher education. If the student is to be treated as an expert ... well ... I am reminded of a quote in Nation (1991, p.101), who cites Leslie's (1987) comment that "If learners are so capable of self-direction ... do they need teachers?" Unfortunately this book does not begin with an analysis of what formal education is concerned with, and the valuable role that structured learning plays in a student's lifelong learning journey.

Patchy coverage is evident across Chapters 7, 8, and 9. In each case, learning objects are central to the discussion. It is a pity that a separate chapter was not allocated to learning objects, perhaps freeing space for discussion about instructional design and the use of multimedia in e-learning. Even across three chapters, it is disappointing to find no *critical* treatment of learning objects. Attention is given to their inherent (or rather, *potential*) benefits and the metadata standards that have emerged, but the pedagogical and learning design difficulties learning objects give rise to are barely mentioned.

An example of the narrowness of some chapters is Chapter 10, which deals with e-assessment. Here the focus is on only those forms of assessment where the uploading, marking, *and* return of assessment are automated. So Optical Character Recognition (OCR) is mentioned, but uploading, automatic plagiarism reporting, and insertion of digital comments by markers on student essays is completely overlooked. Rather than being 'markers', faculty become 'monitors'.

Possibly the most disappointing aspect of *Contemporary Perspectives in E-learning Research* is that it is largely a platform for the (often very specific) research focuses of its contributors. This significantly limits the discussion. For example, the book makes no mention of Laurillard's Conversational Framework, Anderson et al.'s Community of Inquiry framework, Salmon's Five Stage Model, Web 2.0, e-portfolios, or Multi-User Virtual Environments (MUVEs). However, substantial attention is given to learning objects.

This book is not written for beginners to e-learning; it is more suitable for researchers. Readers with very specific areas of interest that overlap the rather narrow perspectives offered in the central chapters will find parts of this book very useful; those with a more general interest might be advised to read the first and final few chapters.

In summary, I think it a pity that the book offers perspectives and does not really seek to provide any form of synthesis. The contrast between the opening page (where "a synthesis of research" is promised) and p. 217, where it is stated that "research cannot be readily synthesized", is telling. Even if such a synthesis of research findings is *not* possible, an attempt to do so might have proposed further avenues of inquiry. Given the lack of comprehensive coverage by the middle-chapter authors, who achieved depth in narrow areas rather than breadth across their themes, a lack of overall synthesis in the volume is hardly surprising.

Reference

Nation, D. (1991). Teaching texts and independent learning. In T. Evans & B. King (Eds.), *Beyond the text: Contemporary writing on distance education* (pp. 101–129). Australia: Deakin University Press.

Book Reviews

Dr Keryn Pratt
University of Otago
Dunedin, New Zealand

Abrioux, D. A. M. X., & Ferreira, F. (Eds.). (2009). *Open schooling in the 21st century*. Perspectives on distance education. Commonwealth of Learning: Vancouver (pp. xii, 204).

When I saw the title of this book I was excited, as the issue of open schooling is very topical. I was, however, a little alarmed and disappointed when I read the first line of the preface. Its emotive nature did not suggest *Open Schooling in the 21st Century* (which is part of the Perspectives on Distance Education series) would provide the balanced and supported views on distance education and open schooling in the 21st century that I was hoping for. Reading on, I was reassured, as it seemed that this book would not be an emotive appeal, but rather, as it claims, a "carefully prepared and thoroughly researched book" (p. vi). Overall, however, I found that the book failed to live up to this promise. While arguments were well reasoned, I was disappointed at the lack of reference to other research and discussion on this topic. While interesting points were raised, no support was provided for them, so the reader has no way of following up on the information presented.

Open Schooling in the 21st Century consists of 11 chapters written by 14 international authors. Part I introduces the book, while in Part II three chapters cover three themes associated with open schooling. These themes are then revisited in the six case studies in the third section. The case studies were chosen for their variety and to reflect the three themes, and are based on examples from a variety of Commonwealth countries. The final section presents a conclusion.

The introductory chapter defines open schooling and provides context for the book. It introduces the three themes, which have been chosen because they "are of fundamental concern to policy-makers and senior bureaucrats" (p. 8), and outlines the six case studies. The first theme discussed is that of policy. Du Vivier and Ellis identify levels at which policy may be formulated, and then focus on the role played by intermediate levels of government (national, state, or provincial). They make a reasoned argument for this level of

government being involved in setting policies, and propose a cyclical process for doing so. They describe the steps they believe those involved in setting policies should take, and what should be involved in the policies.

Haughey and Stewart's chapter focuses on the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in open schooling. Their chapter is general rather than specific in nature, as they note it is important that "government policy-makers review research studies... and ensure they keep up-to-date with current projects in their own and similar countries" (p. 38). As such, while this chapter provides general background on issues that need to be considered with regard to using ICT in open schooling, few specifics are given. They identify issues that need to be considered with particular regard to infrastructure (including support) and pedagogical approaches.

In Chapter 4, Rumble explores issues related to the costs associated with open and distance learning. He provides a broad overview of the types of costs involved, factors that affect these costs, and the implications of these for policy-makers.

In the third part of the book, six case studies are presented. In each case study, the focus is on the themes identified in the previous section. The authors provide the context within which the organisation was developed. They then outline aspects of the organisation related to the themes, including governance, funding model, degree of openness, pedagogy, use of ICT—and the challenges faced in each of these areas. The organisations described vary widely, and include the following cases from developing countries and from four continents:

- Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning
- Namibian College of Open Learning
- Open Access College, South Australia
- Open College, Papua New Guinea
- National Institute of Open Schooling, India
- Vancouver Learning Network, Canada

The institutions also vary widely in the approaches they have taken to open learning. The range of approaches is interesting; however, I found the wide variety in context limited the relevance of the approaches taken and lessons learned.

Another disappointment with this book was the formatting. Although it is available as an e-book, it has not been designed for this format. For example, odd and even pages have different margins, which is disconcerting when read on a screen. Considering the topic of the book, I found this disappointing.

On the whole, *Open Schooling in the 21st Century* is very general, with a lack of depth in the discussions of the issues, and limited reference to literature where readers can gain further discussions of the issues. As such, it is of limited value to those who are already familiar with the research on open learning. It is also limited as an introductory book for those new to open learning, because of its focus on three themes. Although the case studies are varied, they were chosen to illustrate the three themes, resulting in a lack of breadth. It must be noted, though, that the issues chosen are of "fundamental concern to policy-makers and senior bureaucrats" (p. 8) and, as I am neither, I may be underestimating the value of this book for this audience.