OPEN PRAXIS

INTERNATIONAL
COUNCIL FOR OPEN AND
DISTANCE EDUCATION

Book Review of Learning Online: What Research Tells Us About Whether, When and How

Reviewed by: William H. Stewart
Gangnam-University of California Riverside IEC (Republic of Korea)
wstewart@courses-gnucr.org

Introduction

Our learning has become increasingly mediated by technology and to that effect online education and blended learning in the classroom have become part and parcel of everyday life, whether taking the form of official classwork or in our own independent, interest-driven pursuits. The application of online education is not a one-size-fits-all approach however, nor may it be appropriate for all learners or instances. Means, Bakia, and Murphy have synthesised a variety of resources and topics in the field to present the reader with research that has been conducted regarding the effectiveness of online learning, as well as an engaging overview of what online learning looks like in K-12 and Higher Education, in addition to personal interest and productivity.

The text is divided into 9 chapters that will take the novice through foundational knowledge in the field of online learning all the way through current topics (e.g. Blended Learning, Virtual Schools). The more knowledgeable or focused reader can easily dive into topics of greater interest or personal relevance. As the authors note, the text has been written in such a way that each chapter can stand on its own so that the reader is free to engage with the text in any order or amount that meets their needs.

Structure and Content

The authors establish a foundation for all readers in Chapters 1 and 2 by introducing the landscape of online learning, the inconsistency of terms, and as a result the challenge of a coherent conversation. Rather than suggest yet another typology to describe a quickly changing field, the authors pragmatically provide a set of dimensions for the reader to better contextualize the topics they will encounter in the book: context, design, implementation, outcomes. This particular chapter will be of value for readers without any background knowledge and will prepare them for subsequent topics, while chapter 2 begins by grounding the text in research through an extensive meta-analysis of
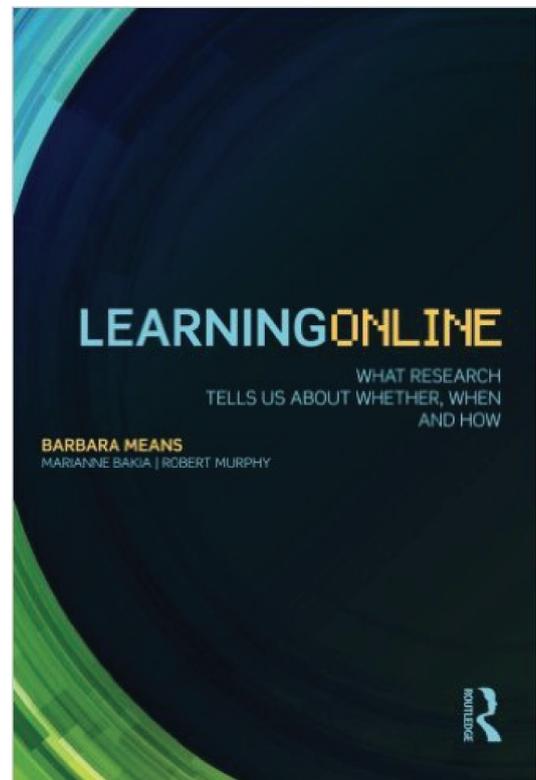
studies conducted by the authors that address not only whether or not online education is as effective as face-to-face education, but in what ways it is shown to be associated with more positive outcomes than traditional methods alone. As is suggested by the subtitle of the book of whether, when, or how, there is a host of nuance and as a result there are applications and contexts that are more effective than others, making this chapter an asset for all readers.

Chapters 3 and 5 examine how brick-and-mortar tertiary and secondary programs are extending themselves through online education as well as a synopsis of the origins of current practices and research. Topics range from adaptive instruction, competency-based learning, and MOOCs. This chapter also begins a treatment on blended learning which is covered more extensively in chapter 5 within the context of K-12 education.

Everyday informal learning that occurs online in a more structured way than the casual learner might describe their learning activities is addressed in Chapter 4. The authors describe various forms of self-initiated learning such as online tutoring, help with assignments, gamification, the limitations of current research, as well as aspects of the digital divide that disadvantage certain learners. This chapter may be of less interest to the majority of readers since such learning experiences tend to be ubiquitous if not wholly transparent in the 21st century.

Chapter 6 discusses the rise of 100% online universities and K-12 virtual schools and explores the performance of students in these programs, as well as how these organizations are funded. These institutions generally offer full degrees and aside from the obvious advantages they provide in accessibility, they are not without controversy and the authors fairly represent the complex relationship of profit, access, quality outcomes, financial-aid associated with funding, and the major criticisms launched at typically for-profit fully online institutions.

The learner is brought into focus in Chapter 7 and the authors explore the difficulties associated with designing online learning experiences that meet the needs of an increasingly diverse group of students, particularly those that are not adequately prepared for, or ideally suited for, formally learning online. This is often a paradox for online learning as many learners are ill prepared and ill suited for it, yet, it is commonly a last chance for many that have not been adequately served by mainstream educational outlets.

Lastly chapter 8 briefly discusses the economics of online learning and asks a fundamental question of whether or not it reduces costs when compared with traditional methods. The authors note the complexity and challenge associated with analysing available data and ultimately offer some general conclusions with the proper perspective as it comes down to how one chooses to compare numbers in the absence of standardised methods of calculating the costs involved. Chapter 9 closes the text as a summary of the previous chapters along with a research agenda for directions of future inquiry.

Conclusion

The authors have provided a valuable text that gives the professional and laymen alike a manageable overview of not only the research related to the effectiveness of online learning in various situations and formats, but also of the ways it is manifested in Higher Education, K-12 virtual schools, blended learning in face-to-face classrooms, open universities, and informal learning online. I would recommend the book to those looking for a broad and accessible overview of online learning. Readers looking for a more in depth treatment of a specific online focus such as only Higher Education or blended learning may be better served by a text more limited in scope. The potential exists for this book to be used as a primary or supplementary resource in an introductory course in online education/distance education. Strengthening the argument to do so is the independent nature of each chapter which allows flexibility and adaptability for any course curriculum.