Book Review

*Online, Blended, and Distance Education: Building Successful Programs in Schools*

DAVID ADELSTEIN
Wayne State University, United States
dave.adelstein@gmail.com

*Online, Blended, and Distance Education: Building Successful Programs in Schools* gives a much-needed global overview on the current state of K-12 e-learning. Editors Tom Clark and Michael K. Barbour have gathered a wide array of academics and educators to author chapters on a fervently discussed topic, one that has a growing, but a surprisingly limited body of research. The vast scope of the book, which looks at the online educational process from creation to practice, offers insight to a large audience consisting of educators, administrators, and researchers in the field.

To help guide the reader, the book is split into four distinct parts. Part one consists of an overview chapter regarding the state of online, blended, and distance education in K-12 penned by the editors. The brief research portion includes a chart of important dates, as well as an overview of the general topics the book presents. Part one concludes with a brief outline of the remaining chapters contained in the remaining three sections.

In part two, Research and Policy, six chapters are dedicated to reviewing various aspects of online, blended, and distance K-12 education. Defining and encouraging quality online teaching, instructional design, management systems and tools, cyber charter schools, understanding K-12 e-learning research, and ensuring equal access are discussed in individual chapters. Each chapter is authored by experts in their respective areas of the field, which are summarized below.

The section begins with chapter two, authored by Kathryn Kennedy and Leanna Archambault, who look to identify how to foster quality K-12 online environments through four distinct parts. These areas include a review of research, an overview of current standards as set by iNACOL, SREB, and the NEA, professional development for the teachers to ensure quality, and future thoughts regarding teacher training.
Christy Keeler reviews best practices for online course design in chapter three. Basic course design models of teacher-as-designer, design team, and template design models are initially discussed, while a large part of the chapter details specific instructional design elements that are deemed integral to the process. Attention is given to communication, instructional strategies, assessment, and accommodations, all elements found at the micro-level of design.

Chapter four gives the reader an overview of technology infrastructure and tools, two vital parts of online education. Rob Darrow advises how to select an appropriate Learning Management System (LMS) as well as show how mobile and Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) solutions might fit into an online infrastructure. Various synchronous and asynchronous tools, such as social media, blogs, and wikis are briefly discussed, along with gamification and open-source leaning resources.

Richard Ferdig, Cathy Cavanaugh, and Joseph Freidhoff push the reader to look further into key K-12 online and blending learning components and the research surrounding them. The authors divide chapter five into five sections: asking the right question, answering the critics, appreciating the complexity, understanding resources, and exploring current research. The authors wish to ultimately see research move in a new direction by looking at rarely explored areas, such as understanding what makes online education work in specific contexts.

Chapter six, authored by Victoria Raish and Ali Carr-Chellman, takes a close look at the state of cyber charter schools in the U.S. A brief history, including the legislation behind the movement and reasons for growth, are reviewed. Research in effectiveness compared to public schools, the for-profit nature of cyber charters, and the legality and ethics behind such models close out the discussions on this recent shift in education.

The final chapter in part two discusses the various components that comprise ensuring equitable access in online and blended learning. Authors Ray Rose, Alese Smith, Karen Johnson, and David Glick make it clear that ensuring equality consists of more than just access to online courses. Providing appropriate technology, high-speed connections, and quality instruction are all important areas for districts and online schools when establishing online coursework.

The bulk of the book can be found in part three, which contains nine chapters dedicated to Case Studies on Practice. The breadth of part three allows the audience to view district, state, and charter programs across the United States, the three most common types of e-learning programs in the country. One final chapter on the United States focuses on a K-12 online teaching endorsement program. The remaining five case studies look to other countries, with a focus on Canada, Nepal, Australia, the United Kingdom, and South Korea. Each case study is detailed below.
The first case study reviews how the North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS) looked to improve itself through evaluation data collected from students, teachers, course developers, and E-Learning Advisors. Kevin Oliver and Tracy Weeks share results and the ensuing reactions from selected findings including student preparation and advising, student strategies, student differences, content and course development, logistical and technical issues, and teaching. The evaluations ultimately influenced change in key areas of training teachers, efficiency, quality, technical issues, teaching, and organizational priorities.

Dazhi Yang and Kerry Rice provide an overview of Boise State University’s K-12 online teaching endorsement program in chapter nine. Using the Idaho Standards for Online Teachers (based on ISTE, NEA, and iNACOL), the BSU Department of Technology became a state-approved endorsement provider in 2011. The case study reviewed the history as well as the challenges of starting up a unique certification pathway. The end result was an endorsement program other universities can build from.

Chapter 10, authored by Mickey Revenaugh, presents the creation process of Nexus Academies, an example of blended charters. Based off results from four initial pilots in Texas, Maryland, and Philadelphia, the case study began by presenting key questions from the Nexus design process, such as who makes up the student body, size of the school, schedules, staffing, and environment. Finally, a typical student day was presented.

Chapter 11 tracks the progression of the Clark County School District (CCSD) Virtual High School from its inception to its current status of serving over 100,000 students in blended and online environments. Jhone Ebert and Allison Powell discuss the challenges faced regarding policy, funding, implementation, perceptions, content, teacher development, and effective practices. The authors conclude with a look at the future of the CCSD Virtual High School program.

John Smallwood, Jennifer Reaburn, and Stephen Baker give a thorough overview of the Virtual High School (VHS). An online private school located in Ontario, Canada, VHS has been viewed as a successful example of online education for the past two decades. Chapter 12 presented many aspects of the program, including the asynchronous courses, online environment, evaluation and assessment, insuring quality teaching, international outreach, and the challenges of plagiarism.

Chapter 13 discusses the barriers to online education faced by developing nations. Cathy Cavanaugh looks specifically at Nepal, initially discussing the educational, economic, environmental, and informational technology context of the country. This is followed with a discussion on both the potential and steps required to bring online education to the children of Nepal.
Starting with a brief Australian legislative review, Stephen Harris presents a case study on the Sydney Centre for Innovation in Learning (SCIL), the online course program for the Northern Beaches Christian School. The design process of the online environment, funding models, and curriculum of SCIL are outlined, as well as the challenges faced during the creation phase. Chapter 14 concludes with current student learning outcomes and how the program can grow in the future.

In Chapter 15, Helen Boulton and Lisa Hasler Waters author a case study regarding virtual learning environments (VLEs) within schools in the United Kingdom. Using a mix of two fully online schools and three traditional schools, there were similar patterns found across all five institutions that helped with the ultimate goal of personalized learning: personal portals, collaborating, and socializing. The case study reviews the schools progress in the three areas, as well as outlines future steps.

The final case study, presented by Hyeonjin Kim and Jeonghee Soo, discusses the Cyber Home Learning System (CHLS), the South Korean national online educational system. Beginning with history and design, the overall impact on policy and learning was considered. After the success factors are taken into account, Chapter 16 concludes with a look at future next steps for the program.

The final part, entitled “Summary Thoughts,” is once again a single chapter authored by the editors. Part four presents a concise overview of parts two and three. A good portion focuses on a summary of part three, reviewing the general ideas behind each case study. Going beyond the recap, policy and practice for both parts two and three are discussed in detail. Finally, the co-editors conclude the chapter with a brief look at possible future trends in online, blended, and distance K-12 education. These trends include various ways of presenting information in an e-learning course, such as personalized, adaptive, and teacher-facilitated content.

In the introduction, the co-editors present a very general overview of the history and current state of K-12 e-learning. Although the summary might appear brief, the research presented actually makes a compelling case for the book itself, as there is a clear need for compiling and expanding upon what is available. The fast pace formatting of chapter one is representative of what to expect from the remainder of the book, as each chapter presents information and quickly ends before it outstays its welcome.

In an accelerated six chapters, part two aims to give the reader an analysis of current policies and topics impacting K-12 e-learning. While it would be irrational to expect the book to hit upon every aspect of the subject, the topics selected in part two allow the reader a wide range of information regarding significant portions of K-12 e-learning. Each chapter is presented in a succinct manner that is dense with information but manages to remain
accessible to a larger audience coming at the material from personal or professional interests. The authors have a clear understanding of the topics discussed, which is evident throughout their contributions.

While having the research and the topics presented in part two is vital to understanding the e-learning landscape, part three helps to make the information personal. As each chapter discusses a unique case study from the United States and elsewhere, the information presented give the audience a ground floor view into various e-learning scenarios. This perspective is impactful for a wide audience, giving both researchers and curious educators information they can immediately digest, understand, and use. The co-editors return in part four to proficiently summarize the previous chapters to provide the audience with a concrete understanding of the topics presented.

Overall, *Online, Blended, and Distance Education: Building Successful Programs in Schools* is an informative read for interested parties, which is a difficult challenge for a subject that attracts such a large and diverse audience. The topics and research discussed are relevant and presented in a logical format, with case studies serving as an excellent follow up to bring the information to the reader on a personal and detailed level. The co-editors, along with the contributing authors, present an exemplary book that is fitting for both those involved with and those who are new to the subject of online learning.

References