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Book review: "Online, blended, and distance education: Building successful programs in schools" by Tom Clark and Michael K. Barbour

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February – 2016

Book Review – Online, Blended, and Distance Education: Building Successful Programs in Schools

Editors: Tom Clark and Michael K. Barbour (2015) *Online, Blended, and Distance Education: Building Successful Programs in Schools*. Softcover. Stylus Publishing. ISBN: 978-1-62036-164-1 Pages 220.



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The process of reviewing a book like *Online, Blended, and Distance Education: Building Successful Programs in Schools* is an interesting task. This book is a collection of writings by several authors with additional pieces by the two editors, Michael Barbour and Tom Clark. In this text, the two editors manage to bring together an impressive group of scholars with proven reputations in the field of educational technology. It is an informative read filled with both research and case study examples to draw from.

Online, Blended, and Distance Education: Building Successful Programs in Schools is divided into four parts. Part One is an overview of the book and Part Four provides a summary. Parts Two and Part Three comprise the majority of the content.

The book begins with an introductory chapter in which the editors explain the background and objectives of the book. Their intention when putting the text together is to address two essential questions. The first question asks what can North American educators learn from international online, blended, and distance education programs? The second question is the exact opposite of the first. What can international educators learn from North American educators? Although the proposed task is a challenging one, they have successfully met the challenge.

In the first content chapter, *Identifying, Evaluating, and Fostering Quality Online Teaching*, by Kathryn Kennedy and Leanna Archambault, the authors analyze the topic through the lens of online teaching standards. They begin by briefly reviewing research relevant to effective online teaching and the various standards related to this topic. The standards include the NEA Guide to Teaching Online Courses, the iNACOL National Standards for Quality Online Teaching, and the SREB Standards for Quality Online Teaching. All three sets of standards are reviewed to identify commonalities across the three sets.

Kennedy and Archambault close their chapter by describing their perceptions of how the research and standards may be used to foster quality online teaching. They assert that the research and standards should be used to guide teacher professional development for in-service teachers as well as pre-service training for teaching candidates. They elaborate that this is important as many schools shift from face-to-face to blended and online courses due to the differences between the two teaching environments.

Chapter 3, by Christy G. Keeler, discusses the topic of instructional design as it applies to online learning. Keeler takes the works of seminal authors in the area of instructional design like Gagne, Briggs, and Wager and applies their research to the topic of online course development specifically. She identifies considerations specific to online learning like choosing technology tools and developing online assessments. She also discusses specific design models.

In Rob Darrow's Chapter 4, *Technology Infrastructure and Tools*, he addresses the topic of technology infrastructure in three parts: learning management systems, connectivity and hardware, and mobile learning. The first two parts, learning management systems and the section on connectivity and hardware, are obvious choices for this chapter. These first two topics are addressed effectively with a solid overview of both major and less well-known learning management systems including Moodle, Blackboard, and Desire2Learn. Darrow also includes a list of considerations when reviewing course management systems for adoption to find the best fit. The connectivity and hardware section discusses items worth considering when adopting a learning management system in order to improve the probability of successful learning management system adoption.

I found the third section of Chapter 4 on mobile learning the most interesting, and I see why Darrow includes it as a separate topic. The topic of mobile learning has a very important role in this chapter because many learners now access online learning environments through mobile learning devices such as smartphones and tablets. The mobile learning section also includes a discussion of related issues such as blogging and social networking.

Chapter 5, by Ferdig, Cavanaugh, and Freidhoff, presents research as it applies to online and blended learning, outlining that there are multiple factors, including blended learning models, to consider when building a blended or online program (Horn & Staker, 2014). The authors of this chapter make the connection between there being so many variables and the need to ask the right questions. These questions seek answers to whether online or blended learning is equal to or superior to traditional learning environments. Although the authors drive this point home with the statement that “no single study will answer everything we need to know about k-12 online learning,” they do give the reader a guide to what questions to ask along with some basic understandings that current research has revealed. These

understandings relate to some overarching qualities for successful online and blended learning environments. Ferdig, Cavanaugh, and Freidhoff also present a few concerns and shortcomings for the reader to consider when evaluating or creating online or blended or online programs. The chapter is both clear and informative.

In the chapter, “Cyber Charter Schools”, Raish and Carr-Chellman make the connection between the two growing educational initiatives of charter schools and online learning. This is an interesting chapter because proponents for either charter schools or online learning will assert their benefit for addressing gaps in education, but this chapter suggests using them in partnership. The chapter includes valuable information on the background of charter schools, the present and potential relationship between charter schools and online learning, current relevant legislation, as well as possible obstacles to successful online charter schools and ways to surmount these obstacles.

The next chapter, *Ensuring Equitable Access in Online and Blended Learning* by Rose, Smith, Johnson, and Glick addresses an old but still very relevant topic. The topic of equity in education appears in literature throughout the history of education going back to Brown vs Board of Ed in 1954. Rose, Smith, Johnson, and Glick discuss the potential of online education for providing equity through online learning opportunities. More importantly, they offer research-based options for increased success in pursuing efforts to provide equity through online learning.

Part Three of the book focuses on specific cases of online, blended, and distance learning. Eight case studies present situations that range from domestic scenarios with bountiful resources to international programs that attempt to provide learning opportunities with minimal resources at best. The editors do an excellent job choosing varied cases that present a broad spectrum of learning scenarios. Case studies include a program for online teacher education programs, a collection of blended charter academies with plentiful resources, and a Nepalese program whose lack of resources includes toilets in addition to adequate technology.

Clark and Barbour's Online, Blended, and Distance Education: Building Successful Programs in Schools is a well-planned and informative book. It presents a multitude of relevant topics on the subject of online, blended, and distance learning in an approachable manner. It contains research that will be informative and relevant to both online educators and administrators.

References

Horn, M.B. & Staker, H. (2014). *Blended: Using disruptive innovation to improve schools*. San Francisco, CA. Jossey-Bass.

