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Book Review : Contemporary Perspectives in E-learning Research: Themes, Methods and Impact on Practice

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Review Subject:

Contemporary Perspectives in E-learning Research: Themes, Methods and Impact on Practice

Edited by Gráinne Conole and Martin Oliver

Taking advantage of the possibilities and potential of e-learning has been promoted as the most effective means of enhancing the quality of teaching and learning at the present time. A book providing an overview of contemporary research into e-learning could be expected to attract a substantial readership depending on its coverage. This is a good book, and makes a real contribution to e-learning research. Among a genre of books that seem to be published mainly to give the author or editor something significant for the curriculum vitae this one does explore some different and very useful ground. I did, though, experience some disappointment that I will get out of the way early and then get on with the review. When, I was first offered the volume to review I was rather keen because the title, *Contemporary Perspectives in E-learning Research: Themes, Methods and Impact on Practice*, led me rather naively to think that it would focus on more than just higher education, and perhaps deal with broader education and training e-learning issues. I was mistaken. The book draws largely on higher education thinking, experience, research and applications and it does not range into the issues of other sectors or their applications of e-learning.

A feature of the volume that I found pleasing was the amount of recent and relevant research that each of the chapters draws upon to produce a strongly evidence-based set of readings that form a nicely balanced book. A further feature that I liked was the willingness to draw on the thinking from other sectors of education and their literatures. A really nice

example of this is drawing on Lave and Wenger's (1991) work on communities of practice – concepts developed from apprentices' learning and being applied to e-learning.

The book is divided into two major sets of foci – Part 1 deals with the macro dimensions of e-learning, and Part 2 the micro dimensions. There are six chapters in Part 1, including an introductory and orientation chapter by the editors themselves. The other five chapters include explorations of broader issues of learning technologies and their association with knowledge growth and definitions and impacts on society, the impact of e-learning on organizations, and the impact of policy and funding on e-learning development and how it has been acted out. There are useful discussions on the Giddens (1999) conceptualisations of knowledge from an “is it true?” stance to a “what can it do?” stance. There is also a succinct but pithy and useful discussion of positivism and a social perspectives paradigm of scientific inquiry. The succinctness of this section of the book mean that much is left unsaid and unargued but, to my mind, the very inclusion of this sort of exposition in a book of this nature makes useful connections that we do not often see in the e-learning literature. Cutting across the parts and the chapters of the book are the six themes identified by the editors – interdisciplinarity; access and inclusion; change; commodification; interactivity and social interaction; and political aspects. These themes are provided with some range and definition in the book so that we readers can understand them well enough and they are a defensible set of themes to pursue. I would have liked to have seen a further theme on the development of human capital and the book could have included an economic theme such as that without being much different from what it is now. In today's world where the strong interest is in the application of knowledge for economic or social good such a theme would have been useful to explore.

Part 1 of the book also includes a chapter on the impact of policy and funding and practice in e-learning in higher education. I started reading this chapter with some suspicion that it would be very UK-centric but was pleasantly surprised. A really valuable contribution of the chapter was the development of the “e-learning timeline” – which is represented as a nicely comprehensive matrix that considers the technology available at the time, the applications made of that technology, the characteristics of those applications, and the major initiatives that drove the developments at the time. While the treatment of those initiatives is UK-centric, the timeline matrix that results from the analysis is not and includes applications from anywhere. Of course, the actual dates for the timeline will be different in differently developed parts of the world, but the concepts and their sequencing remain relevant. Other chapters in Part 1 focus on the design of learning technologies, the impact of e-learning on organisational roles and structures, and learning theory and its application to e-learning. Even though I am an experienced e-learning user and something of a researcher I found the chapter on the design of learning technologies had much to teach me and the forward thinking that is represented by the chapter was refreshing and gave me much cause to think about how I teach and research in e-learning. The history of technologies and the interrelationships between those technologies I found enabled me to make better sense of what I know already, and provided me with a rather neat form of taxonomy around which to form my own thinking. I have no doubt other readers will form the same view. The lead author of this chapter, John Cook, has the rather delightful title in his institution of Manager of Reusable Learning Objects. I imagine he already has many sceptics wondering at that title and making their own sense (or nonsense) out of it. However, as one reads the chapter the

aptness of his position title becomes clearer, and leads rather nicely into the next chapter, aimed at organisational roles and structures. It was this chapter of the book that most caught my eye since my own view is that we have paid too little attention to this matter as e-learning has evolved and changed. This chapter again provides a history of organisational response to e-learning developments, along with a valuable theoretical connection to McNay's (1995) two-dimensional concept of educational institution organization. The chapter is a bit short and, therefore, a little limited in what it has to say – but nevertheless plays a very valuable role in a book that devotes so much space to macro issues of e-learning.

Part 2 comprises nine chapters, including one of conclusions. These are solidly written chapters that draw well on the available literature and that contribute to the book in an effective way. It was refreshing to see a chapter devoted to e-assessment, something not normally dealt with in any detail in the literature. The chapter acknowledges the movement of assessment from outputs to learning processes, but does not deal with current issues such as negotiated assessment and the contribution that current information and communication technologies and e-learning techniques can make to assessment that provides a learner with opportunity to develop a product for assessment that also serves a purpose within their own employment or other strategic directions.

A real value in this book that is developed in Part 1 and continued effectively in Part 2 is the development of really useful summaries, such as the taxonomy of learning activities shown in designing for learning chapter; and the summary of things we know and things we do not know (but need to) in the chapter on collaboration. Also of value throughout the book are the pithy and insightful comments made by experienced practitioners and researchers and placed in shaded boxes within each chapter.

The Conclusion chapter is cautious and organised around the six themes of the book. Questions are raised by the chapter, rather than answered and, although some readers may be disappointed by that, I thought it was generative and provided some strong bases for further research and reflection on e-learning. The substance and solidity of the chapters of the book are used in the conclusions as a basis for argument and, if there is a criticism to be made of the chapter, it is that its caution can sometimes lead to the banal – such as the insight that different individuals (stakeholders) have different vested interests in higher education (p. 220). A little more writing into the Conclusions chapter would have made it more substantial and made a better use of the solid material provided in the contributing chapters.

In summary, this is a good book that I would recommend be read by people with a serious interest in e-learning and, because of the breadth of issues dealt with and the histories provided, it may be a book worth considering as a text in relevant courses.

References:

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McNay (1995), "From collegial academy to the corporate enterprise: the changing cultures of universities", in Schuller, T. (Ed.), *The Changing University?*, Open University, Buckingham.