

BOOK REVIEW

THE FINEST BLEND: GRADUATE EDUCATION IN CANADA

REVIEWED BY

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Parchoma, G., Power, M., & Lock, J. (Eds.) (2020). *The Finest Blend: Graduate Education in Canada*. Edmonton: AU Press. Pages: 311. Price: 39.99 CAD (paper).

With many higher education institutions moving to online, virtual spaces and closing their doors to most in-person activities due to the current global pandemic, this edited volume is a timely addition to the literature addressing online, virtual learning for graduate education, though at the time of writing the authors and editors could not have known the impending relevance of their work.

The chapters included in this edited volume are based on work presented at the 2015/2016 Collaboration for Online Higher education and Research (COHERE) conference examining online graduate learning programs, and the Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education (CSSHE) conference in May 2016. Therefore, this volume represents a collection of perspectives from across Canada on the design, delivery, and administration of blended and online learning programs for graduate education.

After an initial discussion outlining the global landscape of blended and online learning, the first half of the book (chapters 2-5) concentrates on examining the design element of programs for sustainability and increased access to programs, detailing the supports necessary for designers and instructors. The second half of the book (chapters 6-9) is concerned with the other side of that coin, the outcomes of these programs, through examining the experiences of both faculty and students in blended and online courses, exploring their engagement with the various methods of teaching and learning to inform future practice and policy.

In chapter one, Michael Power provides an overview of blended and online learning through history, from the early days of the Open University, through implementation of video conferencing, and finally to what we have today, known as BOLD – blended online learning design. Power's insight, concluding that now is the time for institutions to take up BOLD to "prove or disprove its relevance" (p. 34) is particularly astute, given the current pandemic which has changed the face of higher education since this volume was published.

Chapter two provides an auto-ethnographical approach by Jay Wilson, speaking from experience as Department Chair supporting online learning delivery using a mentoring approach. However, at times it seems as though this approach was merely informal professional development in disguise, evidenced when the author states: "there needs to be a systematic way of supporting them [faculty]" (p. 44). This chapter didn't have as much structure or direction as other chapters in this volume, most likely owing to the auto-ethnographic nature, the re-telling of the author's experiences. The advice given on how to support faculty in blended and online learning as a chair/administrator may be less relevant moving forwards, given that the pandemic has moved graduate courses online, and faculty—whether new or experienced—have learned "on the job" to create and deliver online programs. Given the current climate, the support faculty need moving forwards may no longer be the same.

Chapter three reports the results of a design-based research approach, advocating for effective orientation programs which target the online learning environment as well as course material and expectations. The authors argue that institutions should be developing programs from the learner's perspective, to ensure they meet technological ability of all students and adequately prepare graduates for what to expect.

Chapter four provides a guide to the use of different media in online courses from the perspective of instructional designers. It provides a detailed report on how team-based design works, the benefits and drawbacks of various uses of media in online course design, and other considerations such as resource constraints, including financial issues and readiness/experience of course instructors.

Chapter five presents the findings of a participatory action-research project investigating faculty experience transitioning from face-to-face to online, virtual course provision. The chapter is insightful, and provides meaningful, actionable results to support staff development through the process, using Lewin's (1951) model of change as a guide.

In chapter six, we switch focus from design of programs to looking at the experiences and perceptions of staff and students in blended and online learning programs. Sawsen Lakhal provides an overview of blended, synchronous learning (multi-access learning) of a franco-phone Master Teaching Program for practitioners teaching in anglophone schools. The author reports the experiences of students with the face-to-face and distance learning components. Unfortunately, the small sample size limits wider applicability, but the results of the study support existing literature indicating a research focus is still required for online, distance learning programs in managing communication and the availability of (and ability to use) the technology required.

In chapter seven, Snow discusses the development of open education over time at Cape Breton university, from the different types of Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) to the use of social media platforms for "curious" students as part of their open access provision. The author offers insights for similar sized institutions in their own development of sustainable open education policy.

Chapter eight explores students' and professors' lived experiences of a graduate, blended learning program using the Community of Inquiry (COI) framework, as used by Garrison, Anderson & Archer (2001), also

used by many of the authors in this volume. They discuss learning as an inherently social activity. The contradictory findings between faculty perception of students' technological ability versus the students' actual experiences, some reporting a steep learning curve, provide focus for further research.

The final chapter in the volume explores how purposely designed cycles of learning (less formal, synchronous, auditory discussion; and formal, asynchronous text discussion) support and enhance student engagement, finding that the students, in fact, made use of any and all methods of interaction, engaging in similar ways regardless of the course instructor's intention.

As Lock and Power state in their conclusion, "these nine chapters demonstrate the complexity of current work in designing, implementing, and facilitating learning using blended and/or online approaches" (p. 303).

As is common with edited volumes, the style and tone of each chapter varies, depending upon the type of research being addressed. The chapters in this volume address the complexity of designing and implementing blended and/or online approaches to teaching and learning, using a variety of methods to study these issues, including ethnographic approaches and action research.

Some chapters are based on the author's personal experiences; others detail the results of research studies. Although some chapters draw common conclusions, as is to be expected there are also some contradictory conclusions drawn from the different perspectives of the authors and their expectations of students. These come to light particularly when they are describing research based on their different beliefs about students' and/or faculty's experiences and ability to use technology-enhanced strategies.

However, taken as a whole, the book provides a broad overview of the current state of blended and online graduate education across Canada and provides an important reference for course designers and instructors in designing and enhancing their current, often hastily constructed, online offerings for greater accessibility, engagement, and sustainability.

References

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