



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

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## BOOK REVIEW

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

**Programs.** Tom Clark and Michael K. Barbour (eds.). Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2015, 978 pp., \$39.95 (softcover), \$95.00 (hardcover), \$95.00 (library e-book).

The majority of research concerning online and blended learning occurs in higher education, corporate, and government settings. Research examining K–12 (i.e., kindergarten to twelfth grade) environments is especially lacking. Early on in the field some of the most valuable research was not peer reviewed. Great progress has been made and peer-reviewed journals are regularly publishing articles on K–12 online and blended learning. This trend has been highlighted by special issues in journals such as *The American Journal of Distance Education* and by the establishment of the *Journal of Online and Blended Learning*—the only journal dedicated exclusively to publishing articles examining issues surrounding K–12 online and blended learning. However, reports and edited books still play an important role and have the potential to make a significant impact on the field. I believe that *Online, Blended, and Distance Education in Schools: Building Successful Programs* has the potential to make that level of impact.

Tom Clark and Michael K. Barbour, two longtime researchers in the field of K–12 online and blended learning, edited the book. The editors should be commended for soliciting chapters from many of the most influential researchers in the field. Chapters are organized into two main sections that are bookended by two chapters written by the editors to provide an overview and summary for the book. The first section contains six chapters that focus on research and policy. These chapters provide concise summaries, critiques, and recommendations that will prove helpful to both novices and experts in the field. Authors also commonly reference external resources that make the book an especially valuable resource. I believe that the following three chapters will prove especially insightful to a wide audience.

In the chapter “Identifying, Evaluating, and Fostering Quality Online Teaching,” Kennedy and Archambault list many of the accrediting bodies and professional organizations that define quality teaching and guide the design of teacher education and professional development programs and initiatives. The authors then highlight and compare the K–12 online teaching standards developed by the International Association for K–12 Online Learning, the Southern Regional Education Board, and the National Education Association. They also direct readers to a more comprehensive cross-reference of how these standards are aligned.

In the chapter “Technology Infrastructure and Tools” Darrow, a former principal of an online charter school, highlights several practical issues that should be considered when developing technology infrastructures and curating tools. Teachers and administrators will also find helpful the tables listing example communication, visual, audio, and writing tools. Furthermore, Darrow provides guidelines for selecting and using open educational resources (OER) and directs readers to explore three OER repositories.

In “Instructional Design: Teaching with Intention,” Keeler tackles a topic all too often ignored in the K–12 online learning literature—the process of designing online courses. Keeler describes three basic K–12 course design models: teacher-as-designer, design team, and template design. Regardless of the model used, Keeler explains that those seeking to design online courses have to make macro-, micro-, and lesson-level design decisions and provides a helpful figure to categorize many of the potential decisions that designers commonly face.

Perhaps what makes this book most valuable to the field and what distinguishes it from other efforts are the nine case studies on practice in the second section of the book. Too often

our field fails to maintain an international perspective and I applaud the editors and authors of this book for providing five international case studies from Canada, Australia, United Kingdom, South Korea, and Nepal in addition to the four U.S. case studies. These case studies help to answer the two guiding questions of the book:

- (1) What can North American educators/programs learn from international K–12 educators/programs?
- (2) What can international K–12 educators/programs learn from North America?

Although all of the case studies are well written and helpful, I briefly review only two chapters that are particularly insightful—one from the United States and one from Nepal.

Oliver and Weeks share a case study of an external evaluation at a new virtual school, the North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS). Evaluations are commonly conducted at virtual schools but the results are not always shared broadly, and when they are, we rarely get a glimpse into how programs received and acted on the evaluation's findings. Oliver and Weeks sort their key findings into six categories: (1) student preparation and advising, (2) student strategies in online courses, (3) differences in student groups, (4) content and course development, (5) logistical and technical issues, and (6) teaching. Following each description, the authors share how the findings impact NCVPS policies and programs that benefit students and teachers. In an earlier chapter on research trends and needs, Ferdig, Cavanaugh, and Freidhoff challenge that “researchers need to find a way to collaborate with the schools so that the outcomes improve the research field while also improving teaching and learning in those contexts” (53). Oliver and Weeks' case study provides an example of how researchers can answer that call. Interestingly, as a result of the evaluation NCVPS work to “better screen students and to design appropriate support interventions” (90). However, in an earlier chapter Rose, Smith, Johnson, and Glick argue that screening students “is misguided and may lead to unintentional biases in the online program” (75). This highlights one of the many disagreements in the field and provides an opportunity for additional research.

In the chapter “Barriers to Online Learning in Developing Nations: The Case of Nepal,” Cavanaugh shares a fascinating and insightful glimpse into some of the obstacles and opportunities for online and blended learning in Nepal—“one of the world's least developed countries” (156). Cavanaugh further explains that Nepal is especially capable of developing a strong online learning presence because of its “ambitious national education plan that prioritizes technology” (157). However, Nepal faces a large teacher shortage and follows a somewhat sporadic learning calendar with eighty public holidays in addition to the frequent sick days commonly due to childhood illnesses—some of which result from poor drinking water. Perilous traveling conditions also make it a challenge for students to access their education even when healthy. Furthermore, students are commonly required to stay home to assist with family responsibilities. Cavanaugh explains that these problems could potentially be alleviated with online and blended learning. Although there are no easy solutions, Cavanaugh sees the possibility of students accessing online courses from home using mobile devices connected to Nepal's ever-more-present mobile communication towers. As a result, Cavanaugh explains that “investment in mobile education is most crucial” (160). Nepal also has organizations, such as the Open Learning Exchange, that are leading ambitious initiatives that provide teachers access to open activities and materials as well as professional development to teachers regarding educational technology. Cavanaugh believes that with modest investments, these types of programs can expand rapidly. In addition to financial investments, Cavanaugh explains that Nepal needs national leadership and a shared vision that results in a “permanent systemic commitment on the part of collaborating government and agencies” (162). Cavanaugh rightly argues that overcoming obstacles in a country like Nepal provides a model for other

developing countries. The ongoing work in Nepal can also provide important insights to online programs in the United States that may unintentionally exclude students who lack at-home resources and support.

The editors and authors should be commended for their efforts in the book. I highly recommend that researchers, practitioners, and graduate students interested in K–12 online learning have this resource on hand. I have already referred to these chapters several times for my own research purposes and encouraged colleagues to do the same.

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