



## 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**, edited by M. Barbour and T. Clark, Sterling, VA, Stylus Publishing, 2015, 256 pp., USD \$95.00/\$37.95 (hardcover/paperback), ISBN 978-1620361-63-4/978-1620361-64-1

Tom Clark and Michael Barbour have assembled a well-rounded text that covers the field of online, blended, and distance education from a variety of viewpoints. This book brings together a wide-ranging group of authors, in addition to the editors' own contributions to the field. The editors present a global perspective of distance education as an opportunity for growth with challenges in the way, rather than a one-sided tome touting distance education as either a panacea for education or a devious attempt to promote an ideological agenda. *Online, Blended, and Distance Education in Schools: Building Successful Programs* is a useful guide for both new and seasoned practitioners, researchers, and policy makers in the area of distance education.

The editors set the stage for the book in chapter 1 by presenting a brief history of the evolution of distance education from correspondence to radio broadcasting to modern-day Internet-based distance education. In addition, they detail the growth of enrolment in distance education courses at the K–12 level. The authors conclude with a list of policy and practice needs, including funding structures and preservice teacher preparation. They present two key questions as the purpose of the book: “What can North American and international educators learn from each other about online and blended learning?” and “What are some key policy and practice issues in the field that might be addressed through advice from experts and program leaders?” (p. 5). The remaining chapters are broken into three parts: a section on current research in distance education, a section on case studies in distance education from around the world, and a concluding chapter summarizing the findings and a call for future directions in research and policy.

The research section includes contributions from various leaders in distance education research who present their findings on a variety of topics. Chapter 2 focuses on how to determine and promote quality online teaching. Kathryn Kennedy and Leanna Archambault detail the evolution of online teaching standards and the evidence supporting good online instructional practices. The authors continue with a review of various training programs and a call for more evidence-based teacher preparation practices, both preservice preparation and in-service professional development. Chapter 3 presents an overview of instructional design models and challenges for online courses. Christy Keeler outlines the various formats of online course development (e.g., teacher as designer, design team, and courses built from templates), and discusses how a variety in delivery methods can complicate the design process. One example of how this complexity can affect design is how delivery systems can vary in the number of adults interacting with children during the instructional process (e.g., teacher, mentor, facilitator, parent).

The author also differentiates between micro-level and lesson-level design, and points out additional design considerations, particularly those for special needs populations.

Chapter 4 focuses on online learning infrastructure challenges, imploring personnel to consider both the obvious and the more subtle aspects of building a system to support online and blended learning. Rob Darrow details the co-evolution of mobile devices and the progression from e-learning to m(mobile)-learning to u (ubiquitous)-learning. Chapter 5 addresses the directions future research should take to move beyond looking for the ultimate, “Does it work?” study. Richard Ferdig, Cathyavanaugh, and Joseph Freidhoff describe five components to consider when trying to understand research into online and blended learning. These are whether the study (1) is asking the right question, (2) addresses the legitimate concerns of critics, (3) reflects appreciation of the complexity of factors underlying research in this area, (4) understands and accesses all of the resources for online and blended learning research, and (5) reflects what is currently known about distance education from research.

Chapter 6 provides the reader with an overview of cyber-charter schools, their history in one state in particular, and current political, social, and policy issues surrounding cyber-charter schools. Victoria Raish and Ali Carr-Chellman discuss the current appeal of cyber-charters over traditional brick-and-mortar school districts, as well as research on the effectiveness of cyber-charters, and advise readers to follow the money carefully to gain a full understanding regarding policy and practice. In the final chapter of this section, researchers discuss current issues with distance education concerning special education, equity, and accessibility. Ray Rose, Alese Smith, Karen Johnson, and David Glick point to the growing digital divide not only with hardware, but also bandwidth, an obvious concern when it comes to online and blended learning, particularly in rural areas. In addition to ensuring that special needs populations have the appropriate tools and have access to courses that are designed with those needs in mind, the authors also point to the need for culturally responsive design with respect to race and orientation.

As a whole, this section does summarize the various areas of K–12 online research. However, it does seem that several of these topics belonged in a separate section. For example, the chapter on course development, while an important topic, seemed to lack a connection to research and policy. The same could be said for the chapter on infrastructure. Further, one could argue that more important topics were left out of this section, such as open educational resources and open access in general. Although the editors address some of these in their summary chapter, the relationship between online and blended instruction and funding would seem to be sufficient to warrant more than a few sentences at the end of the book.

The next section of the book is composed of a series of vignettes, or case studies, on a variety of distance education settings from around the world. These chapters highlight the successes and challenges in very different contexts, ranging from a blended charter school system in the United States to starting distance programs in third-world countries. The case studies provide information on the start-up of online programs, the evaluation of student outcomes, evaluations of teachers’ experiences, and the maturation of programs from minor course providers to key components in curriculum delivery for an entire district. In addition, some of the studies discuss how online programs have come full circle by developing blended opportunities with the brick-and-mortar institution from which they were born.

Examples of public and private settings are included as well. Case studies come from Canada, Australia, Nepal, the United Kingdom, and South Korea as well as from the United States.

In keeping with the theme of learning from international experiences, the case study on online learning in Nepal is of particular interest. The country is very diverse, with many different ethnicities represented in the primary and secondary student population. Travel is often difficult due to the lack of quality infrastructure in remote regions. This lack of solid infrastructure also plays a role with respect to electricity and even space to build schools. Further, the nation is facing challenges due to climate change. Nepal is a very poor country, with many adults seeking work outside of the country. Despite all of these factors, the country is a growing democracy whose current leadership is pushing for significant improvements in education with technology being the driving force. Cathy Cavanaugh makes a strong argument in this chapter that the country is a prime candidate to build on these goals through online learning, which can address many of the problems associated with access. In addition to the country being a participant in the One Laptop Per Child Program, the nation has a growing mobile telecommunications infrastructure, which, in addition to an economic strategy, has been an educational policy strategy as well. She also calls for policy makers in Nepal and other countries who are building an e-learning infrastructure from the ground up to not only carefully look at the current research in online and blended learning, but to examine other developing nations that have successfully developed online learning infrastructures (e.g., Singapore and India). Although addressing the technical, political, and infrastructure issues, cultural barriers may make a less optimistic scenario more plausible.

In addition to the K–12 setting, one chapter details the development of Boise State University's K–12 online teaching endorsement. Dazhi Yang and Kerry Rice describe the current state of teacher training for online and blended environments as lagging behind what is currently needed based on the explosion of online learning in the United States. Although states have begun to issue standards for quality online instruction, questions arise over the need for endorsements, which are usually based on subject area. The authors go on to describe the evolution of the online teaching endorsement in the state of Idaho, which requires additional coursework specific to online learning, as well as an online practicum experience lasting 8 weeks. At Boise State University, finding placement sites for preservice teachers was a difficult task for the simple fact that there were fewer placement opportunities. However, the university forged a partnership with the state online school, and that partnership extended beyond placement assistance to include the development of online tutorials, facilitation of mentoring experiences, and research opportunities.

The case studies should invoke thoughtful classroom discussion. From a presentation standpoint, a textbook on this topic could be organized in a more logical manner (e.g., preparing online teachers, creation of a virtual school, evolution of the school, evaluation of the program). This is a minor issue, but something instructors should be aware of when designing a course on this topic.

The concluding chapter highlights the key themes from the preceding chapters in the book in light of the two initial questions asked at the beginning. The editors summarize the key practice issues around four themes: teaching, content, technology, and management. They also summarize the key policy issues around areas of ensuring student quality, the role of government, and promoting equity. The final

paragraphs summarize future trends in online and blended education, including globalization, increased blended learning opportunities, an evolving role for teachers, and the push for personalization, adaptive systems, mobile access, and free and open resources. As previously mentioned, some of these topics could have had dedicated chapters, and instructors may need to supplement the text with additional course materials sooner than expected.

While primarily geared as a textbook for courses in distance education and educational/instructional technology, the book serves as a state-of-the-field text for those wishing to become more aware of changes and challenges in the field of distance education specifically for K–12. The editors have created a wiki resource (<http://onlineblendedschooling.wikispaces.com/>) for teachers and students to enhance the discussion and learning experience. There is a badge system currently in development on the wiki that teachers have the option of using or adapting in their own class to further encourage student participation. The book provides ideas for practitioners and policy makers with regards to approaching distance education in today's environment, as well as openly discussing the challenges of providing high quality content, instructors, and access to students regardless of geographical location and situation. Rather than being a book dedicated to best practices in the classroom, or a text that simply translates current research for practitioners, this collection of case studies and research adds to the knowledge base of the field while providing opportunities for discussion on many of the current issues in K–12 online and blended instruction.

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