

Reviews / Comptes rendus

Discussion-Based Online Teaching to Enhance Student Learning: Theory, Practice, and Assessment (2nd ed.)

By Tisha Bender

(Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2012, 256 pages)

In a networked world that does not seem to be weary of Web 2.0's ubiquitous influence in our lives, new opportunities and options for students to pursue formal and informal learning experiences continue to emerge. Arising in tandem is a veritable cacophony of books, articles, practitioner blogs, web-based special interest group sites, instant message and RRS feeds, and even whitepapers from software companies trying to secure market shares—many with the intent to improve practice and ease the discomfort of practitioners new to the field of online instruction.

Discussion-Based Online Teaching to Enhance Student Learning: Theory, Practice, and Assessment cuts through the online noise and serves as a comprehensive resource for practitioners entering the field of online instructional practice in higher education. More than just an introductory resource, it offers a detailed exploration of three key facets of online teaching that is reinforced with research and linked to personal experiences. The author weaves general pedagogical theory and knowledge with theories explicating teaching and learning online. Importantly, the “Yes, but how do I . . . ?” questions from practitioners are addressed, as are ways to assess learning outcomes. According to the liner notes of this second edition of 2003's original publication, Bender has added content reflecting the impact and potential of social media, as well as re-crafted insights based on additional online teaching and learning experiences and recent research literature. The text is conveniently divided into three parts, but readers are to be forewarned: this is neither an easy nor a quick read.

The first section contains five chapters exploring the theoretical implications in building a body of online pedagogical knowledge. Bender gently guides the reader

through esoteric discussions of space and place of online classrooms, asking the reader whether “we need not only time, but also proximity, for meaningful connections?” (p. 44). Practitioners are drawn to consider what it means for online instructors and learners to connect at a distance, yet to be present in the moment of discussion. Bender shares a number of theoretical models of knowledge acquisition in terms of active learning and reinforces the importance of encouraging learners to draw from experiential knowledge when discussing course concepts.

In Part Two, Bender moves away from the rhetorical questions of the previous section and deals with the practical applications of online teaching. Novice and experienced practitioners will benefit from the comprehensiveness of this segment, especially the sections on ways to engage learners in the discussion right from the beginning of the course. Additionally, extracts from Bender’s own student postings illuminate and reinforce the importance of the practitioner’s awareness of the challenges learners confront in virtual spaces. Learners do not come to online classrooms toting equal technological abilities and academic knowledge, and they certainly do not exhibit uniformity of learning style and interests. Bender’s realistic suggestions to scaffold participation are clearly presented and concretely rooted in personal experience and musings about theoretical applications. Addressing learner diversity may be more challenging for practitioners who are required to facilitate pre-packaged course materials; furthermore, a point that may be lost in Bender’s presentation is how both synchronous and asynchronous discussion topics have the potential power to adjust flexibly to the learners in the “room.”

Rounding off the text, Part Three addresses assessment. I expected this section to deal with assessment in terms of identifying learners’ achievement of course outcomes and the issues created by the very nature of the online space; however, this is not the case. The details I sought in terms of assessment were curiously relegated to the back end of Chapter 8: Innovative Online Teaching Techniques. Bender’s presentation of assessment in Part Three was more to do with assessing the validity and quality of online teaching and learning. Personally, I think (and hope) we have exhausted this topic. Can we not move on to think about the validity and quality of teaching and learning in higher education in general, rather than holding online learning to some higher standard of quality, spurred by academics and administrators housed in traditional bricks-and-mortar spaces? Each of the three chapters in this final section would serve as a worthy starting point for an examination of the quality of higher education course offerings and practitioner effectiveness—regardless of delivery mode.

This text is not without other limitations. The pedagogical power of synchronous learning platforms that enable real-time voice, video, and chat are not addressed adequately. Deep discussions from synchronous conversations can continue in asynchronous spaces. As well, Bender’s emphasis on digital natives’ engagement with social media does little to address the conflated sense that frequent use equates appropriate and skilled use of technology as a tool for academic learning. Now that we are moving closer and

closer to the uncharted territory of Web 3.0 and its projected focus on semantic mapping, I am curious how our online teaching will evolve. Will our online discussions be able to keep up with the Internet's rapid transfer of information and opinion?

In sum, this is one of those rare texts in which the reader can flip randomly to most any page and extract a nugget of theory, a snippet of sage advice, or a taste of experience from the field. Much of its strength rests in its deep connections with practical experience and underpinnings to theoretical concepts. Although some tracks may be tough sledding for novice practitioners—especially those who have not benefitted from prior exposure to the theory of teaching and learning from graduate courses in education—readers will come away from this text with a deep appreciation of the complexities of how discussion-based online teaching can, indeed, enhance student learning.

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