Reviews / Comptes rendus

Blended Learning in Higher Education

by D. Randy Garrison & Norman D. Vaughan
(San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008, 231 pages)

If you teach and think that blended learning is just another buzzword, or if you think that you already incorporate blended learning into your course because you have a website or a blog, or if you have no idea what exactly Web 2.0 is or why there is such fuss about Facebook and Twitter, then you really, really need to read this book. Blended learning is much more than incorporating technology into an existing pedagogy or using it to deliver the same course in a different way. It is a new and different philosophical and theoretical approach to learning, a convergence of the classroom and communications technology with the potential to transform higher education for the better (p. x). In the words of the authors,

> Blended approaches to learning are not just more trendy technology-driven ideas and gadgets that will fade as fast as they come. Blended learning questions conventional practices and the belief in the lecture as an effective approach to engage students in critical and creative thinking and learning. Blended learning designs illustrate how higher education can revisit and strengthen the fundamental values and practices that have been seriously compromised over the last half-century. (p. 146)

This new approach to learning incorporates and integrates the strengths of face-to-face and online learning in a synergistic manner to create a "unique learning experience congruent with the context and intended educational purpose" (p. 5). Garrison and Vaughan place blended learning within the framework of a community of inquiry (CoI). Defined as a "cohesive and interactive community of learners whose purpose is to critically analyse, construct, and confirm worthwhile knowledge," a CoI requires three key elements—social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive

presence—and "appropriately integrates these elements and provides a means to guide the design of deep and meaningful educational experiences" (p. 9). This integration provides the deep and meaningful learning and critical thinking that are considered the hallmarks of traditional higher education but have often been eroded in large traditional classrooms and online courses. Blended learning, as defined by these authors, is not only constructed on the framework of CoI but in its design approach also offers the possibility of recapturing the traditional ideals of higher education in today's context.

Of course, what instructor worth his or her salt would not want to do this? A particular strength of this book for me was the powerful first section on blending learning's theoretical foundation (the first four chapters contain numerous references to the literature, a wealth of material for those who need and want a conceptual framework) combined with the equally powerful applied or practical guides to it that are presented in the second section. Helpful scenarios covering a diversity of teaching situations, from small philosophy classes to large lecture-type chemistry classes, are provided. Each scenario is like a mini case study, in which we are told how the class was taught, how the instructor redesigned the course using a blended-learning model, and the outcomes that resulted from the transition. In later chapters, the authors give detailed suggestions on a variety of topics, such as course design, course elements, facilitation, and assessment; I found their suggestions very "doable" and will incorporate some of them into a course I am currently developing. The appendices are also valuable, providing several templates for course outlines, for sample assessment rubrics, and for creating a faculty community of inquiry to support blended learning. Many of these could be immediately and easily integrated into a course.

The many very practical and helpful aspects of this book are important because I felt that the authors, in their well-placed (and, I would add, much-needed) enthusiasm for a blended learning revolution in higher education, did not put enough emphasis on the challenge of such a revolution. Many faculty members in higher education, particularly those in research-oriented institutions, are necessarily focused on tenure-track activities. Unfortunately, in many institutions, teaching is not one of those activities. And, in teaching-intensive institutions, a teaching load of seven or more courses a year leaves little time or energy for a complete revisioning of, or even selective revisions to, existing courses. Indeed, very few faculty, unless they have some official teaching and learning leadership role in their institutions, have the time, the technological skills, and, perhaps most importantly, the social capital to pull together a faculty community of inquiry—as laudable and important as such a community might be.

The authors do, however, acknowledge this issue to some extent, even providing some discussion of these challenges in their final chapter, "The Future," and in Appendix 1, "Organizational Change." These sections would be excellent reading for department heads, deans, senior administrators, or anyone in a teaching and learning leadership role, although they may not be of great interest to those who teach, many of whom, in my experience, would prefer to focus on their classrooms and students rather than institutional politics. This brings me to my other minor criticism of the book. In going from details such as templates for assessment rubrics to "big picture" discussions, such as the organizational change needed to support blended learning, I think the book spans too large an audience. Those who read this to improve and enhance their teaching and their students' learning may not want to bother with the bigger questions. On the other hand, will deans or directors read through to that important last chapter?

Overall, though, this is an excellent book. Ideas for my course are already well marked in my copy of it, and I will share this resource with our teaching and learning group. If you teach and want to teach well in a blended environment, this book will be of great use to you. And if you wish to promote blended learning as a new and valuable approach to teaching and learning in higher education, you will find *Blended Learning in Higher Education* most helpful in your quest.

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