

Teaching in Blended Learning Environments: Creating and Sustaining Communities of Inquiry, 2013. Edited by Norm Vaughan, Marti Cleveland-Innes & Randy Garrison. AU Press, Publisher. 142 pages. ISBN 978-1-927356-47-0

Reviewed by Dirk Morrison

Introduction

The seventh in the *Issues in Distance Education* series (editors Terry Anderson and David Wiley) follows true to form by “offering informative and accessible overviews, analyses, and explorations of current issues and the technologies and services...[focusing] on critical questions and emerging trends.” However, the context here is not distance education per se, but rather *blended* learning environments.

Potential Audience

While the content focus and conceptual context fits squarely within higher education, the authors legitimately claim that the book would prove useful to a wider audience (instructional designers and course developers, educational administrators, researchers, government officials and K-12), anyone “interested in quality education issues.”

Scope of Book

Teaching in Blended Learning Environments provides an accessible and clearly written book that is neatly divided into seven chapters across a mere 125 pages, a great length for busy professionals or students looking for a concise overview of blended learning. Uniquely, the authors focus their interpretation, understanding, and design implications of what they claim is *optimized* blended learning, through the conceptual lens of the now familiar Community of Inquiry (CoI) model.

Content Organization

Conceptually, the organization of the book is based on seven principles to guide the design and implementation of blended learning environments; extending and updating Chickering and Gameson (1987), a “deductive derivation” (p. 17) of the Community of Inquiry model (CoI), the seven principles are grounded in collaborative constructivist approaches where “students collaboratively assume shared responsibility and control to design, facilitate, and direct inquiry” (p. 4). Claiming *teaching presence* as the CoI element of focus for the book, the seven principles

are nested within five core chapters (Design, Facilitation, Direct Instruction, Assessment and Technology), the first Chapter presenting the conceptual framework of CoI and the last providing a lively conclusion. Practically, however, the organization of the content proved to be somewhat convoluted. For example, Chapter 2 entitled *Design*, has two main sections, Instructional Design and Cognitive Presence, followed by sub-sections of social presence, organization, delivery, assessment for the each, with the second section also identifying a *principle*; given the clear emphasis on social presence as a core, top-level element of the CoI model, it is unclear why it is nested under instructional design, and, by its placement, appears subordinate to cognitive presence. Also, a more intuitive and logically organized use of headings, coherence reflected in a proper table of contents, would improve the “usability” of the book.

Within the core CoI category of *teaching presence*, the authors nest design, facilitation, and direct instruction; curiously, within each of these, they then plug in social and cognitive presence, both of which are top-level elements in the CoI model. This shuffling of categories points to a possible information/concept/model *display* shortfall, namely, that the Venn diagram of the CoI framework appears inconsistent with the categories (and their inclusion, overlap) presented in the table format. For example, in the CoI Venn diagram (p. 11), teaching presence includes “setting climate” (intersecting social presence) and “regulating learning” (intersecting cognitive presence), while in the table format, indicating discrete elements and categories, it includes “design and organization,” “facilitating discourse,” and “direct instruction.” So, what is presented in the organization of this book is yet another variation of the model elements and their relationship one to another. In this author’s opinion, this makes for an unnecessarily confusing read. The main ideas, principles, suggestions for practice, etc., presented in this book are all important and interesting but the presentations of these principles and concepts need review. On this note, while the liberal use of lists, tables and diagrams, succinctly capturing the essence of core ideas, principles and examples was appreciated, there were occasions where too much information was presented (e.g., Table 3.1) and examples provided (as illustrations) were not particularly helpful (Figure 5.3, 5.5, 6.3), the text point size being almost illegible.

Content Review

Strengths

A core strength of this book is the explicit emphasis the authors place on the importance of the methodical and consistent application of sound instructional design principles if the pedagogical potentials of blended learning environments are to be realized. In fact, Chapter Two is entirely dedicated to this focus. Chapter Three underscores the importance of facilitation of learning in blended environments (with a wise nod to the “Goldilocks” nuance of not too much or too little, but just the right amount), with a list of nine “indicators of facilitation” (p. 55) being an especially useful tool for encouraging cognitive presence. Where I would differ with the authors is around their claim that “...*equal weight* (of facilitation), with differing actions, be given to both face-to-face and virtual environments” (p. 60); given potential combinations of online and face-to-face “blends,” discipline/course-specific learning outcomes, and particular design goals and strategies, the relative weighting of the facilitation activities, and by extension, teaching presence, will likewise be variable (i.e., what is “just right” in terms of facilitation will depend on a unique constellation of design factors, including content/discipline focus). The addition and description of a number of rubrics (e.g., Inquiry-based project rubric, discussion forum rubric)

and other such design aids (e.g., learning contract example, online discussion summary guide, etc.) is a highlight of this book, providing an excellent collection of practical “take-aways” from even a cursory reading.

Critiques

The book claims new territory by an exclusive focus on *blended learning*, which the authors define as “the organic integration of thoughtfully selected and complementary face-to-face and online approaches and technologies” (p. 1, in Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p. 148). However, if the definition of blended learning is linked to our concepts of face-to-face teaching and learning, then we need to ask: what does “face-to-face” actually mean in an era of ever-increasing access to wireless Internet bandwidth, ubiquitous mobile computing, and intuitive and user-friendly *synchronous* communication tools? In Chapter Six, entitled simply *Technology*, the authors themselves allude to this blending (ironic) of what they mean by face-to-face, claiming “instructors can use these tools [synchronous online] to...replace classroom sessions with virtual ones” (p. 118). This is the very essence of what question is being begged by attempting to anchor the CoI model to a conceptualization of blended learning that may simply be out of date; one needs only ponder for a moment how relevant it is to define “face-to-face” to be synonymous with physically being in the same place at the same time (e.g., a classroom) and then understand how this flawed assumption leads us into a conceptual, definitional cul-de-sac; it seems clear that any *synchronous* analogue of face-to-face environments (e.g., Google Hangouts, Adobe Connect, BlackBoard Collaborate, etc.) has the *potential*, if designed and implemented well, to equal, if not surpass our traditional, classroom-based experiences and expectations of teaching and learning. Also, to restrict the definition and requirements of face-to-face learning environments to that of the physical classroom strikes one as fundamentally unfair to learners who are truly at a distance from the institution and providing a different set of facilitation actions and processes unnecessarily disadvantages those not able to participate in these classroom-based settings. Clearly operationally defining blended learning in terms of the relative ratio of synchronous face-to-face to asynchronous online interaction would also be helpful (e.g., is a course defined as *blended* if it includes, say, one face-to-face session at the beginning and one at the end, with all other learning activities taking place in an asynchronous online environment?). Finally, avoidance of polarizing hyperbole such as:

“Distinguished from the lecturer transmitting accepted knowledge in traditional face-to-face teaching (“sage-on-the-stage”), or the role of instructor in traditional distance education (“guide-on-the-side”), the teacher in a blended environment is collaboratively present in designing, facilitating and directing the educational experience” (p.3),

would greatly benefit the work and keep the focus on identifying the specific, unique characteristics of blended learning, as more broadly defined.

Summary

Teaching in Blended Learning Environments is a valuable contribution to the expansion of our knowledge and understanding of how we “do” education at the beginning of our 21st Century. The utility of the *Community of Inquiry* model, as both a conceptual framework and a practical design template is clearly articulated and intuitively obvious to any reader interested in the

dynamic, effervescent world of blended learning. The concluding chapter, in which the authors rightly point to “new and emerging social media technologies” (p. 121) as the single most important catalyst for challenge and change of traditional views, administration, and constructs of higher education, is the perfect capstone for this exploration of blended learning environments.

Author

Dirk Morrison, B.A., M.Sc., Ed.D., is a faculty member in the Education and Technology Design graduate program, Department of Curriculum Studies, College of Education, University of Saskatchewan. His current areas of research include the application of ICT to distance and e-learning in higher education, non-formal and informal online learning environments.



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