

Better together: innovative learning and authentic connections in the online space

Book review: Abegglen, S., Neuhaus, F. and Wilson, K. (eds.) (2022) *Voices from the digital classroom: 25 interviews about teaching and learning in the face of a global pandemic*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press.

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In the early months of 2020, as one country after another went into lockdown, like the lights turning off in a house, room by darkened room, those of us not working on healthcare's front line retreated to our homes and to isolation.

Or did we?

The Teaching and Learning Online Network (TALON) emerged during that time as a hub for sharing resources and knowledge to support the shift to online learning, to compile ideas for approaches, and to give updates and themed readings in monthly newsletters. Quickly, the focus expanded to the people in the network and the University of Calgary, its home, before reaching out further – to the wider global learning and teaching community, beyond the confines of the digital space.

One result is this remarkable book. Each chapter draws on the experiences of a total of 27 members of the dispersed TALON community, interviewed via Zoom in the first year of the pandemic: half at the time of the emergency pivot, and the rest once we had returned, deliberately, to online teaching in the new academic year.

Gathering lecturers and professors, academic developers, learning designers, learning technologists, librarians, and graduate students, drawn from a range of subject disciplines and professional services, the chapters capture a snapshot of life shifted online for those already fully immersed and confident in technology, and those who were brand new to it.

The first half of the book tends to typify the innovation and experimentation of those first few months, everyone focused on ensuring their students continued to be able to learn even while sometimes struggling to manage the plethora of tools available. Deeper issues emerge too, around social justice and 'who sets the norms of the digital environment' (Maha Bali, p.139), the importance of sharing expertise and experience and having guidance at the right time, and even what higher education is for.

As time – and the book – moves on, the message evolves towards a greater appreciation of the challenges faced, although this is less to do with the technological aspects and more about what Tom Burns calls 'the humane aspect of university' (p.53). And this forms the driving message of the book: the value of partnership working, whether that is staff and students, students with students, or colleagues within or across institutions, summed up by Jane MacFarlane: 'The human experience is all part of the learning process. . . . We learn better when we're together' (p.92).

Technology, as the title suggests, plays a large part in the book, but very much in the vein of White, White and Borthwick's observation that 'technologies and their social contexts of use have a complex and co-constructive relationship' (2021, p.164). As such, it is evident that this is not a book about technology-enhanced learning, or a review of digital tools.

Several interviews highlight the challenge of negotiating social presence, one of the Community of Inquiry's three interlinking elements (along with teaching presence and cognitive presence) that converge to create a 'collaborative constructivist educational experience' (Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes and Garrison, 2013, p.11). It does provide some useful advice for those keen to engage students in online learning spaces: set manageable and collective expectations, choose tools you're comfortable with, keep the learning goals in mind, and transform existing materials rather than directly translate them into a new mode of

delivery. It also recognises the challenges of learning and teaching online, in the difficulty of accessing the 'rich mixture' of different forms of dialogue that occur face-to-face (Charlie Smith, p.86), and how we have not yet managed to tap into the affordances of technology for the informal connections that can add so much meaning to a learning experience.

However, this is a positive book, recounting inspiring and creative ways for connection, for presence and authenticity, and for co-construction, all of which demonstrate clearly how constraints can stimulate and support innovation, and how online teaching can resolutely have community at its heart: as one interviewee notes, 'I found I could [build a strong relationship with my students] by creating a supportive atmosphere built on trust and respect. . . . The pandemic . . . pulled us in the same direction' (Lisa Silver, p.219).

It is also a beautiful book, the typography and layout designed to reflect the interplay between the text and the screen, and between 2D and 3D. This is carried through in the middle section, comprising colour portraits of all the interviewees, taken on Zoom by a professional photographer and arranged in physical context to give again that mesh of the real and the virtual, and providing a humanising and personalising touch that lifts the whole book. As many of these educators sought to do themselves, these portraits have taken the person out of the computer and given them a tangible presence.

The reflections that close each chapter, which characterise the patience we had to learn to live with, add most value to the book. Written a year after each initial interview, these update the reader on the interviewees' position and outlook. The majority of voices recognise the opportunities the pandemic wrought for learning and teaching, and indeed, 'emancipation depends on a new blueprint where what is possible, perceptible and palpable is redrawn' (Quinn, 2010, p.64). The outlook for higher education, in these interviews, remains upbeat, even if it can seem difficult to imagine sometimes how we might achieve our goals, or hold off those developments we are less keen on.

Voices from the digital classroom shows us that amongst the range of responses and the diversity of experiences, we are united by more than divides us: a common sense of care and

connection, sharing and community. Leaving the last word to interviewee Rujuta Nayak, 'we are all holding each other's hands and . . . doing what we can' (p.155).

References

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