

Book reviews

CREATIVITY & CRITIQUE IN ONLINE LEARNING: EXPLORING AND EXAMINING INNOVATIONS IN ONLINE PEDAGOGY

Palgrave Macmillan

Baxter, J., Callaghan, G., & McAvooy, J. (2018)

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In early 2020, Australian education moved rapidly to online teaching to help contain the spread of Covid-19. This shift led to a crash course in online education for many adult EAL educators. I had been teaching in various post-secondary EAL contexts for quite some years, yet my knowledge of online pedagogy was scant. Like many educators, I found the move a stimulating experience.

Two years on, we have come to see online learning as integral to education. For this reason, *Creativity & Critique in Online Learning: Exploring and Examining Innovations in Online Pedagogy* is a useful companion for EAL educators wishing to expand their knowledge and practice of learning online. Tips and discussion points at the end of each chapter add to the volume's accessibility.

This volume of 10 case studies, drawn from UK distance education provider The Open University (OU), is a multi-faceted examination of online learning in higher education. The case studies coalesce in their support for social constructivist approaches to education, conceptualising learning as a participatory, communal, experiential, and agentic endeavour. Etienne Wenger's notion of 'community of practice' is employed throughout to define the volume's key theme of 'learning community'. From this fundamental understanding of learning as a social practice, three sub-themes emerge; online forums as trust-building, asynchronous spaces for collaborative learning; informal learning and the use of digital technologies to build teacher-learner connections; and the importance of identity formation in shaping teachers' and students' experience of online learning.

Chapter 2 critically positions online learning in relation to neoliberal trends of increased marketization and technologization. This chapter acknowledges the tension in education of needing to engage with continual technological ‘innovation’ alongside fulfilling education’s human, nurturant, socializing functions. Baxter et al. allay this tension arguing that theories of learning, from behaviourism, cognitivism, constructivism, and more recently connectivism, are ripe with features that support online teaching pedagogy. This is expounded further in the ensuing case studies.

Chapter 3 looks at the design of online forums in developing academic communities of practice. It recommends that the purpose and relevance of forums be clearly conveyed and discusses different ways to promote students’ active participation. Motivated by the importance of teamwork as an employability skill, Chapter 4 explores how online forums facilitate peer collaboration. In this case study, students are required to contribute to written chats with peers to produce an artefact or solve a problem. Chapter 5 examines the use of social media platforms as informal learning spaces that can foster student-teacher relationships and academic communities of practice. Chapter 6 is inspired by employers’ calls to develop creativity. It considers how students’ production of multimodal or ‘multisensory’ texts, such as digital audio recordings, presentation slides and photographs, develop this employability skill in online learning contexts. Chapter 9 evaluates OU’s annual voluntary, informal *Student Connections* conference, a series of livestreamed interactive events aimed at developing a sense of community among OU students and educators.

These five chapters are relevant to adult EAL teachers in that they provide numerous insights into the vital importance for learners to be skilled in understanding and producing informal, collaborative and multimodal texts. In Chapter 4 for example, students are evaluated on their written participation in peer co-constructed knowledge building activities. Yet the linguistic challenges of informal and collaborative text writing, and their potential for excluding plurilingual students, are not mentioned. I found this alarming, but not surprising. Nevertheless, it points to the paramount importance for EAL students to learn and practice informal and collaborative writing. In addition, comprehension and production of multimodal texts is another area of the EAL curriculum that is likely to need more attention.

The refreshing autoethnographic style of Chapter 11 invites professional reflection, about values, identity and relationships in online contexts, through its use of first- and second-person narrative perspectives. This chapter would make an excellent discussion paper for a community of educators wanting to explore issues raised by the sudden transition to online learning, covering topics such as disembodiment, increased technologization, bonding with students, social connectedness, opportunities of blended delivery, self-efficacy, personal values and professional identity in online learning.

Chapter 7 offers suggestions for minimising academic cheating. The task of boosting students' awareness of academic integrity seems to be diligently covered by EAL teachers in my experience. But for those seeking more knowledge, this chapter contains updates about technological innovations in perpetrating and combating academic cheating. Chapters 8 and 10 look at managing Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and large-scale module teaching teams respectively. These will be relevant to EAL educators working in large-scale distance education contexts like the OU. Finally, Chapter 12, written by department head Diane Preston, outlines the case for recognising teacher identity, building peer support, clarifying expectations, and challenging notions of teacher resistance in managing educators' transition to online learning.

Online learning is ubiquitous. It also holds the risk of isolation. Building plurilingual students' capacities for successful participation in online learning communities is therefore vital. This volume draws our attention to the importance for EAL learners to have access to highly-skilled online learning facilitators. It also points to the importance for EAL teachers to have the scope to apply their linguistic expertise in developing learners' collaborative communication skills across a range of text types. And finally, this volume shows that EAL educators need adequate technological resources to create the online communities where adult students will learn to thrive and participate in the future.