

Book review

Elearnings: Implementing a national strategy for ICT in education, 1998-2010

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Ham, V., & Wenmoth, D. (Eds.). (2010). *Elearnings: Implementing a national strategy for ICT in education, 1998–2010*. Core Education, Christchurch (pp. 203).

Elearnings: Implementing a national strategy for ICT in education, 1998–2010 outlines the implementation and subsequent impact of the national information communications and technology (ICT) in education strategy in New Zealand, 1998–2010, from the perspective of the stakeholders. In essence, it is a collection of stories told by a wide cross-section of educators (e.g., principals, Ministry staff, teachers, facilitators) who detail their involvement in this implementation. *Elearnings* is, therefore, of most interest to those same people involved in e-learning today. Those involved in implementing strategies for developing virtual learning at any level (i.e., fully online or blended) will find little of direct relevance (i.e., only one or two articles directly address the issue of virtual learning), but will still find much that applies in that context.

The book is divided into seven distinct sections, each of which tells the story of ICT implementation in New Zealand from a particular perspective.

The first section details this history at a system-wide level with chapters from Trevor Mallard (then Minister of Education) and Carol Moffat, who led the coordination of the strategy for the Ministry. This is followed by a chapter from Laurence Zwimpfer, who provides a perspective on the technological infrastructure that was developed to support this strategy. Many teachers (online or in the classroom) might be tempted to skip this section in search of more relevant classroom examples, but that would be a mistake. While this section is not directly relevant to practice, these articles do provide a context for understanding our current challenges—how to shift teacher practice and how to ensure that the use of e-learning is less about technology and more about learning. Stepping back and viewing this from a system-wide level is vital for anyone involved in education, and virtual learning is no different. The message of investing in human capital is told passionately by Carol Moffat and is well worth reading for that reason.

The next section deals with capability building and, specifically, the professional development of teachers, mainly from the context of the Ministry-funded ICT Professional Development (ICTPD) clusters. A series of chapters gives an interesting range of perspectives on professional development that can be dipped into at any level. Of particular interest to a teacher working in a virtual environment is the article by Allannah King. King gives an insight into the journey from using a more traditional teacher-directed approach to becoming a facilitator of learning. King herself admitted that her approach was all about “...teaching children how to remember things” (p. 82), but over the course of the first ICTPD contract and beyond, she developed a shift in practice to reflect the needs of the learners rather than herself. Through blogging and connecting with others on the web she found a whole new world of professional learning that she could dip into when needed. It clearly illustrates the need for teachers to reach out beyond their own physical or virtual classroom to develop their practice, and how the web can become a key enabler of this.

The section on developing digital context and communities is of direct interest to those working in a virtual learning environment, because Rachel Roberts details the rise of the Virtual Learning Network, “...a network of school clusters and educational institutions, which collaborate to

provide access to a broad range of curriculum and learning opportunities for students through online learning” (p. 145). The story of the growth of this network to one that has spread throughout rural New Zealand is one of innovation driven by need. While there is little direct reference to teaching practice, the enduring message is one that really underpins this book as a whole—the strength of communities of schools and what can be achieved when they work together. Mark Treadwell’s chapter, “Personalised Learning: The Quiet Revolution of Learning Management Systems” might be of interest because of the proliferation of learning management systems (LMS) in New Zealand and their perceived role in ‘virtualising’ schooling. Treadwell gives a unique rationale for their use, built on the LMS as both aggregator and enabler of personalised learning.

A number of shorter articles make up a collection entitled “Improving student learning and engagement,” which focuses on practitioner research. One worthwhile example is Dorothy Burt’s account of the rise of the Manaiakalani cluster. Burt describes how Pt England Primary School’s context helped to drive innovative practice across the school and then into the development of the Manaiakalani cluster. The staff at this decile one school in Auckland realised that they weren’t harnessing the talents of their children, resulting in widespread disengagement from learning. Through a systematic process of reflection and planning, they developed a pedagogical model that harnessed ICT to enable learners to express themselves. There was an emphasis on students as creators of content, using cutting-edge technology and the web to develop an authentic audience. This was scaled into a project involving seven schools, known as the Manaiakalani cluster, which continues to be a beacon story in New Zealand today. Burt extols the virtues of collaboration and clustering of schools which is so prevalent in many of the stories in this book, but it is also interesting to note how the school has virtualised much of what they do.

The book ends with a typically engaging article from Derek Wenmoth, who focuses on future trends, challenges, and opportunities. Wenmoth examines how the web will become an enabler of networked schooling in which schools move beyond simply being ‘connected’ by the technology, to being a network that is a functioning community. Within this community the role of virtual learning is paramount in connecting the learner with a broad range of opportunities, whether from other schools, educational institutions, ‘experts’, or other learners.

For the educator who is interested in practical ideas for implementing virtual approaches—whether fully online or ‘blended’—there will be little of direct value in *Elearnings*. There are glimmers of practice sprinkled throughout the various chapters, especially those written from a teacher’s or facilitator’s perspective, but that is not the purpose of this book. Its purpose is to tell a story and it does this very well. Teachers at any level will find some stories that resonate with their own experience and they will therefore find reading it an excellent reflective exercise. It is extremely strong on stories relating to teachers’ professional learning, so is a worthwhile read for a teacher working in a virtual environment.

Teaching online brings a unique set of challenges and it is important that teachers don’t work in isolation. We have enough individual silos in traditional schools without replicating them online. The web has the power to connect people, so working online should provide more (not fewer) opportunities to collaborate and connect with others. There are very strong, well-told messages in this book about the strength of communities of practice, school clustering, and developing professional networks that teachers need to be familiar with. There is also a sense of the ‘can do’ attitude of many teachers who have seized the initiative to become learners and leaders. We need more of these teachers and, while I doubt whether a single book will change anyone’s thinking overnight, it useful to expose more to these ideas.

As with any book that has numerous contributors, some chapters are better than others. This variability is almost unavoidable, but thought has also gone into how it is organised so readers can skim through to find the stories that interest them. It also means the odd flat chapter (and there are one or two in the last section) does not affect the overall quality of the book. This flexibility is a real strength and will allow a prospective buyer to weigh up the relevance of the contents.

Overall, *Elearnings: Implementing a national strategy for ICT in education, 1998–2010* is a very worthwhile read for teachers involved in virtual education at any level. Although very few of the stories are directly relevant to those working online, in a New Zealand context most of these teachers are very much based in a traditional school setting and this is where the stories will resonate.