



Book review

Online, Blended, and Distance Education in Schools

Rachel Whalley, VLN Primary School

Clarke, T. & Barbour, M.K. (2015). *Online, blended, and distance education in schools: Building successful programs*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishers. (pp. 256).

In the series foreword to this book, Michael Moore reflects on the development of distance learning, noting that the research focus that was once mainly on the tertiary sector now includes the school sector. At the same time, the perspective of online and distance learning being an enriching add-on to traditional schooling has changed. It is now regarded as an alternative way of learning in its own right. However, Moore cautions that teachers should not be swept up in their enthusiasm for new technologies without learning about best practice in online and distance education.

These are timely messages for the education sector in New Zealand, where online and distance education are no longer considered to be the sole domain of tertiary institutions or Te Aho o te Kura Pounamu (until 2009 this was The Correspondence School [Davis, 2015]). For more than a decade there has been steady growth of online and distance learning across collaborating primary and secondary schools (Barbour, Davis, & Wenmoth, 2011; Roberts, 2009).

Michael Barbour is well placed to edit this book, having been involved with K–12 online learning for almost two decades as a researcher, evaluator, teacher, course designer, and administrator. Michael also has experience in the New Zealand educational setting, having a role in research supported by the Ministry of Education and FLANZ in this area (e.g., Barbour, Davis, & Wenmoth, 2016), and he currently sits on the Governance Board of the VLN Primary School, which is led by the author as an ePrincipal.

Editors Michael Barbour and Tom Clark have brought together 27 contributors—mainly from North America—but contributors from Australia, South Korea, Nepal, and the United Kingdom add a global perspective.

The book is divided into four parts. In her foreword Cathy Cavanaugh highlights how e-learning's inherent flexibility can improve access to education globally — by providing students with access to courses, qualified teachers, and opportunities to learn at their own pace and place. Underlying this potential is our challenge to develop successful practice and research and to share this globally.

In Part One Barbour and Clark give an overview of the themes and case studies to be covered in the book. They provide background to the rapid growth of K–12 online learning and highlight the nature of blended learning, which is now bringing online learning into the mainstream. This growth in turn creates the need for new policy and programme development.

Under the general heading of research and policy, Part Two provides more detail on each of the themes: quality in online teaching; instructional design; technology, infrastructure and tools; and research. These themes are discussed and shown to be key considerations for online and blended

programmes. Part two also has a chapter on cyber charter schools as an alternative to traditional schools, and a chapter on ensuring equity and access in online learning.

Part Three presents case studies that illustrate the themes explored in Part Two. Many of the case studies are from North America and are in the context of virtual schools, but public, district, and private schools are also represented. These case studies describe a range of policies and practice, including the development of an online teaching endorsement programme, and evaluative approaches for virtual schools. For example, the Nexus Academies have designed and built schools that have enabled them to transition from online to blended learning.

Global case studies follow. The first focuses on Nepal and the barriers to online learning in developing countries. Perhaps deliberately positioned first, this chapter discusses the current educational setting in Nepal, the potential of online learning to improve access to learning, and what the international community can do to help achieve this potential in a systemic and sustained way. After the recent catastrophic events in Nepal, this work may have become an aspect of the national rebuild. There are other case studies from the United Kingdom, where Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) are used to personalise learning; from Australia, where the Sydney Centre for Innovation in Learning is showcased and policy is seen to be variable and not very supportive across different states; and from South Korea, where the Cyber Home Learning System is a public education initiative for all school students. In many of these case studies there is evidence of the need for a balance between the level of policy support provided and the development of good practice for online teaching and learning. In South Korea the education system has strong policy support but educationalists are now looking at how they can make their programmes more learner-driven. Finally, in Australia, schools are struggling to develop innovative practice in the field at the ‘grass roots’, without policy support from state governments.

Part Four summarises and discusses future trends of online, blended, and distance learning in schools. In their discussion of issues of policy and practice, Barbour and Clark note the need to better prepare and train teachers to teach online, to improve the quality of resources and course material, and to extend the use of technologies to support learning and improve management of online programmes. In their summary they suggest strategies for making these improvements. Also of significance is the need for a greater focus on student performance, and for programme developers to take this need into account early in their planning so that data that identifies student achievement can be gathered. The future trends identified by Barbour and Clark are for online, blended, and distance learning in schools to become more global, blended, teacher-facilitated, personalised, open, adaptive, mobile, and evidence-based.

In reading this book I was constantly making comparisons with, and critiques of, my own educational setting. It was interesting to see where New Zealand sits in relation to policy and practice internationally, and that many of the successes and challenges faced worldwide are similar. Those New Zealand schools that are in collaborative clusters have established systems to support and coordinate online learning. (These clusters include the VLN Primary, NetNZ, and regional community clusters such as FarNet and Volcanics.) Practice continues to develop throughout these organisations, although there is plenty of scope for improvement (Barbour & Wenmoth, 2013; Barbour et al., 2016). Policy that initially helped to establish this work (e.g., see Powell, 2011) is now falling behind what is needed to ensure these developments are sustainable. This book will help practitioners, administrators, researchers, and policy makers to examine effective practice and future policy developments. It would be great to see a chapter with a New Zealand perspective included in any future editions.

This book is accompanied by a wiki that would be useful as part of a course of study or for those undertaking research in this area. The wiki includes Chapter 1, abstracts of the other chapters,

and links to related literature and other resources. More resources are likely to be added, making this an enormously valuable site for researchers working on K–12 open flexible and distance learning (see <https://onlineblendedschooling.wikispaces.com>)

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Biographical note

Rachel Whalley is ePrincipal of the Virtual Learning Network Primary School. Her expertise is in blended and online learning, project planning and development, online learning communities, pedagogy, and curriculum development for online teaching and learning.

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