

Reviews

BURGE, E. J. (2007). *Flexible higher education: Reflections from expert experience.* Maidenhead, England: Open University Press (pp. 172).

This book reports on an ambitious two-stage research project designed to capture the experiential knowledge and pioneering tales of early distance educators. In the first stage of the project, 44 distance educators who are deeply involved in distance education and are spread across the world (including in New Zealand) were interviewed. This first part of the book is, as Sir John Daniel says, like “walking through familiar territory in comfortable shoes” (p. 102). However, there is still much in the first section to prompt thought and provoke reflection.

In the second stage of the project, seven expert commentators were asked to undertake a meta-level reflection on the chapters that had been developed from an analysis of the interview data. The guiding questions they used were broad, so comments in this section of the book are a mix of personal recounts, reaction to the themes, and advice to current practitioners and researchers in distance education. There is, in effect, a third and final stage to the project. The author’s own reflections are woven into the text and allowed a place as the final chapter. Her familiarity and interaction with the data place her in a unique position to provide supplementary commentary. In addition, as an experienced distance educator herself, she brings a valuable lens to bear on

the data. All in all, there is a rich mix of wisdom, experience, and advice.

The book captures the experiences of many key leaders and early innovators in distance education. Their experiences, summed up in themes such as “having no prior experience,” “access, respect, and responsiveness,” “managing technology,” and “learning from [their] achievements,” are brought to life through their words. A picture is built up of pioneer distance education researchers and practitioners and their work. It is a picture that many will still recognize. I see the book as one that will appeal to the broad range of educators who are involved in open, flexible, and distance education. All will find links to areas in which they work.

The book makes a contribution to the field of distance education in three broad ways. First, it reaffirms the value of distance education and reminds us that distance education is a different and evolving form of education that requires teaching, management, and leadership that recognizes those differences and builds new practice on established strengths. Second, the book reminds us that key issues such as access and quality still need to be addressed. Finally, the book helps address gaps in knowledge about the history of distance education. This contribution is important. Any field of study needs to understand its history and draw on that. This understanding is particularly important in the present context, where the advent and use of new technologies in distance delivery have brought people to the practice of distance education who have little or

no knowledge of the foundations they build on and the past experience that can inform their practice.

As well as looking back, *Flexible Higher Education* also looks forward. The expert commentators highlight the continuing importance of course design in times when we acknowledge the changing nature of our learners and the design challenges new technologies bring us. They also note the challenges associated with the blurring of boundaries between face-to-face and distance modes. There are reminders to not overlook the hard-won battles, particularly the acceptance of distance education, and to emulate the qualities such as resilience, persistence, and doggedness that the pioneers brought to their work. Concerns about the variability of online learning and how to continue to ensure quality and flexibility are identified as critical current challenges. There are also suggestions for research and guidance for young and inexperienced distance educators.

The final section of the book provides a valuable resource. There is a list of publications that participants provided in response to the request to offer readings that would be of interest to readers. Those readings also had to be easy to locate and retrieve. The result is a reading list that could provide a firm conceptual underpinning for practitioners in the field of open, flexible, and distance education.

An acknowledged gap in the book is the absence of voices from countries where English is not the first language. That experience waits to be captured. The focus of the book is higher education, so experience in school-based distance education has not been captured. That experience would be of great interest

to distance practitioners in Australia and New Zealand in particular, where there is rich experience in compulsory sector distance education. Another small point is that the book's title does not reflect its focus on distance education.

This book celebrates the work of early innovators and leaders in the field of distance education, reminds us about the achievements in distance education, and provides a rich picture of people who have made significant contributions to this field. The book starts by suggesting the interviewees "pushed conventional limits to create extraordinary learning opportunities" (p. 3). Technologies and times have changed, but the challenge has not. That challenge needs to be taken up by those currently working in distance education. Part of the challenge for us must be to place innovation alongside established understandings of distance education, to draw from experience, acknowledge the lessons learned, and then to continue to build. This time, we have prior experiences on which to draw.

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GORINSKI, R., & FRASER, C. (2007). *From targeting problems to tailoring solutions: The Wairoa West Cluster Schools success strategy.* Wellington, New Zealand: Research Division, Ministry of Education (pp. vi, 43).

In an evaluation of rural schools in New Zealand earlier this decade, the Education Review Office (ERO) noted:

Parents living in rural areas share the same educational goals as their urban counterparts. They want to

know that their children are in a safe environment, they want them to reach their academic potential, and they want them to emerge from the school system well prepared for the world of work or tertiary study. . . . However, for parents in many rural areas, the range of options available is limited. (ERO, 2001, p. 1)

The ERO has identified an international problem facing governments in countries where some people live beyond the major population centres. How can young people and their families in small schools in rural communities be provided with opportunities that are comparable to those expected by their urban counterparts?

The *Wairoa West Cluster Schools Success Strategy* provides information about how school clusters can improve the education of young New Zealanders. In examining this cluster of five small, remote primary schools, with a combined roll of 120 students, Gorinski and Fraser chronicle changes in student achievement, teaching practice, governance, and management, together with the development of a professional learning community between 1998 and 2004. They conclude:

The initiative yielded some extremely successful outcomes for the Wairoa West communities . . . including enhanced student academic and social achievement, improved staff retention, improved governance practice, a more clearly delineated interface between governance and management, the implementation of a more effective and reflective style of teaching practice and, significantly, the

development of a strong and effective professional learning community. (p. 2)

Rural and distance educators will be familiar with the electronic networking of schools in New Zealand into regional intranets, although after almost two decades there is not yet a substantial body of research about these structures and the processes within them. The qualitative research undertaken by Gorinski and Fraser may, therefore, be of interest to educators searching for outcomes of aligning schools with one another, whether in clusters, as in this study, or in Internet-based networks in other parts of rural New Zealand.

The schools in the Wairoa West cluster were all geographically isolated and ranged from decile one to decile seven. The subjects of Gorinski and Fraser's research were overwhelmingly Maori (ranging from 58 percent to 100 percent of school enrolments), and large numbers of the students in the five primary schools were the sons and daughters of farm workers and seasonal employees. Students' families were characterized by low levels of education and low levels of household income, and the schools in the cluster "shared a generalised history of student under-achievement" (p. 1). Outcomes of the clustering of these five schools included improved student achievement and staff retention, as well as improved governance.

For almost two decades, and preceding the advent of the Internet in schools in New Zealand, regional networks of schools have provided extended learning opportunities for rural New Zealanders, based on academic and administrative integration between sites to facilitate collaborative teaching and learning. As

anyone involved in teaching in these linked schools will attest, there are different demands on teachers in these structures than in traditional face-to-face classrooms. Gorinski and Fraser provide useful information about the specific professional development requirements in the schools in the Wairoa West cluster, many of which will be familiar to New Zealand rural educators who teach in networked environments.

This Ministry of Education report is a positive study of educational change in a small cluster of rural New Zealand schools that provides insight into an aspect of education that has not received a lot of attention from researchers. The question distance educators will likely ask after reading *From Targeting Problems to Tailoring Solutions* is whether the next step should be to electronically network the Wairoa West cluster, to enhance the sharing of educational resources in this region.

REFERENCES

Education Review Office (2001). *Rural education, education evaluation report*. Wellington, New Zealand: ERO.

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