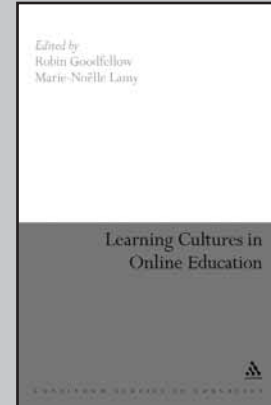


Review

Learning Cultures in Online Education

Title:	Learning Cultures in Online Education
Author/Editor:	Robin Goodfellow and Marie-Noëlle Lamy
Publisher:	Continuum
Price	Hard back £70
Reviewed by:	Jennifer Bain, Goldsmiths, University of London
ISBN:	9781847060624
Orders:	www.continuumbooks.com



In this book, 'Learning Cultures in Online Education', contributors from a range of disciplinary and national backgrounds offer their analyses of the way that 'cultures' of different kinds are expressed in online educational interactions. The book explores a range of ideas about globalised virtual learning environments and discusses the implications for learners, teachers and educational institutions. The publication, I would suggest, is of particular relevance to researchers and practitioners in the field of global education, but will also be of interest to those seeking to expand their theoretical understanding of cultural influences on online learning. It would be fair to suggest that this is not a book to provide straightforward practical guidance on how to develop online learning environments. However, if you are interested in looking at a range of empirical case studies that offer diverse theoretical perspectives on how understandings around believing, communicating, valuing and producing knowledge exist in online learning communities, then read on.

The book is organised in a way that I found accessible, even if some of the academic terminology had me reaching frequently for a dictionary. This is not a light read but the introductory section, 'A Frame for the Discussion of Learning Cultures', is particularly useful in providing the reader with a clear context, and I would suggest that, even if you read the rest of the book in a non-linear fashion, you should start here. What I gleaned from the introduction was that the editors, Robin Goodfellow and Marie-Noëlle Lamy, are seeking to bring together a range of views that problematise the workings of culture in online education. They suggest that this need to problematise learning cultures is driven by several educational and sociotechnical developments, in particular:

- The spread of new media communication practices (i.e. the internet community, informal learning practices) which are influencing educational development
- The growth of widening participation and multiculturalism policies, particularly in higher education, which are intended to address the increasing diversity of learners
- The expansion of transnational e-learning

It was these statements that really made me, as the reader, start to think about how online learning had permeated my pedagogical practice, almost without my noticing, and how pertinent an understanding of its impact might be to all phases of education.

Suitably inspired, I read on. The book contains eight quite diverse chapters that offer a range of theoretical and disciplinary positions, with each of the authors illustrating their ideas with short data extracts where relevant. The chapters offer snapshots rather than longitudinal insights into practice and, collectively, suggest new ways of understanding the meanings that are created when learners, teachers and institutions set out to create learning communities online.

Chapter 1 offers a critique of the cultural analysis frameworks most widely known outside the online world. I found this useful in developing an appreciation of the complexity of the diverse and often conflicting cultures of online participants. This chapter also highlights the limitations of existing frameworks of cultural analyses and how they may sometimes offer profoundly misleading approaches to the realities of intercultural communication online. Intriguingly, for me at least, this chapter challenges the possibility of being able to develop a notion of online cultures and underlines the importance of face-to-face encounters to the learning experience.

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Each of the six case studies showcased in the following chapters of the book quite deliberately provide a counterpoint to Chapter 1. The case studies investigate a range of learner types and data to offer multiple perspectives (e.g. political, cognitive, symbolic, ergonomic) on the online learning experience. Each claims that the online situation allows people to construct identities not available to them in face-to-face situations – as women or men, as professionals (continuing and initial teachers) or citizens involved in the discourses of globalization. This provides a lot for the reader to think about, so rather than summarise each chapter in turn, I thought I would extract some of the bits I found most interesting and relevant to my own practice in order to give a flavour of the book. So here goes...

Chapter 2 explores issues of identity, gender and language. The authors focus the reader on thinking about the impact of the internet on contemporary society and how it has affected the way we communicate, relate to ourselves and to each other. In turn they argue that the internet as a communication tool has the power to impact on ways of perceiving, thinking about or approaching a task and “can reap unimagined wider social changes” (p31). Food for thought indeed.

Chapter 3 proved useful in developing an understanding of local interpretations of online teaching practice. I found this chapter particularly engaging as it touched on some of the unease I feel on a professional level around how we, as educators, often embrace online learning in an unquestioning way. This chapter serves to highlight that teachers associate online technologies with pedagogical innovation and effective professional development. However, interview data reveals that although teachers pay lip service to the transformative possibilities of technology, for this transformation to happen in practice requires teachers to be knowledgeable of and interested in engaging their learners in student-centred learning practices in a more general sense. Mmm, note to self: must look at how I use the VLE to innovate and transform!

Chapter 8 explores new learning cultures and provides one of my favourite quotes, central to the concept of lifelong learning, “Learning is an aspect of personal (and community) development that is never not happening” (p 151). Perhaps particularly pertinent to Design and Technology, this chapter also introduces ‘new educational options’ that value immersion in realistic, meaningful social activities combined with time for reflection and looks at how online communities might develop the type of non-systematic teaching required to support these. It concludes, quite dramatically, that the future of education

is not about school... rather about finding out and supporting how young people learn successfully in a range of contexts.

If that's not enough to think about, then other chapters explore, for example, the social context of learning, the phenomenon that is virtual education and assessment issues for non-local students.

Finally, the discussions in the book are brought together by the editors in a conclusion that outlines new directions for research in online learning cultures. They reflect on common themes that appear throughout the book, the notion of cultural identity, the role of language, particularly the English language, in framing online cultures and the role of technologies in online interactions. The authors outline themes for future research and conclude, rather neatly I thought, with the argument that the same systems of digital communication that have supported the emergence of online cultures should be more than adequate to support multicultural research by multicultural researchers.

My final reflections on the book are as follows. Although each of the case studies is interesting and engaging in its own right, I found it quite difficult to extract a coherent message, although I acknowledge that this, in part, may be down to my lack of expertise in the field. If pressed to interpret the overall message conveyed, I would summarise it as follows; Whilst the educational research community has paid some attention to the technological problems and practical pedagogical challenges that increasing cultural diversity brings, this book offers a new perspective as it discusses ways in which quite disparate orientations and experiences might be brought together, both theoretically, towards a concept of ‘learning culture’ that goes beyond essentialist characterisations of participating individuals or groups of learners, and to some degree practically, in the development of principles for the design and conduct of online teaching and learning in culturally diverse situations. A concern for the book is that, as it is essentially an academic text, it may not fall into as many hands as it might, given that the central messages are relevant to us all: the intersection of two emerging phenomena – changing notions of culture and the rapidly expanding amount of online interaction in education.