Book Review

Teaching in Blended Learning Environments: Creating and Sustaining Communities of Inquiry

Norman D. Vaughn, Martha Cleveland-Innes, D. Randy Garrison
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The advent of the World Wide Web has drastically changed the learning environment for students and instructors both inside and outside the classrooms of today's institutions of higher education. The practice of faculty transferring knowledge to their students solely by in-class lectures and discussions has become out dated. In turn, instructors must come to the realization that the Internet, much like overhead projectors and chalkboards of the past, can now be used as a pedagogical tool to increase the engagement of their students in a "community of inquiry," both inside and outside of today's modern classrooms (p. 2). In their book, *Teaching in Blended Learning Environments: Creating and Sustaining Communities of Inquiry*, Norman D. Vaughan, Martha Cleveland-Innes, and D. Randy Garrison build on these arguments and the previous work done by Garrison and Vaughan in their book *Blended Learning in Higher Education* (2008). Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes, and Garrison offer instructors a step-by-step guide to how blended learning can increase engagement, interaction, and collaboration in higher education. The ultimate goal of the work is to improve teaching in higher education through the development of blended learning environments that focus on design, facilitation, direction, and assessment. This, in turn, will create and sustain productive communities of inquiry that will benefit everyone engaged in positive learning experiences.

Teaching in Blended Learning Environments is not solely a treatise on how 21st-century instructors must use technology for the betterment of the community of inquiry they are attempting to develop. Nor is this a work that dismisses the instructor as the core of the community of inquiry. Instead, this work goes beyond blending face-to-face learning with the use of technology by positioning the instructor as the designer, facilitator, and director of the blended learning environment. The authors provide readers with a step-by-step instructional manual on how to apply the principles of blended learning in practical settings by combining face-to-face learning strategies with online learning strategies.

The book begins with seven principles associated with productive undergraduate teaching, which include:

1. Encourage contact between students and faculty;

2. Develop reciprocity and cooperation among students;

3. Encourage active learning;

4. Give prompt feedback;

5. Emphasize time on task;

6. Communicate high expectations; and

7. Respect diverse talents and ways of learning. (p. 16)

The authors then outline the principles to establishing and maintaining a community of inquiry within a blended learning environment. They are:

1. Plan for the creation of open communication and trust;

2. Plan for critical reflection and discourse;

3. Establish community and cohesion;

4. Establish inquiry dynamics (purposeful inquiry);

5. Sustain respect and responsibility;

6. Sustain inquiry that moves to resolution; and

7. Ensure assessment is congruent with intended processes and outcomes. (p. 17)

By providing this information in list form, the authors allow readers to clearly understand the guiding principles of the work.

The structure of *Teaching in Blended Learning Environments* as well as the clear and concise manner in which it is presented makes this work accessible to professors, teachers of children and young adults, educational administrators, government officials who focus on educational initiatives, instructional aides, and adult education teachers. However, the stated intended audience for the book is faculty members and graduate students who teach in today's institutions of higher education (p. 6). The introductory chapter of the work outlines key terms and definitions used throughout, such as *blended learning* and *community of inquiry*. The chapter also introduces readers to the structure of the work and it allows readers to develop a clear understanding of how blended learning practices can be introduced into classrooms.

The five body chapters of the book instruct readers how they can use "design," "facilitation," "direct instruction," "assessment," and "technology" as pedagogical practices and tools to "fuse face-to-face and online learning" that, in the end, "will create purposeful communities of inquiry in the support of deep and meaningful approaches to teaching and learning" (p. 18). Although each individual chapter does an excellent job of taking readers through how they can prepare and implement the practices and tools mentioned earlier, the chapter focusing on technology may be the most useful for graduate students and newer faculty members, many of whom grew up in the digital age. This chapter takes students and instructors past the elementary practice of posting comments on a common website and introduces readers to a variety of different social media applications such as social bookmarking, wikis, mashups, synchronous communication and conferencing, and virtual worlds. These "active and collaborative learning experiences" (p. 120) force students to be active participants in a community of inquiry and can increase their understanding of a topic under discussion, both inside and outside of the classroom.

Teaching in Blended Learning Environments is a well-structured and informative book that will empower many readers to change and re-conceptualize the pedagogical tools and practices they employ when teaching college and university students. For those instructors who already employ many of the blended learning tools and practices discussed within the work, the chapter

focusing on technology can allow them to build on the social media applications that they are already using and further stimulate their students in a productive community of inquiry. However, this work is far from all encompassing. Although many of the pedagogical tools and practices discussed in the volume comfortably span many fields of study, sections focusing on specific fields of study would have added to the quality of the work.

If there are plans for a second edition, more focus should be applied to specific fields of study. Also, the segment of the book that discusses the validity of self-assessment will need elaboration because, although it can be a useful practice in upper-year undergraduate courses or in graduate-level courses, I question the practice of self-assessment in early-level postsecondary classes. I also believe that the authors of the work assume that all faculty members will be willing to shift from their previous teaching practices to the new blended learning environments suggested in this work, which is not a realistic expectation. Although the authors mention that a "paradigm shift" (p. 125) must occur within higher education so that blended learning environments can succeed, they also fail to address the limitations placed on the number of hours that faculty members can dedicate to teaching. However, *Teaching in Blended Learning Environments: Creating and Sustaining Communities of Inquiry* should still be considered a step in the right direction toward the improvement of teaching techniques in higher education. The work is impressively useful and postsecondary instructors who take the time to examine the book and employ the tools and practices discussed within it will benefit from it. In turn, these approaches will improve blended learning experiences and benefit students and instructors as they engage in their own communities of inquiry.

Reference

Garrison, D. R., & Vaughan, N. D. (2008). *Blended learning in higher education: Framework, principles, and guidelines.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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