Clark, T. & Barbour, M. K. (Eds.). (2015). *Online, blended and distance education in schools: Building successful programs.* Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing. Pages: 239. ISBN: 978-1-62036-164-1 (paperback), 978-1-62036-166-5 (ebook).

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As the editors acknowledge in their introduction, one of the challenges of writing a book on online learning is that the field itself, while exploding in popularity, has been insufficiently researched. Due to the revolution of the industry, and influenced in part by the breakneck changes in technologies available for use, there is risk that once a book of this nature is published it may soon be made obsolete. Additionally, contributors Ferdig, Cavanaugh, and Freidhoff observe that online and blended programs often avoid scrutiny beyond the schools or systems they are developed in, further inhibiting the extant literature on this increasingly relevant topic. Nevertheless, as students across North America enroll into learning opportunities beyond the bounds of traditional classrooms, it is imperative that scholars and practitioners push the boundary of policies by exploring what research does exist on the subject of best practices for online learning. This crisis creates the need for publications such as *Online, Blended, and Distance Education in Schools: Building Successful Programs.*

This text consists of a generally relevant and useful discussion of a variety of subtopics related to online learning. Authors explain how to design online, blended, and distance learning programs aimed at supporting all students, regardless of socioeconomic status or geographical location, and reflect on which factors to consider when selecting Learning Management and Course Management Systems. Authors also focus on describing the specific pedagogical requirements unique to online instruction, including communication protocols (synchronous/asynchronous, frequency of interaction), lesson design for online platforms, and the delivery methods required to meet the needs of potentially unique clientele, including adult learners.

The broad array of subjects touched upon by the authors might be seen as a limitation to some; this book may be attempting to do too much in one single text, compromising the depth of exploration of complex issues. Another potential deficit for readers of Online, Blended, and Distance Education in Schools: Building Successful Programs is the lack of focus on online education within Canada specifically. While the Canadian context is included, it is not the focus: most chapters are written from or about the American milieu.

These six topics are included in the Research and Policy section and inform the reader of major issues:

1. Identifying, Evaluating, and Fostering Quality Online Teaching
2. Instructional Design: Teaching with Intention
3. Technology Infrastructure and Tools
4. Research into K-12 Online and Blended Learning
5. Cyber Charter Schools: An Alternative to Traditional Brick-and-Mortar Schooling?, and
6. Ensuring Equitable Access in Online and Blended Learning

Following the Research and Policy section are nine case studies which vary in contextual and narrative voice and serve to flesh out the experience of online education. The text discusses issues from a primarily North American context, although four case studies are included on Nepal, Australia, the United King-

dom, and South Korea. Perhaps the broad overview of recollections and research is extended through its reach, but while the geographic stretch provides scope, the depth of comparison among programs in comparable physical and social contexts is missing. The United States does share some commonalities with Canada with regards to the state of public education, but there are also significant differences including, among others, funding, achievement testing, and teacher qualification policies. The world of online learning is not immune from those distinctions. For Canadian educators, more Canadian-specific examples would be beneficial.

An imperative and recurrent concern addressed in the text is that while online learning may provide opportunities for students who have not previously experienced success, this will not happen if the same barriers of accessibility, inflexibility, teacher expertise in diverse learning, and precarity remain in place in cyber contexts. This need for democratization of access to courses and support for those enrolled is particularly well-addressed in Chapter 7: Ensuring Equitable Access in Online and Blended Learning. Early in the chapter, Rose, Smith, Johnson, and Glick articulate a common myth preventing equitable access: "Administrators often feel that it takes a special student to take advantage of online education [before asserting that] this approach is misguided and may lead to unintentional biases in the online program" (p. 75). In response to this myth, the authors articulate the specific divide created between affluent students and those lower on the socioeconomic ladder: "Without attention to the fundamental access issues, the potential exists for online courses to become just another way to separate have and have-nots, rather than a tool to help address disparities in educational opportunity" (p. 72). Most of the existing literature on online schooling tiptoes around or entirely avoids this harsh reality: that while online learning may empower certain students, stakeholders must proceed with caution to ensure that all students, regardless of socioeconomic background, have equitable support in achieving success.

One suggestion put forth, as a first step to improving equity in online learning, is that significantly more effort should be exerted in order to gather demographic and other information from the online courses, resulting in discoveries such as those made by Rose et al., that "minority students, particularly those self-identifying as African American, are taking online courses at higher rates than their white counterparts, relative to their representation in national K-12 populations" (p. 75). Again, given the dynamic changes in demographics between students in each province, let alone across countries, application to the specific Canadian experience may be less precise. Nevertheless, the relevant point is made that learning more about who the clients are and why they may be taking online education courses could help stakeholders better design a platform that moves beyond tolerating and towards embracing a diverse student body.

As one of us (John) is tasked with the role of inclusively supporting K-12 students with disabilities and/or with mental health diagnoses, the section on special needs accommodation within Chapter 3 as well as relevant sections of Chapter 7 held special interest. The authors make an important distinction in their contention that the mere provision of accommodations and assistive technology for students with special needs does not ensure accessibility. The relationship between diversity and the need for flexible and varied teaching methods is explored via the claim that online lessons that focus on single strategies often marginalize students with diverse learning needs. Finally, the text seeks to dispel the normative myth that there is an ideal student for online learning, when many students who fall within minorities, be they ethnic, gender/sexuality, and disability, can benefit and currently are benefitting from quality online instruction. This last claim underscores the urgency in ensuring equitable access to technology in school districts throughout Canada and the United States.

The conversation specifically regarding making online instruction welcoming for students who fall into the category of disability, however, is somewhat thin. Beyond the recommendation that it be incorporated, the concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) was not explored in any particular depth, despite it being a constantly evolving philosophy that opens up an ever-expanding set of possibilities for making instruction more accessible for all learners (Dolmage, 2015). This concern is assuaged to some degree because many other chapters not directly related to diversity and inclusion nevertheless call for rigorous and mindful design practices that imply Universal Design principles, such as multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement (Dolmage, 2015) - but a more explicit connection might have been made.

Similarly, while it seems that the authors' hearts are in the right place regarding accessibility, the chapters might have benefitted from mentioning how inclusive education is seeking to transcend deficits and procrustean tendencies that might be loosely gathered under the former label of "special education".

Along these lines, they might also have included discussion of how, informed by progressive paradigms of strength-based support and "nothing about us without us" (Charlton, 1998) involvement, truly collaborative, equitable, and inclusive access for students with disabilities is a moral imperative for online learning as well as being highly achievable given the appropriate values, conditions, and design practices (Dolmage, 2015).

Notwithstanding our earlier critique of the case studies section, there were two case studies from the third part of the text that we found particularly relevant to our current practices and contexts. In "A Case Study of External Evaluation in Support of a New Virtual School", researchers Kevin Oliver and Tracy Weeks report findings from their project evaluation of The North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS), a large organization servicing public state high schools, in its 2007 - 2009 start-up period. The evaluation was intended to gather information to help improve the program. This chapter provides details on the rigorous "mixed-methods concurrent triangulation design" study which could then be adopted in any online practitioner's own context in order to inform policy and improve practice (p. 88). The detailed examination into questions, such as whether students in credit-recovery programs may be more likely to hold lower degrees of technological proficiency, interrogate what can otherwise be teacher or researcher biases which then assume causality due to lack of analysis (p. 89). Additionally, Canadian practitioners in particular may find value in the Canadian-specific chapter on the experience of a Virtual High School in Ontario that started up an online school for Canadian students studying around the world. One of the key findings in their program evaluation is the importance of collaboration between instructors and course designers (p. 146).

Overall, the bevy of perspectives from this diverse team of contributors, describing theory and practice in rural and urban settings, from large public schools to tiny charter programs, and across various North American settings and overseas, allow for a wide, if not groundbreakingly deep, survey of key policy and practice issues regarding online, blended, and distance education. The book will provide school leaders an informed view of this emerging field and a fruitful starting point for crucial conversations about what constitutes engaging, rigorous, and accessible instruction in online, blended, and distance education.

References

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