Creativity and Critique in Online Learning

"Accessibly written and timely, this book will be of interest to teachers in Higher Education charged with developing pedagogically sound online programmes to serve a wide, diverse and international student body. Interdisciplinary in scope, the book draws on interesting case studies from the Open University with relevance and application to other HE contexts. With refreshing honesty, the writers present a 'warts and all' analysis, acknowledging the difficulties and challenges as well as the affordances of online teaching and learning. This is very much a twenty-first-century text, offering great ideas and thoughtful critique of the key issues—essential reading for anyone currently teaching, or planning to teach, in a contemporary University."

—Dr Joan Woodhouse, *Associate Professor in Education, University of Leicester, UK*

"This is a book written by practitioners for practitioners. It combines action research and theoretical analysis with practical tips for virtual practice. The lively case studies investigate how social networks of students and staff are learning through technology, and about technology enhanced learning. A diverse range of disciplinary contexts are set within the Open University's mission to promote openness in educational opportunity. The rapid adoption of digital learning in universities makes this enquiring and informative text both timely and useful."

—Dr Jane Roberts, *Learning and Teaching Innovation, Open University, UK*

"This book is an excellent critical overview of the issues surrounding online teaching and learning in Higher Education. Using a series of complementary case studies focusing on the Open University, the book combines critical explorations of theory and research with accessible accounts of practice represented most clearly by the tips and discussion points to stimulate debate and which end each chapter. The chapters cover a broad range of issues pertinent to the use of digital technology in HE, from relatively established approaches such as online forums and online conferences to more recent developments such as creating MOOCs or incorporating social media tools into teaching and learning. The three themes identified in the concluding chapter, relating to digital technology's use

in promoting student collaboration, building academic communities and redefining academic identities, should help to stimulate the kind of debate and further research which the book calls for in its conclusion. Most importantly perhaps, the case studies offer an opportunity for other academics and institutions to learn from practice in a longstanding pioneer in the field at a time when, like so many other institutions, it is facing significant threats as a result of the socio-economic pressures it so keenly explores."

—Michael Jopling, *University of Wolverhampton, UK*

Jacqueline Baxter • George Callaghan
Jean McAvoy
Editors

Creativity and Critique in Online Learning

Exploring and Examining Innovations in Online Pedagogy

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Editors
Jacqueline Baxter
Open University
Milton Keynes, UK

George Callaghan
Open University
Milton Keynes, UK

Jean McAvoy
Open University
Milton Keynes, UK

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To Open University Associate Lecturers, past and present, whose efforts, innovation and enthusiasm have made such an enormous contribution to the lives and study journeys of our students.

Foreword

Clay Shirky suggests that it when a technology becomes so pervasive as to be invisible, then profound change occurs. In higher education, this might be the stage we are entering now with online learning. The change has been rapid, particularly give the glacial rate of change often observed in higher education. At the end of the 1990s the internet was seen as an interesting application, but not necessarily relevant to all subjects or modes of teaching. When creating the Open University's first elearning course in 1998, I recall a colleague confidently predicting "you'll be lucky to get fifty students who want to study like that." When we launched in 1999 we had 15,000 students. It seemed students did indeed want to study via the internet, and for distance education in particular it opened up a whole realm of possibilities.

For distance education, it was now possible to conduct group work without disruptive and expensive day schools, students could form communities online, and their sense of isolation greatly reduced. Course teams could respond to queries, change material without the need to send out printed addendum. Greater responsiveness and flexibility were now possible. For campus based students they could now watch lectures on demand, access notes after a lecture, and communicate with fellow students away from the physical location. In short, the technology made distance education more like face to face, and vice versa.

Since those early days the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or Learning Management System (LMS) has become a commonplace and essential piece of technology infrastructure in almost every university. Although the limitations of this technology and its application are often criticized, this overlooks how much we take its presence for granted. Online learning, and some form of blended approach is now the normal experience for nearly all students.

Despite this prevalence online a good deal of misconceptions and myths around online learning still persist. How, what and who we teach is affected by a shift online and yet the norms of face to face, or traditional distance education still dominate. A group activity that may take an afternoon in a face to face workshop may take three weeks when conducted online and require subtle negotiations and careful structuring. Similarly a printed unit that worked well in distance education may seem dry and wordy online, and miss opportunities for interaction. Often educators who have developed expertise in one setting get drawn into online teaching without any subsequent change in perspective.

Into this mix we can also add new developments, such as the use of social media, and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). These are often accompanied by a good deal of hype and rhetoric. There can also be a tendency for a 'year zero' mentality to accompany many of these new developments. It was with something of a wry smile and weary resignation that many working in higher education greeted claims that MOOCs represented the first generation of online education, and then proceeded to encounter many of the issues that distance education had been working with for decades.

Much of the literature in online learning tends to focus on very practical '6 steps to successful teaching' type guides or more critical perspectives on the nature of the internet and the role of higher education. This book provides a much needed practical approach to online education while being grounded in pedagogic theory, drawing on the extensive experience of staff at the UK Open University across a range of disciplines. The coverage addresses many of the different areas associated with online learning, with an emphasis on its creative use for the benefit of students.

These themes – community, identity, scale, pedagogy, creativity – are at the core of the book, creating online learning that is as engaging as face to face education, while taking advantage of the benefits the technology affords. While this work is largely focused on a distance education setting, as I argued above, the distinction between online and face to face, or distance and campus-based is increasingly blurred. The work covered in this book provides a useful basis for all educators in successfully implementing various aspects of online education.

The Institute of Educational Technology Martin Weller
Open University
Milton Keynes, UK

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Notes on Contributors

Jane Barrett (now retired) was assessment lead for Faculty of Social Sciences and Lecturer in the Psychology Department (Open University, UK). She recently gained an online Masters Degree in Online and Distance Education from the OU, as well as holding a PhD in social psychology. During her OU career, Jane worked on the production team of several online modules. These modules included the first online module for the Psychology masters degree and a new large-population Level 2 module for the psychology programme. Jane has published pedagogical research and retains a scholarship interest in collaborative learning.

Jacqueline Baxter is Senior Lecturer/Associate Professor of Public Policy and Management at The Open University Business School. Her research interests lie in the areas of public governance and accountablity, particularly in the realm of education. Her books include: School Governance: Policy, Politics and Practices and most recently: School Inspectors: Policy Implementers, Policy Shapers in National Policy Contexts. Her background is in teaching and pedagogy and she has written extensively on this subject. She is a Senior Fellow of The Higher Education Academy and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. She is also Editor in Chief of the Sage publication Management in Education and a Member of The Council of The British Educational Leadership, Management and Administration Society. She blogs at: www.jacquelinebaxter.org. Her LinkedIn profile can be found here: https://www.linkedin.com/in/dr-jacquelineaundr%C3%A9e-baxter-53206a12/. She tweets at @mieeditors and @drjacquebaxter.

George Callaghan is an Economist with the Open University. He has taught in the area of Personal Finance and Economics, co-editing the highly successful Personal Finance textbook which accompanies the module You and Your Money. He has conducted research funded by the Higher Education Academy into the use of ebooks in learning and is currently researching the pedagogy around using social media for University teaching. He is a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

Paige Cuffe is an Associate Lecturer on undergraduate psychology modules and the Masters in Online and Distance Education and sits on the Board of Study for the Institute of Educational Technology at the Open University. As a consultant with a special interest in collaborative and technology enhanced learning, she has for eight years been involved in the planning and delivery of staff development for Associate Lecturers on adapting practice to online teaching and in supporting peer sharing of practice. A member of the Association of Learning Technologists and British Psychological Society, she has worked in online education for over a decade.

Karen Foley is a Lecturer in Learning and Teaching Innovation at the Open University and is responsible for developing and delivering the Student Hub Live, a platform of online interactive events that facilitate open access to an academic community. In previous roles, Karen was an academic consultant for the Faculty of Arts and Social Science, developing the concept of online interactive conferences (Student Connections) and synchronous and asynchronous formats to promote these (including online workshops, podcasts and audio dramas).

Ian Fribbance is the Executive Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Science. He has previously been Associate Dean of Teaching & Learning Enhancement in the Social Science Faculty. He has led several of the Faculty's curriculum innovations in personal finance and financial services. He won an Open University Teaching Award and a National Teaching Fellowship and is also a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

Hannah Gore joined The Open University in 2005, developing a range of projects centred in technology enhanced learning to leverage student and learner engagement. Hannah works with and syndicates content to OpenLearn, iTunes U, YouTube, Audioboom, Bibblio, Google Play, OERu, Facebook, and FutureLearn. At present these first and third party channels represent a combined rate of circa 10 million visitors per annum, with Hannah working towards the launch of further channels. As an advocate of lifelong learning, Hannah researched her doctorate in MOOC engagement with The Open University.

Helen Kaye is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology and currently Deputy Associate Dean (Teaching and Learning Innovation) in the Open University Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Her doctoral and post-doctoral research was in classical conditioning and cognitive learning theory. Helen was previously qualification director for Psychology at the OU and chaired the production and presentation of the final year module Investigating Psychology 3. She has authored textbook chapters and edited course books as well as publishing research papers. Helen maintains scholarship and research interests in learning and memory in various contexts.

Madeleine Knightley is a Chartered Psychologist and Staff Tutor with the Open University. Her research interests are in personal identity and development. She is undertaking ongoing training in positive psychological and cognitive behavioural approaches and techniques for improving health and well-being.

Rachel Manning is an applied social psychologist currently working with governmental and non-governmental organisations to provide independent research, training and consultancy. During 20 years spent in the higher education sector she drew on her interests in social identities and intra- and intergroup processes to inform her teaching practice and pedagogical research. Her broader research interests have primarily focused on the notions of 'prosocial' and 'anti-social' behaviours, informed by community, environmental and critical psychological perspectives.

Jean McAvoy is Senior Lecturer and Director of Teaching in the School of Psychology at the Open University. She has worked extensively across the psychology programme, including undergraduate, postgraduate and PhD supervision. Her specialist teaching is in research methodologies. As a critical social psychologist her own research focuses on processes of subjectification and the production of subjectivities, with a particular interest in the ways in which moral orders and transgression are constructed in ideological, discursive and affective practices.

Michelle Oldale is a person-centred psychotherapist, trainer and supervisor with experience in the Further and Higher Education sector. She is the co-author along with Michelle J Cooke of 'Making the Most of Counselling and Psychotherapy Placements'. Michelle's core values reflect the holistic nature of wellness and she is a licenced 'Well Now' facilitator. Currently a Part Time Post Gradate researcher with the Open University exploring Weight Stigma, Michelle has previously researched the therapeutic relationship in British Sign Language and Power in Relationship when the Therapist is Deaf, the Client is Hearing and a Sign Language Interpreter is present. www.michelleoldale.com

David J. Pell's 'first career' (28 years) was in local government as a professionally qualified public sector manager, environment health officer and housing manager serving as a director of health and housing for ten years and then as a director of wider community services. In 1993 he left to establish an environmental consultancy working mostly with the international Environment City Programme and to develop an academic 'second career' (25 years to date) as an Associate Lecturer with Sheffield Hallam University Business School and the Open University. He has researched, published and taught at all levels in both the natural and social sciences.

Graham Pike is Professor of Forensic Cognition at The Open University's School of Psychology and Director of Research for the Centre for Policing Research and Learning. He researches in forensic psychology, critical criminology and applied cognition, and focuses on issues of evidence and harm within the criminal justice system. He has a passion for public engagement and innovative online education, and has produced a number of Apps, MOOCs, blogs and websites, as well as a large number of supported distance learning courses in psychology and the social sciences.

Diane Preston is a Senior Lecturer in Human Resource Management in the Department of People and Organisations at the Open University Business School. She has many years of experience in teaching, research and management roles. She was Head of Department for five years and Associate Dean (Teaching and Learning) for nearly two. She has written and led many modules at all levels of study and has watched with interest how open and distance learning and pedagogy has developed. Her research interests cover many aspects of the management of people and management learning and development, including how individuals make sense of work and organisations and professionals moving into management.

Stefanie Sinclair is a Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies at The Open University, with a special research interest in religion and identity (gender and national identities in particular). She is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and has led various projects critically exploring online and blended learning in HE, including a project on 'Assessing oral presentations at a distance' funded by the Higher Education Academy. She was awarded the 2017 Teaching and Learning Fellowship by the British Association for the Study of Religions in recognition of her contribution to excellence, innovation and transformation of the student learning experience in the study of religions.

Donna Smith With an academic background in politics and media, building on her experience of working in Westminster politics, her research has focused on UK politics, media, sexuality and representation. As an experienced higher education manager, designer, developer and tutor/lecturer, her focus also includes teaching and learning in the social sciences (politics in particular), with forums and participation a key interest.

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