

BOOK REVIEW

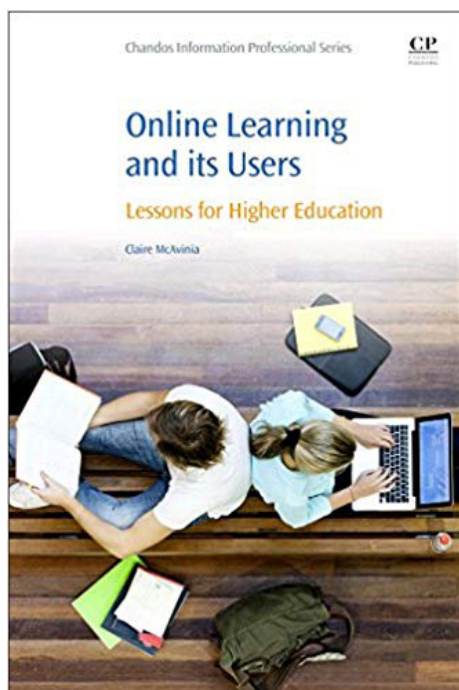
Online Learning and Its Users: Lessons for Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

From the early usage of computers and the internet to the widespread adoption of online education, it has been expected that these novel practices would revolutionize education. The book, *online learning and its users* (McAvinia, 2016), addresses the expectations and disappointments by presenting and discussing the past, present, and future of online learning in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with a systemic perspective. It specifically focuses on the role of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) based on the literature and current evidence from the field. By users, the author refers to all stakeholders of online learning: lecturers, students, managers, and supporters. Online learning and its users are examined with a sociocultural perspective through the lens of Activity Theory (AT). The author discusses the past and present disappointments in spite of the expectations from online learning that it would change the traditional pedagogy. Based on the current findings from the field through the lens of AT, she proposes lessons for changing or transforming the pedagogy of online learning in HEIs including Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), rather than repeating

or supporting the traditional practices. In this regard, the book calls for further systemic research addressing theoretical/pedagogical, organizational, and methodological issues impeding the revolution of online teaching and learning practices.

REVIEW OF THE BOOK

The first chapter of the book presents the historical development of online learning in HEIs starting from the early usage of computers and the internet. The author discusses this development process by basing her arguments on a comprehensive literature. The historical perspective not only focuses on the use of online learning, but also on the organizational and theoretical developments by covering the evolution of the roles of the staff at HEIs. From the theoretical perspective, how learning theories informed the use of VLEs and the challenges to revolutionize pedagogy of teaching in HEIs are discussed based on the relevant literature.

From the organizational perspective, how the role of learning technologists has evolved as the supporters of the adoption and mainstreaming of VLEs in HEIs is particularly examined together with the challenges.

The second chapter focuses on the challenges and disappointments in online learning, whose clues are given in the first chapter, based on the literature and history of disappointment. The author uses “disappointment” to describe the underuse of online learning and its disability to create a major change in teaching pedagogy. In other words, the author argues based on the literature that online learning has been used to repeat and support traditional practices rather than transforming them. She, then, categorizes the challenges as theoretical/pedagogical (e.g. the need for pedagogy-driven use of technology), organizational (e.g. commercial interest on technology usage), and methodological issues (e.g. excessive emphasis on case studies). For the evolution of teaching practices at HEIs through online learning, it is suggested to concentrate on these issues through the focus on activities of the users.

Based on the suggestion in the second chapter, in the next chapter, the author introduces AT and discusses its value as an analytical tool to achieve the expected revolution in the teaching practices in HEIs by transforming them through online learning. AT is specifically described in this chapter since the rest of the book is presented within its framework. It is extensively explained what potential AT has in addressing the above-mentioned pedagogical, organizational, and methodological issues impeding educational change and how AT can be used to change education based on the relevant literature on it and online learning. Particularly, the contradictions that might be observed between the elements of an activity are pointed as the key to the development of online teaching practices. By this way, the author also constructs a base for the next chapters, in which the lessons for the users of online learning are based on the evidence from a systemic study within the framework of AT.

In the next three chapters, the lessons for the users of online learning, namely, managers/supporters, lecturers, and students are presented by supporting them through the findings from the author’s current study within AT as well as the relevant literature unlike the previous chapters, in which the arguments were completely based on the literature. In the next three chapters, the focus is on the activities of the users as to the use and mainstreaming of VLE in a campus-based HEI. The author presents the findings of the activity theoretic analyses to understand the activities of the users and contradictions in these activities. For each activity of the user groups; the subjects, objects, instruments, rules, community, and division of labor were identified as well as the contradictions occurred within and between the activities in the use and mainstreaming of a VLE in a HEI.

The repeat or facilitation of the traditional activities in teaching and learning is defined as the “cycle” and the development and transformation of these activities, instead of supporting them, is called “breaking the cycle”. The observed unshared objects and contradictions were used as the base for the lessons for each user group to break the cycle since they were adopted as the key points for the change in online learning and teaching. Thus, in the seventh chapter, she synthesizes the findings from the analyses of the activities of each user group within AT framework and determines the critical points to change online teaching and learning from the pedagogical, organizational, and methodological aspects. In this regard, this chapter also calls for further systemic studies on user activities regarding online learning, rather than relying solely on surveys or learning analytics since they just concentrate on one part of the activities though they have value.

The past and present of online learning is presented in detail in the previous chapters. In the eighth chapter, she draw attention on the future of online learning. She specifically focuses on MOOCs, again through the lens of AT, based on the literature since they are expected to revolutionize higher education just as expected from VLEs. She separately analyzes and models the activities in cMOOC and xMOOC, two main MOOC types, and discovers the activities and contradictions within the elements of them. Then, she proposes lessons for the development of both cMOOCs and xMOOCs so that they can change educational practices as desired by assuming that both VLE and MOOCs have similar pedagogical concerns.

In the last chapter, the author briefly synthesizes the overall issues in the book and concludes five lessons for the improvement of online teaching and learning in HEIs or, with the author’s words, for breaking the cycle. The concluded lessons are articulation of the expectations from online learning, planning for its collective development, appropriately resourcing support overheads, further research on institutional adoption of new technologies, and gaining more knowledge about students’ learning. As can be inferred, these lessons

cover pedagogical/theoretical, organizational, and methodological issues as often stated as the impediments of change in online learning throughout the book. Therefore, the author recommends taking actions in research and practice to address these lessons.

CONCLUSION

The book presents the literature of disappointments as a result of the expectations that online learning would lead to major changes in the pedagogy of higher education including campus-based teaching and distance education. Based on this review, the author recommends focusing more on teaching and learning activities with a systemic approach from sociocultural perspective rather than focusing on specific aspects of online learning. For this purpose, AT is introduced as an analytical tool to analyze activities of each user group and to reveal contradictions as the starting points of the desired revolution in HEIs. By doing so, the author presents the findings of a current study on the activities of the users of online learning through the lens of AT in a campus-based HEI and concludes several lessons as well as a call for future research from the pedagogical/theoretical, organizational, and methodological aspects. In this sense, the book contributes to the literature of online learning by specially drawing attention on the significance of the understanding of user activities in online learning so as to actualize the desired transformation of teaching and learning in HEI.

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