“Online Learning and Community Cohesion,” is an innovative and comprehensive prospectus on the utility of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), and the extent to which it can reduce prejudice in public education, by establishing common social boundaries which bring students and teachers together for a common purpose. The book also explores and analyzes the ways in which ICT has been used in various countries around the world to promote citizenship, inclusion and community cohesion. The authors examine the theoretical frameworks of ICT initiatives in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, England, the European Union, Canada, and the United States. The rationale for the project is based on the premise that increasing globalization has resulted in the creation of greater numbers of heterogeneous groups, resulting in the potential for both rich cultural exchanges and a tendency toward tribalism. In the book the authors attempt to analyze the role of the school and the extent to which technology promotes cross-cultural interchange, and reduces prejudice by establishing common social boundaries. It is the underlying premise of the book that, “globalization has resulted in communities that are far more heterogeneous, and where intergroup contact has the potential to either foster rich cultural interchange or to provoke tension spilling over into violence” (p. 1).

The authors stress the significance of social identity and self-expression, and the importance of understanding the dynamic of a global group setting which by definition acknowledges diversity and cultural exchange. The use of ICT on a global level can promote online school projects which create deliberative environments that accommodate a global perspective. The authors point out that this has significance for pedagogy and the changing role of the teacher to accommodate twenty-first century learning practices. As such, the need for ongoing innovative teacher professional development should be deemed a priority.

The authors stipulate that meaningful online contact can be achieved using a combination of traditional teaching and learning models such as: a teaching model based on formal lessons utilizing e-books and other media; an informal contact model where students are brought together to share ideas, social activities and cultural exchange; a task model designed to work on joint projects and establish common perspectives; and a cluster model which incorporates elements of the aforementioned approaches. It is suggested that, notwithstanding the potential for meaningful global interaction in education, school divisions in cities and countries where social isolation based on race and ethnicity is the norm, need to change their practices from within before looking beyond their borders for global collaborative partners.

The expressed intent of the book was the examination of the use of ICT to foster community cohesion. Yet, according to the authors, even though all of the nations that were examined in this book have the human, economic and technological resources to support online global partnerships, very few if any programs or projects were designed to bridge societal divisions. In order to change from an exclusive to an inclusive global perspective there is a need for a greater role to be played by UNESCO to provide guidance and leadership in global educational issues. At the heart of the matter is the design of programs, “…that combine international links with connections between culturally (ethnically, racially, religiously) different local schools, might be a way to maximize the potential for this kind of learning and” (p. 144).

Instructional and program design have been identified as key to the success for online learning and community cohesion. Specifically the authors have identified four factors that will determine the success:
“the place of theoretical models in shaping the learning experience in interschool contact programs;
- the role of teachers in shaping and delivering the actual experiences of the participating students;
- the evolving dynamic of technology and the way that it may influence issues of program delivery; and
- skillful program management to insure that quality experiences are provided for all involved” (p. 144).

The significance of this book for public education in the often termed, “developed world,” cannot be understated. The barriers that separate us identified as ethnic, political, cultural and religious have implications for educational leadership, instructional design, pedagogy and andragogy, assessment practices, teacher education programs, and most importantly, for students. If, as it is pointed out by the authors that online, ubiquitous educational access has the potential to support constructivist educational practice and inclusive universal engagement, then this book should be required reading in teacher education programs. Perhaps the relevance of this book lies in its message; that the significance of ICT and online learning for education is tantamount to a paradigm shift that will redefine public education, for the student, the teacher, the community and the world as we know it. How this will be managed is yet to be determined.

Online Learning and Community Cohesion is a thoughtful and articulate synopsis of the challenges we face in public education today and for the foreseeable future. Although the challenges are significant, the authors make a strong case that there is huge potential for improvements in public education and universal access to education through a reasoned approach to online learning, ICT and an inclusive perspective.