

Online Education, Learning Management Systems, Global E-Learning in a Scandinavian Perspective

(Book Review)

Reviewer:

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Online Education, Learning Management Systems, Global E-Learning in a Scandinavian Perspective

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Electronic Layout Tools:

Reasonably well-labelled section headings accompany the PDF version, making use of the navigation pane, bookmark, and thumbnail facilities. This assists initial over-viewing and easy return to content sections of interest. Better distinction for the position of numbered parts would improve the facility.

Presentation:

Coming to terms with a 337-page e-book in PDF format is an interesting experience for a reviewer. There are advantages to being able to assess the contents continually while the book is being read, but it loses the feel of a 'flick-through' overview. No doubt many students and tutors have already addressed the merits and difficulties of e-books within their courses, but without a handheld device, it remains hard to make a mental distinction between a long consultation document, and a pleasurable read of a new work in the field.

Yet, learning about other approaches to online education is always a rewarding experience, and in a field that relies on electronic delivery for its business, this is an interesting, and not yet common enough, development. Offering practical solutions regarding its own media type is significant for a work that describes perspective and experience within a field that has developed to allow its participants to take advantage of flexible forms of communication and delivery. So, it is impressive that the publishers have made the effort to provide multiple formats of the work, and that ISBN numbers for printed, PDF and Microsoft Reader versions are available. This should allow the most appropriate format for purpose to be selected, based on the functionality of each technology. Those requiring a print format are able to obtain a hardcopy version, avoiding lengthy printouts, while the pdf version is more appropriate for electronic working or distribution. The book is also distinctive since the author has received financial support from the Norwegian Non-fiction Literature Fund.

So as a book that offers an European 'regional' perspective (Scandinavian), with comment from a different international area, by way of a Canadian Postscript, I approached this work with anticipation.

Rationale and International Focus:

The work is an ambitious one. Its target is to open gateways between Nordic, European and international educators and the integration of theory and practice. In this respect, the book itself merely forms a starting point, intended to reflect the first steps of a learning process leading to wider collaboration, in the same way a single resource might present the first step to achieving learning outcomes within a blended media course. To emphasise this approach, the book is richly supported by contextual material, including a multimedia interview (<http://www.studymmentor.com>) with the author about his background for writing the book. There, the author

provides information concerning his story of this book, its context (of long and outstanding international experience in the field), and more. An opening space for international online conferences is also available in support of collaboration.

Yet the theme of 'export of education' is clearly at the front of the authors mind, when he presents his perspective from the Scandinavian point of view. This offers interesting contrasts throughout. The international reader is required to approach topics from a less familiar perspective, which raises its own set of questions as to what we do and why we do it. Where for the Scandinavian reader, the aim is to demonstrate the wealth of Scandinavian achievement with technologies related to learning and to demonstrate how, despite this wealth of experience, 'export of learning' is not occurring. Instead, it is portrayed as more in the situation of being infiltrated or in some areas, over-run, by those brought in to assist its further development with the original intention of assisting to cover specific areas of weakness. However, readers from all cultures are more likely to identify with the recurring background themes of 'cost effectiveness' and 'sustainability'.

The Canadian perspective extends specific themes within the book to consider economic growth strategies offered by online learning, and how language considerations of the home country may prove advantageous or otherwise for international marketing of online courses. Pertinent issues are raised that should trigger significant questions for all countries with an interest in better serving their students through further development of online courses. In particular, US and Canadian educational arrangements are compared, to illustrate what courses are able to offer, and considered in the context of their home country's political management structure for education. This discussion, when held next to the main work, becomes a good basis for considering what lessons, or understanding of educational constraints from each country's circumstances, may be useful in terms of transfer of experience from one national context to another. It is significant in outlining why barriers and experiences may not be directly transferable, and in which areas to look to improve a single country's advantage in developing online learning.

Australia is also drawn into the comparison through a 'Comparative Study of Online Education Support Systems in Scandinavian and Australian Universities', within the context of a wider presentation of Learning Management Systems and their use across the Nordic countries. In this, the author arrives at the conclusion that there seems to be a general lack of integration between these systems in all three countries, as well as little focus on standards specifications. In addition, Norway and Sweden value the importance of nationally developed LMS systems and student management systems; where there seemed to be much more national co-ordination and governmental coercion concerning the choice of student management systems, than in Australia. And again, through the theme of economic policy, the concept of 'export of education' reappears. This is put forward as the most striking difference between the three countries, where Australia considers [online] education as an important export industry, but in contrast, Norway and Sweden, do not seem to hold any interest in raising this as an issue for public discussion.

Approach:

Inclusion of these perspectives allows the book to be approached in many ways. Readers may find it helpful to be flexible about the parts they read first, in order to gain the most from the variety of material on offer. For example, the Forewords, Preface and Postscripts are significant in the way they enhance and underpin the gateway approach, and set the perspective and context for the four main sections. Readers with a general interest in collaborations within Online Learning, or with international perspectives on the field, may find it helpful to approach the book from this angle first. However, those readers with more specialist requirements may wish to delve straight into the meat of specific sections instead.

Throughout the book, the author combines interesting theoretical concepts and sound empirical data with anecdotes, to illuminate distance and online education from different levels and perspectives of everyday practice. Despite the data being somewhat older, the observations remain valuable. It is worth bearing this in mind when some of the findings or anecdotes may seem like lessons already learned. In fact, the precise role of the book is succinctly described by Erwin Wagner, in his foreword, when he notes that the '...book summarises what leading researchers have contributed to the research and what many students and many online teachers have contributed to our present knowledge on how to resolve practical problems. In fact this book very effectively helps to create and structure this knowledge itself.'

Content:

The main material is presented in four themed parts, comprising a mixture of articles and anecdotes, or case studies, to illustrate specific perspectives.

Part 1 provides an overview of online education, teaching & learning through a descriptive glossary, three articles and three anecdotes, which are presented from the view of one student, one tutor, and a global primary school. The first article introduces the theory of co-operative freedom (derived from distance education) applying it to online education, and argues that online education can foster both freedom for the individual and group co-operation. The second article presents seven distinct features of online teaching, subsequently introducing the characteristics of online learners and their special needs from the perspectives of distance education, adult education, and online education. The third article presents experiences with teaching techniques found in the literature, recommended by some 150 online teachers interviewed about their experiences with teaching techniques. The analysis of the interviews showed that discussion groups, project groups, lectures, correspondence studies, and use of databases were the most used online teaching techniques.

Part 2 offers two articles and two anecdotes. The first article discusses global issues surrounding international web-based education and makes strategic recommendations for decision makers. The research presented was conducted within the Cisaer project, (http://www.nettskolen.com/in_english/cisaer/index.html), supported by the European Leonardo da Vinci program. The results and discussions are based on literature reviews, catalogue entries submitted by 130 institutions in 26 countries, and 72 interviews with key persons at these institutions, obtained over a one-year period during 1998-9. The second article presents an analysis of LMS systems, conducted in 2001-2 for the European Web-edu project (http://www.nettskolen.com/in_english/webedusite/index.html). Data was collected from interviews with 113 European experts, from 17 countries, who were usually the systems managers in the institutions. Interview analyses revealed as many as 52 different commercial and 35 self-developed LMS systems. The anecdote 'Online Education Obituaries' argues that successful online education should be sustainable, noting that 'It is therefore of great concern that much of the online education that has been offered so far has been transient, unsuccessful and far from sustainable'. The anecdote explores the reasons behind this, questioning how sustainability may be built into future initiatives, yet acknowledging unsustainable attempts in terms of their value to individuals, institutions, and society. In contrast, 'Fronter' describes the story behind a dawning Norwegian LMS success.

Part 3 looks at the Nordic Scene represented by Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. Two articles present perspectives on Learning Management Systems (LMS) in the Nordic Countries and A Comparative Study of Online Education Support Systems in Scandinavian and Australian Universities. The first article presents the results from an analysis of online education and LMS systems based on a literature review and in-depth interviews with 20 selected Nordic training managers in 2001. The analysis comprises a broad range of institutions from primary education, secondary education, higher education, distance education, and corporate training. The comparative study discusses systems comprising content creation tools and systems for learning management, student management, and accounting. More use of anecdotes is made in support of this area, including a personal account of Online Learning in Denmark, a provocative statement on Swedish Challenges of the move towards Online Education, a discussion on Nordic Virtual Universities, and Two Decades of Online Sustainability as presented by NKI Fjernundervisning, or the NKI Internet College.

Part 4 presents one article, and one anecdote, on potential improvements and accessibility of the systems that are used to offer online education. The article presents an analysis of the answers the Web-edu project team members received when they asked 113 experts in 17 European countries what features they would like to see included in their future LMS systems. The analysis indicates thirteen key needs and concerns drawn out from this study. A personal view of the future of online learning is presented which makes a qualified attempt to envisage some of the developments towards 2010, based on the history of online education and the trends that have been elucidated throughout this book.

Global-Individual Perspectives

The work succeeds in presenting localised perspectives of an expanding field, and aligning these with different international experiences. Where research can span several years, but the field is fast-moving, anecdotes have allowed the work to retain the essence of individual experience, and to keep the focus on the growth and needs of all of the individuals involved in creating and participating in the learning experience online. As needs and

commonality of purpose is one basis on which communities are formed, the author has been consistent in presenting his extensive experience in a way that supports his ambition of the work as a gateway. Whether it succeeds in this is, of course, a more complex question, but it should not be a wasted read. There is enough here for each person to find something of value, independent of their focus and background, even if it is not what was expected at the start.