

## Virtual Learning and Higher Education (Book Review)

### **Reviewer:**

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### **Textbook Details:**

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David S. Preston (editor)  
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### **Introduction**

Editions Rodopi has provided a great deal of information about this book on their webpage. Located at the first site noted above there is a brief overview of the book and an indication who might be interested in it. There are also notes on the contributors and abstracts of the ten papers included in this eighth volume in the At the Interface series. For those who would like to scan the backgrounds of the contributors and read abstracts of the papers, the webpage is the place to go.

The following material provides comments on and reactions to the volume in general and the papers specifically rather than repeating what is already available on the webpage.

These papers are from a conference at Mansfield College (Oxford) held in September 2002 with some of the references updated to mid 2003. The ten papers in this volume are divided into three sections. These sections called Frontierland, Into the Unknown, and Looking before Leaping provide an array of practical examples and philosophic insights of value to newcomers wanting a grasp of important issues in virtual learning or the experienced wishing to see what others are doing in the field.

### **Frontierland**

Frontierland, the first section, includes four papers covering the strategic and the tactical. Waring and Boardman start off by describing the development of an eight part virtual learning environment (VLE) framework for the training of physical education (PE) teachers at Durham University. While the parts of the VLE would be familiar to most distance education instructors, the section of the paper on Issues and Challenges is most informative and corroborative. Waring and Boardman begin by pointing to that bugbear poor access both at a technical level and at personal level. Technical access varies from place to place and over time and so the instructor must keep this in mind so as to remain flexible and understanding. On the personal level, Waring and Boardman suggest that there needs to be some anonymous posting capabilities in order to facilitate sharing of and benefiting from experiences that might be infringe on someone's privacy. This flows clearly into the ethical issues faced by instructor and students in a physical education course. In this case, the PE teachers that wish to share experiences and developments from their own schools must gain consent from their students and their parents. Without that they would not be able to share valuable insights from their experiences most of which deal with children. This ethical issue is coming more and more to the fore, as it should, not only in distance education specifically but also in education and in our society generally. Waring and Boardman continue with a comment on the use of PDAs, on the importance of the communication zone of their framework in promoting

quality assurance and facilitating research into pedagogy. Finally, they clearly recognize the VLE certainly as challenging to implement but as a worthwhile educational paradigm that engages both student and teacher in their own learning.

Price and Lapham discuss the virtual seminar from several perspectives one of which is that of assessing the views of full-time versus part-time students. They deal with the pros and cons of virtual seminars as opposed to face-to-face seminars in general. This in turn is used as a base from which to describe their study of first-time distance students. They point out, among other things, that students re-entering after a number of years have higher satisfaction with the asynchronous, any-time, any-place mode than the traditional students. They also noted that the non-traditional and the traditional students are somewhat intimidated by each other; the former with the educational experience of the later and the later with the work experience of the former. However, they commented on the ability of both groups to have their voices heard in the communications section of their framework and the importance of the instructor in creating an atmosphere where students feel in control and as a result less intimidated.

The third paper, by Ross and Davis, covers the E-Learning Plan (ELP) of Athabasca University (AU) which is billed as “Canada’s Open University.” Ross and Davis describe AU’s background and the approach to course development, in general, and turn to the ELP more specifically. With this 2001 plan and its revisions AU signaled a move from print to online as their primary delivery mode by 2006. Readers can visit the AU at <http://www.athabascau.ca> and judge the current state of this move. Ross and Davis outline many of the challenges facing this move, to removing barriers to post-secondary education, and to increasing access for students. They note the need to revamp the course development approach to accommodate online courses; the requisite support structures for instructors and students; the need to develop open-source management systems rather than use of a variety of proprietary software as at present; the transformation of their static print materials to dynamic materials (e-books and streaming audio and video); and the development of an online communication environment that can cope with continuous enrollment and differing rates of student progression. These are weighty challenges all of us who move in and through distance education face.

The last of the papers in this first section describes the development of a web-based resource page to be used by online instructors at the University of Phoenix (UoP). Muirhead introduces some of the challenges facing online instructors, covers the background of the UoP, touches on the importance to UoP of the training of online instructors, and describes the elements (course content and services) of the resource page that UoP courses will contain. This concept of a resource pages is not uncommon in a distance education course, however, Muirhead gives particular insight into the benefits and concerns. Key benefits revolve around bringing some consistency to the courses by providing some structure for instructors as well as easing access by students to content, evaluation, and services while maintaining some local focus. This later issue of local focus is important because the UoP covers many educational districts in the United States and Canada and so must be wary of fulfilling local educational requirements. Concerns he notes are the resistance to using online resources for any length of time, the costs of building such a resource page when there is some doubt as to its effectiveness in promoting relevant interaction, and the amount of time it takes to train instructors to maintain the resource page.

The papers are a snapshot of what was or what might be and as such beg the question, ‘What is the status today?’ I imagine that we are more or less still in Frontierland because we are still dealing with many of these same issues.

## **Into the Unknown**

Thomson begins the second section by discussing the use of information and communication technologies in workplace learning. He deals with small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) and bemoans the supply side failures of training opportunities in that they are not appropriate in terms of time, cost, or location. It is even more critical in SMEs that learning materials and methodologies be appropriate and not just a repurposing of old materials and ideas! While Thomson does not speak in terms of customer relations management what he says about finding out what the workers need, what the context is that they are in, and what supports they require speaks to a very clear customer/worker perspective. This is a very stimulating paper because it uses well known ideas in fundamental, no nonsense language to set out strategies for improving workplace learning.

Stiles continues with another excellent paper on the implications of a widening participation in higher education (HE). He does so by looking at strategic and pedagogic issues from within a UK focus but which is certainly applicable broadly. Stiles notes that although there is widening participation there are still numerous barriers to

student completion (lack of preparedness of HE, changing personal circumstances, financial matters, impact of undertaking paid work, and dissatisfaction with course or institution) that are going unresolved. Similarly with widening participation there is a greater diversity of learning styles but a gap between what is a recognized need and what is actually available in HE institutions. This disconnect results from a number of factors ranging from insufficient staff development in pedagogy or learning activity design; through the pre-occupation with content production to the detriment of pedagogy and learning; to inconsistent or piece-meal institutional strategies towards use of and training in technology. The implications of all these are that many decisions and especially technological ones are being made without clear institutional goals or understanding of long-term impacts. Stiles calls for a national focus to bring aspects of pedagogy, assessment, content, and technology into balance. Not to do so, Stiles notes, would be to the detriment of student learning and staff development as well as achieving national goals and competitiveness. This is sober comment worthy of reading by all education specialists.

Fuller completes this second section by discussing assessment in the virtual learning environment. He recognizes that there are inherent problems with assessment tools but that there is 'unexploited potential' available. His example of teaching large classes illustrates how he uses systems to benefit; developing automated marking can save time in large classes. Fuller does not deal with drill-and-kill multiple choice but with the problem of using automated marking with higher order competencies of analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Fuller's short paper could not cover much detail but takes a positive view that much can be done. He is pragmatic however, by saying that synthesis competencies are outside the realm of automated assessment tools. He does give references to work in the field one of which is to a web site located at the University of Cape Town; <http://web.uct.ac.za/projects/cbe/mcqman/mcqcont.html>

## **Looking Before Leaping**

The third section of this book consists of three papers that deal with fundamental issues of the university in this age of information and computer technology. Because of this they are immediately more controversial and less able to be encapsulated.

Wood explores the chasm between faculty and administrators and does so using activist language of dissent, conflict, reform and revolution. He calls for laws to protect higher education from administrators who are taking universities down the corporate path. Such laws should limit the number of distance courses acceptable for degrees; protect intellectual property of faculty; ensure substantial numbers of full-time, tenured faculty; strengthen tenure; mandate budget levels; and prevent the corporate takeover or privatization of universities. Whether you accept what Wood says at face value and distance education as disastrous or reject it as outmoded hyperbole and distance education as worthwhile, he does bring up many issues that in part or parcel intrude on our higher education lives.

Bromage puts together a fascinating look, with the catchy title of 'Atavistic Avatars,' at the possibility of a truly virtual university. He discusses the nature of virtual reality (VR), brings in some example of its use in schools, delves into how we might develop a sense of being (the ontology of VR), and what it would mean for universities and for students. While he is certainly positive, Bromage is not without his concerns. The major concern is that centering on the importance of establishing VLEs which allow and nurture meaningful student engagement with others on common tasks. This is well worth a read for its array of insights and caveats if not for its Star Trek like qualities.

To finish off the volume, Preston covers a broad swath in his paper on 'Virtual Values: The University in Crisis.' Preston explores how technology in general has had a great impact on our society and now information and computer technology is having a significant impact on universities. His study of the National Technological University and comment on the British situation suggests that there are imbalances the broad strategic views and the concerns of the local and national communities. He is not unlike Wood and Bromage in having concerns about unguided or unreasoned use of technology but couches his concerns in calmer and less futuristic terms. Preston notes that universities, and the British nation itself, must take a more holistic approach to technology, its use, and its impacts.

Preston's paper for all its calmness is the most disturbing of any of the other papers in this volume. The other sections illustrate concrete and practical items while the two other papers in this section give extreme perspectives which may be accepted or rejected with little impact. However, this paper details the insidious nature of what Preston calls 'the macro-technological issue' by which he means, 'an increased alacrity to use

technological values to determine the university mission and future.’ This is evident, the paper notes, not only in the growth of managerialism with its language of efficiency but also of the closing down of democratic practice, and a rejection of a balanced approach. All of us in HE probably have our own examples that fit this definition and detrimental practices. Preston in this paper would ask, “What are you doing about it?”

Preston offers a remedy. He provides his vision of a university which is ‘a place where frameworks for knowledge appraisal are negotiated and agreed through a narrative of tradition.’ With this Preston harkens back to the idea of the university but then formulates a vision to fit the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He gives a goal towards which university communities can work towards in the way that they determine best for themselves.

This volume has many hidden highlights that would be of value to many in the distance education area. It gives practical insights mostly from a British perspective, references to many articles and books, and up-to-date web sites for current research. Most of all it shows the education community that there are groups exploring distance education topics, moving ahead as best they can, and grappling with obstacles successfully. This is a good read because it offers many hours of reflection afterwards.