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Book review: Review of Diana Oblinger's 'Game Changers: Education and Information Technologies'

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Review

Game Changers (Oblinger, 2012a) is an openly licenced free eBook that has been edited by Diana Oblinger and released through EDUCAUSE under a Creative Commons licence. Diana Oblinger is President of EDUCAUSE and has a strong personal record in innovation that means, among other things, that she has excellent contacts. The result is a book with more than 400 pages, containing 17 articles and 21 case studies. It is also a book with focus; looking at the trends in technology for learning that relate to the US College and Higher Education. This is a sector that is facing changes. An interesting aspect of those changes brought out in the book is that the "traditional student", attending a single college through to completion, has already been overtaken by the "non-traditional" who now make up around 73% of those in the college system (Pepicello, 2012). The exceptions are now more common than the supposed typical case and the book looks at the way information technology and new attitudes to education can help us cope with this new situation as the game changes. While there is a US focus, and the majority of articles reflect that, the book is not exclusively US (case studies include those from Canada, Sweden, China and Hong Kong). Certainly it is not only of interest to US readers. Having the more definite audience in mind has resulted in the more specific instances and use of data to back up assertions than is often the case in an edited collection.

The book provides two sections. The first consists of a roughly equal split between project-focussed articles and those that are written from an individual perspective. The second covers 21 case studies. This combination works well as the position pieces act to set the scene while the book also serves as a good

source of references about key initiatives and projects. Such projects are often too busy doing things to take the time to provide good articles that are essential to share advances. Each person will find their own path through a book like this but a good map is given by Oblinger's own article (Oblinger, 2012b) that acts as a guide and summary in itself. That chapter highlights the swirling state of education these days, where people change their study, which is apparent across research universities as well as the community colleges. The "game" of education is changing in all sorts of ways – with trends towards more self-learning, more data that can be shared and more ways to interpret this data and self-comparison with others. These lead to opportunities to empower students but also new value chains with more complex mechanisms to build relations between education provider and learner, and then new ways to analyse the resulting data. The theme of game changing underlies the book as a whole and indeed should you have had any doubts that this is a period of change for higher education this book is convincing.

The position pieces offer an introduction across many areas and need awareness and attention from those working in higher and further education. Some of these are at a policy level. The challenge to educate a population (Lingenfelter, 2012) at degree level is spelled out very effectively with facts and figures given to show that the view that "Everybody doesn't need to go to college", (Murray, 2008) quoted by Lingenfelter, depends on an interpretation of education designed for a narrow part of society. Instead the argument is that education is not reaching many who could and should benefit and while investment is difficult in the economic climate it is essential to bring about the knowledge economy that is needed. The chapter makes good use of data to push home its points, for example including charts that show how degree completion is more dependent on economic background rather than ability.

The use of data in itself is a theme of the book and with analytics (Baer & Campbell, 2012) given an important part in the "game changing toolkit". An interesting alternative label for analytics as described in their chapter is "actionable intelligence"; using data to help set direction and policy. Some of that data can be a bit uncomfortable showing as it does the completion problems in part-time education and the difficulty in bringing back those who start to show signs of difficulty. An analytics ecosystem (Long & Siemens, 2011) offers a way to build up the evidence that is needed to know whether approaches to retention and completion are actually working. The chapter lead draws an analogy with the Global Positioning System (GPS) that enables us to guide to our vehicles to present an image of an "Educational Positioning System" (EPS) which can help guide each learner to their goals.

In isolation such views can sound theoretical and unrealistic, in the context of this book it just means going a few chapters further in to find the example of such a design in action. The Open Learning Initiative from Carnegie Mellon University (Strader & Thille, 2012) is described as a way to use data and the design of assessment to tackle the problems of learning specific subjects, the example given here being statistics. This is a switch in scale but by concentrating on solving the issues, with high initial effort and investment a shared solution can be proposed with eventual greater efficiency. Further issues of analytics occur across several case studies (for example at Western Governors and Athabasca). An advantage of the electronic format being that it is easy to search for terms and spot such connections.

A further theme in the collection is openness. The chapter on Open Educational Resources (Wiley & Green, 2012) presents succinctly some of the key points about OER. It leads through to what is a current concern of "open teaching" as large numbers of people start to take free courses. Its counterpoint of "open learning" by individuals has still to really emerge or, perhaps, the guiding role of

the teacher remains necessary to deal with the confusion of the information on the Internet. The way the game is changing rapidly even from the date of writing means that the book only covers the MOOC phenomenon (Daniel, 2012) fairly lightly, however many of the components are there. For example the work on OER from OpenCourseWare (Forward, 2012) and Saylor.org (Shoop, 2012), and the badging infrastructure introduced by Mozilla (Knight & Casilli, 2012). These are initiatives more often covered in blog posts than articles and in each case the more formal written piece has a useful role in setting out the position and becoming a point for reference.

This book practices what it preaches by being available online without charge and using the Creative Commons Attribution licence for articles (though it is notable that this is only made clear for the article by Wiley & Green (2012) and in the front section of the book). Anyone reading this brief review can download, search and read the full text. I have mentioned the US basis and have some mixed feelings on that; it helps to see hard data but also find that some of the problem statements and solutions may not cross-over. However, it is hard to argue with the value for money of free access, and what is more this book will also repay the time that you invest as well.

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