
BOOK AND EBOOK REVIEW

Book Reviews – 2018

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The following publication contains book reviews of these titles:

D. Randy Garrison, (2015) *Thinking Collaboratively: Learning in a Community of Inquiry*. London and New York: Routledge. 147 pages ISBN-1138824313, ISBN-9781138824317.

Elizabeth Losh (ed.), 2017. *MOOCs and Their Afterlives: Experiments in Scale and Access in Higher Education*. Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press. 384 pages. ISBN-9780226469591.

Mona Engvig (2017) *Online Education: Practical, Theory-Based Advice for the Instructor*. San Diego, CA: Cognella Academic Publishing. 172 pages ISBN-10:1516515455, ISBN-13:9781516515455.

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Review 1: Thinking Collaboratively: Learning in a Community of Inquiry (D. Randy Garrison)

Review authored by: Clare Lee

Review of: D. Randy Garrison, (2015) *Thinking Collaboratively: Learning in a Community of Inquiry*. London and New York: Routledge. 147 pages ISBN-1138824313, ISBN-9781138824317

As a passionate advocate of working and learning collaboratively I approached this book with the upmost interest, and it did not disappoint. The content of this book is, or should be, of extreme interest to educational technologists, instructional designers, and educators working in higher education institutions. It would be of particular interest to those who feel that collaboration at a distance is either not viable or not worthwhile, as it demonstrates how to ensure viability and just how worthwhile such experiences can be.

In this book Garrison sets out his Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, specifying the theoretical background to his ideas in detail. He sets out why thinking collaboratively in higher education is both desirable and necessary, quoting both Dewey and Vygotsky to back up his claims. The necessity and power of thinking collaboratively for engendering deep and meaningful learning are his chief themes throughout the book.

The CoI framework (p. 59) itself has been developed over many years and has been explored by many colleagues

and peers of Garrison, giving a wide body of literature to back up his ideas. The chief novelty of Garrison's approach is to set out three 'presences' that must overtly exist within an effectively functioning community of inquiry. The presences are: social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence. Although the presences are separately considered and defined, a community of enquiry exists and functions effectively through a complex interplay between each of these presences.

Social presence (pp. 72–75) is clearly vital in such a community since participation is key. Social presence is not about 'getting on well', although this may be the outcome of the CoI process. Social presence is about developing an ethos of respect and trust within the community. Thus it is vital if full participation of the whole community in the debates and challenges is to be encouraged as well as the reflective thinking that characterises a functioning CoI. The degree to which a sense of identity and belonging is engendered within the group is a predictor of fruitful outcomes from that CoI. Social presence must first be focused on the purpose of the inquiry. However, where an inquiry is artificial or the task trivial then the students will not feel it worthwhile to make the effort needed to establish the second aspect of social presence, which is free and open communication. Personal relationships, the third aspect of social presence, must be allowed to grow over time through the participants communicating openly within a group that has an established and purposeful identity.

Personal relationships can inhibit the respectful communication necessary in a CoI, but if the focus is on working together to establish deep and meaningful learning as part of achieving a particular outcome then relationships can form slowly and naturally over time. The idea that

students will not support or work together is dismissed through the argument that where the purpose of the CoI is well established and is something that each participant can identify with, then relationships will grow. Garrison also suggests that where the CoI is a crucial part of the learning on a course of study then non-participation can justifiably result in failing the course. Thus the motivation to become involved may be extrinsic but with clearly stated ground rules of participation, outcomes required and leadership within the group, the motivation to stay involved should quickly become intrinsic.

Cognitive presence (pp. 75–77) is the second of the presences and is perhaps the most obvious in a thinking and learning environment. Cognitive presence is rewarded through the intrinsic satisfaction of constructing meaning and being recognised as a contributing member of the thinking and learning community. A key education issue associated with cognitive presence is the need to ensure that students move through the phases of inquiry in a timely manner. This aspect must be considered at the planning phase since the design of the task can influence how the students move towards a conclusion. But it also depends on the ideas within the third aspect of the CoI framework – that of teaching presence, and collaborative and distributed leadership within the group. The necessity for leadership and how that is operationalised within the group is a particular feature of Garrison's theories of collaborative thinking and learning.

I found the teaching presence, termed 'the backbone of the community' (p. 88), the most current and thought provoking. Teaching presence is the complex interplay between instructional design, facilitation of the community and direction of the learning, and is to be shared within the community. The first and foremost role of the teaching presence is to design and prepare learning tasks that will engage the interest of the students and allow the deep and meaningful learning experiences that are possible in a community of inquiry. This is obviously the role of an instructor, but Garrison makes the point that the other roles that are identifiable as 'teaching presence' – facilitation and direction – should be shared more and employed by any member of the CoI (p. 80). As the community comes together and establishes cohesion within the members: the teaching presence is overt; students are asked to introduce themselves to one another in order to quickly establish a social presence; challenging questions are asked; and how to challenge others' ideas respectfully is modelled by the instructor. However, from the start the expectation is stated that these facilitation and direction roles should more and more be taken over by members of the community. In a CoI that is functioning optimally each member knows that they will both teach and learn within that community; that is, teaching presence necessitates that individuals assume appropriate degrees of responsibility to regulate learning while receiving the support and direction of the community.

Another possibly surprising attribute of a CoI is that there will be direct instruction during the time of its existence, and that direct instruction will particularly occur after the social and cognitive presences within the CoI

have been established. Direct instruction (p. 95) is seen as a way to provide leadership within the CoI, something which is seen as essential and is never simply the role of the instructor. It is always to be seen as something that any member of the community may and should provide as appropriate during the process. Direct instruction is seen to include maintaining an open and respectful climate within the community, providing new information to the group, diagnosing misconceptions, giving feedback and using metacognition to regulate the discourse.

Metacognition is a further important aspect of a CoI; indeed, the overarching goal of a CoI is to enable the participants to construct another level of awareness, that of metacognition. A CoI invites awareness of both how an individual thinks and learns, but also how other members of the group are thinking and learning. As such, individual metacognition is inspired by the CoI process, as is co-regulatory activity.

A very interesting point made by Garrison is the need for the content of any course using CoI as a learning tool not to be too onerous (p. 91). He states that those in charge of setting out the content of a course should identify the key ideas which are essential to know within that course and focus only on them. If the course content is too full, the students will as a matter of self-preservation fall back on rote memorisation, especially if assessment requires mainly recall. Since this will not be deep learning, such knowledge will be quickly forgotten. On the other hand, if key ideas are presented and explored through the discourse of a CoI, where ideas are challenged and misconceptions exposed and corrected, the learning will be both deep and lasting. Innovative and appropriate assessments will be needed for courses that employ CoI as learning tools, ones that assess the level of learning likely to have been the outcome of the CoI process.

This book contains many important ideas, which I heartily endorse as important for anyone interested in educational technology. However much of the technology currently available actively works against the collaborative thinking described here in its instructional design. Also, disappointingly, since many of its messages are key to designing deep learning opportunities at HEIs, the key messages in this book are not well expressed. The text is highly repetitive to the point that it sometimes feels as though it is browbeating the reader into accepting the ideas, rather than arguing for them or persuading the reader. This is one reason I would not advocate this book for reading at PhD level; this writing style is not to be emulated. A second reason I would not advocate this book to those studying at PhD level is that it simply ignores several seminal writers in the field of collaborative learning or communities of practice. For example, there is no mention of Lave and Wenger's communities of practice, and the meaning of identity is taken as shared without reference to the wide field of literature which discusses identity.

A third reason that I found this book deeply frustrating was the lack of practical illustration. It took Garrison until page 89 of a 115-page book to make a practical suggestion about how to institute a CoI. Once Garrison embarked

on writing about the research behind communities of enquiry (Chapter 6) and about the principles of practice (Chapter 7), his writing began to flow and the readability improved considerably. A careful but serious edit of this book to remove the repetition of ideas and phrases would likely reduce the text by at least 20%, leaving space to include more illustrations of the ideas in practice. It is clear that these illustrations exist from the many research projects and communities of inquiry that Garrison has been part of. Using them to provide exemplars of the meaning of the three presences would be powerful. I agree wholeheartedly that every CoI has to proceed in its own particular fashion; there cannot be rules to follow, only principles that underpin effective establishment of collaborative thinking and learning. However, developing a vision of what a CoI would look and feel like in different contexts would be greatly enhanced by some sharing of exemplars.

This book contains important ideas that are not constrained by face-to-face or distance learning – a community of inquiry can be established in both situations. There is some suggestion that a blended learning environment may be the ideal, using face-to-face to quickly establish social presence, while the benefits of on-line discussion allow for reflective thinking and challenging responses, which take time to formulate. However, it is clear from the examples that are eventually given, that the lack of face-to-face or the technology to facilitate on-line discussion is not a reason not to use the power of a CoI to offer students the best experiences of thinking and learning.

Review 2: MOOCs and Their Afterlives: Experiments in Scale and Access in Higher Education (Elizabeth Losh (ed.))

Review authored by: Tim Coughlan

Review of: Elizabeth Losh (ed.), 2017. *MOOCs and Their Afterlives: Experiments in Scale and Access in Higher Education*. Chicago, IL and London: The University of Chicago Press. 384 pages. ISBN-9780226469591

MOOCs and Their Afterlives brings together reports from recent experimentations with open online courses with critical essays to explore what the dramatic wave of hype around MOOCs seen in recent years might actually have meant. Elizabeth Losh is successful in drawing together a collection where many chapters stand alone as very insightful, but from which as a whole the reader can draw their own links and overall sense of where we now stand. The book performs an important reflective role by suggesting that, while MOOCs have not radically changed the world in the ways they were touted to, some valuable experimentation did occur and some important ideas about modes of online learning were developed through the opportunities this wave of hype presented. Losh introduces the volume by arguing that the reactions to MOOCs from faculty, administrators, students and the general public have been more interesting than the courses themselves.

In combination with reflective reports of educator experiences, the book presents a number of critical essays

that highlight how the drivers for much of this activity have been shallow or ill-conceived. Chapters question key elements such as the rhetoric around inclusivity and universal access to education, and the desire by institutions to be seen as being innovative by joining in with the MOOC hype. There are dark concerns for the ways in which the purported innovation means little in terms of pedagogy, and means much more in terms of reducing expenditure and subverting cherished characteristics of higher education. At the same time, alternative views of how to effectively utilise open approaches, either within MOOC platforms or through wider forms of online learning, ensure that this is very much a balanced and forward-looking volume.

Although it is stated on the back cover that this is not a 'how-to' manual for making MOOCs, a lot of practical ideas and guidance can be drawn from the reports highlighting what can be done, what has worked and what hasn't. There are insights to be gained at the level of designing online learning. There is also the potential to use this book as a resource in developing strategies, or to challenge prevailing suppositions about online learning and about higher education in general.

Several authors are very effective in communicating the ways in which they took the basic MOOC concept, and the platforms it has spawned, and used this to develop something more appropriate to their practices and interests. Hickey and Uttamchandani described the design principles of their Participatory Learning and Assessment approach as applied to an open course on assessment practices (pp. 19–31). This provides guidance on ways in which learners can contribute through structures devised by educators. By carefully constructing and managing uses of this data the authors suggest ways to improve the potential for learning at scale in an open course. Fox describes an approach of developing an online course on software engineering that was shared, redeployed and continually refined amongst instructors across multiple institutions as a Small Private Online Course (SPOC). They explicitly define and refute some of the criticisms that have been levelled against this work (pp. 42–5) and this helps to develop a more nuanced view of how to harness networks and openness through interaction between educators. Davidson relates the experience of teaching a 'meta-MOOC', which invites students to interrogate the notions that underpin higher education and connected learning. The course includes an assignment where groups of students come together to design a new university from scratch, after considering questions such as what higher education is for, who it is for and how it serves society (pp. 70–1).

Acronyms for variations on MOOCs abound and collectively the understanding emerges of how the educators were both riding the trend and distancing themselves from it at the same time. Each report provides the author's own take on what could work, what was worth trying and what was exceptional in their approach. The rich understanding from these case reports and the range of contexts and subject areas covered will be valuable to any educator involved in online learning and looking for inspiration, or for balanced stories of the experiences of their colleagues.

Further chapters highlight how designs for open online learning can suit and challenge particular topics of study. Worth uses a range of online tools with his students to explore media practices in the digital age, with fundamental issues of privacy and copyright reflected through the activities and discussions that emerge. Koh compares the classroom dynamics and authority structures that developed in two courses that both worked to implement a digital feminist pedagogy but utilise different forms of online activities.

These reports are supplemented by critical pieces that comment on the broader picture of open online courses and trends in higher education. Losh herself writes eloquently about the contrast between the rhetoric of the founders and advocates of open education platforms to outline a philanthropic vision of 'digital universalism' and examples of negative emotional impacts on learners and on teachers in the resulting courses. This highlights several areas for attention, including that the lack of personal engagement with teachers that occurs in learning at scale is potentially detrimental to nurturing students who are in pursuit of excellence (p. 221). In one example of how these essays can match the reports from educators, Zamora also reflects on affective aspects of her experiences with a form of connectivist MOOC. She highlights the potential for guilt to be felt by those who do not commit substantial time to participate and instead take a role of lurking. Examples of course communications that recognise lurkers as legitimate participants and explicitly affirm their behaviour as learning are explored as a response (pp. 111–12).

Reid associates MOOCs with a continued and widespread lack of understanding in higher education of how to effectively harness online pedagogy, and describes how the MOOC hype enticed institutions into unrealistic expectations of replicating what happens in a classroom (p. 229). But there is a positive balance to this as he notes that online learning really is being embedded in education in less overt ways, and that there are real opportunities if we can detach ourselves from narrow views of how it can create value.

Vaidhyanathan is more scathing, arguing that the value of these MOOC platforms is very limited and the concerns they raise are great. He highlights the inability of these platforms to make money, but then notes the danger that they might succeed, a situation that would then corrupt higher education as we know it (p. 293). To Vaidhyanathan, these platforms exemplify a customer relationship system based in mass production of education that must be resisted to preserve many of the essential qualities of higher education that are already under threat. These include maintaining a strong conception that education is not about injecting information into a passive learner, that educators should not be pushed by market forces to focus only on popular subjects, and that good online teaching must include rich interactions, scope for improvisation and familiarity amongst learners and educators.

Authors also explore the motivations and limitations of MOOCs to tell us about the state of higher education. Bogost picks apart the apparent motivations for

institutional engagement in MOOCs, such as marketing, cost-reduction and the notion that standardising provision of video lectures from 'star professors' to much wider audiences will improve the quality of education. The speculative way in which MOOCs were assumed to be the answer to perceived problems – some of which are products of educational policies rather than of necessity – and then found to be lacking, is critiqued as an example of the 'solutionist' approach of Silicon Valley thinking applied to education (p. 275). In a related vein to Bogost and to Vaidhyanathan, Shah provides a detailed exploration of how a narrative of crisis is regularly used in higher education and how MOOCs are often discussed in these terms (pp. 303–10). This highlights further concern that, in their most common forms, MOOCs standardise particular norms of education at the expense of making other very valuable education practices appear illegitimate.

The volume comprises 19 chapters, some of which have been authored in a very collaborative fashion in order to draw on multiple distinct perspectives. There are therefore many further experiences and opinions represented there, in addition to the selection highlighted in this review. The emergence of some very diverse and stimulating common threads that run between the chapters is commendable. The very recent history that the book represents does not appear to compromise the capacity of the authors to understand and reflect on what they have experienced. The balance between positive views of the potential for online learning and robust criticisms of what has transpired in recent years make this collection a good basis for anyone interested in the topic to reflect on where we might go from here. The book will therefore be particularly useful for educators and educational administrators who feel that, while a wave of hype around open online courses may have passed, many of the results of this wave are still having an impact and requiring them to make decisions about strategies and approaches to making the most of the opportunities that do exist for open online courses.

Review 3: Online Education: Practical, Theory-Based Advice for the Instructor (Mona Engvig)

Review authored by: Christopher Douce

Review of: Mona Engvig (2017) *Online Education: Practical, Theory-Based Advice for the Instructor*. San Diego, CA: Cognella Academic Publishing. 172 pages ISBN-10:1516515455, ISBN-13:9781516515455

Online Education is described as a book that 'assists educators with facilitating learning in the online classroom, highlighting the role of key pedagogical aspects in delivery content and facilitating student interaction'. I found this description of Mona Engvig's text book to be of immediate interest; I work as a part-time associate lecturer at the Open University in the UK and I also have role within the OU where I am directly responsible for supporting a team of associate lecturers who do a lot of online teaching. Subsequently, I approached Engvig's book with a number

of very practical questions. One key question was: What advice can it offer me about how to improve my own professional practice as an online educator? Another question was: Can I learn something about online education that might be used to help develop the online teaching skills of the associate lecturers that I support? I was particularly interested in the reference to online pedagogy; I find theory interesting and, in some cases, very useful.

Engvig's book, which is published by Cognella Academic Publishing, is short, running to 159 pages. It is split into three sections: foundations of online teaching and learning, approaches to teaching online, and perspectives on online learning. It adopts a distinctly North American tone and style. It is different from European text books that I am more familiar with in the way that it makes abundant use of illustrative photos, many of which I found detracted from the points that were being made in the text.

The first part of the book introduces readers to the concept of constructivist learning, before moving on to a discussion about the difference between online education and traditional courses, concluding with a section that describes andragogy (pedagogy for adult learners). I enjoyed the chapter on andragogy (p. 27); it was clearly presented and well structured.

The second section of the book presents three approaches: problem-based learning (p. 39), gamification (p. 49) and the notion of a 'cognitive apprenticeship' (p. 63) which draws on ideas from Bloom and Vgotsky. I found this second section a little more difficult, in the sense that it didn't provide any clear or direct examples. Problem-based learning can be difficult to facilitate in a face-to-face setting and I felt that there was an opportunity to present a series of case studies or examples to illustrate how this approach can be successfully applied in an online environment. The chapter on gamification offered a single example that was drawn from the author's family (p. 58), but I was left with more questions than were answered, such as: How do you practically assess activities that are gamified? Do instructors collect scores, or should they ask students to write reflective essays about their experiences?

The chapters in the third section presented advice from different sources (students, faculty assistants and faculty), experiences of online students, and how to approach online teaching. The first chapter appears to present a literature review from a paper that Engvig had published, along with responses to a survey that she had designed. This chapter contained a single short paragraph (p. 85) of advice for professors (timely feedback is important, along with the importance of being clear about expectations), and a slightly longer section about advice to students (time management is important, along with participation with other students).

One of the most interesting sections of Engvig's book is the section that describes the experiences of online

students. These take the form of short essays, where students were encouraged to write about good and bad experiences. I felt that the descriptions of bad or poor experiences were particularly useful for those who are new to online teaching. While the student voice is always welcome, I did feel that there was also an opportunity to share the experiences of teachers or professors, which would be just as valuable. This, in some ways, reflects my own interest in learning from the practice of others.

The final chapter is entitled 'How to approach teaching online' (p. 131). In some respects, this chapter reflects what I thought the entire book was all about. It does offer some useful high-level advice, but it is very short, bearing in mind its significance. It is 20 pages in length and contains 11 photographs and illustrations none of which add anything of significance to the important topic that is being discussed.

One of the things that I was looking for was some useful practical advice about how to facilitate live tutorial sessions and lectures, and how to deal with difficult and challenging situations. The book doesn't directly offer either of these points. The notion of Wenger's communities of practice was briefly mentioned (p. 70) but this wasn't explicitly connected to the notion that online educators have the potential to seek advice from and learn from each other. This said, what I did like was that each chapter ends with a series of questions designed to encourage debate and discussion.

Engvig introduces her book as being a 'primer in online education' and may be useful for someone who is looking to become an online educator. The book does offer an introductory and high-level summary of issues that an online educator has to contend with, though I did feel that a lot was missing. I conclude with a simple example: I reached for the book to search for an index; it doesn't have one. I was looking for a key concept that every book on education should contain, and this was: reflection. I looked through every single heading in the table of contents, and this fundamental concept that every educator should be familiar with is not present.

Returning to my opening question: What advice can it offer me about how to improve my own professional practice as an online educator? As mentioned earlier, I found the personal essays interesting for the reason that I used them to reflect on my own practice as an online educator. As it stands, I do feel that Engvig's book is flawed, but I also feel that a book of this kind would benefit and be useful to new online educators. As a course text for an introductory course about online education, I felt that it could have benefitted from wider and more extensive use of research literature (and fewer photographs).

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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