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Citation

Douce, Chris (2018). [Book review] Online Education: Practical, Theory-Based Advice for the Instructor by Mona Engvig. Journal of Interactive Media in Education, 1, article no. 14.

URL

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Book Review

Christopher Douce

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 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).