BOOK REVIEW

HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

REVIEWED BY

ANNE C. CHARLES
CONESTOGA COLLEGE INSTITUTE OF
TECHNOLOGY & ADVANCED LEARNING

Higher Education in the Digital Age is an edited collection of papers that describe examples of digital innovation in higher education. As it is geared to a wide professional audience of faculty, academic managers, policymakers, academic administrators, and project leaders, readers will find that the volume is concise, and that the contributing papers are readable and informative. The editors claim that information and communications technologies (ICTs) have disrupted traditional practices, requiring re-examination and dialogue about ways and means to achieve mission objectives. Stressing that positive opportunities exist for institutions that openly seek to adapt and innovate through incorporating technology into practice, the editors opine that there are three potential scenarios for the future: open collaboration, marginalization of traditional actors, or coexistent domains. Overall, this book provides an excellent introduction to ICTs in practice in higher education.

Readers will find that open collaboration facilitated by ICTs is a key emphasis. The book showcases innovation, shares best practices, and provides examples of contemporary challenges and how they have been overcome. Exemplars include Marr's description of how the UK's Open University (OU) used learning analytics to improve student success and in so doing transformed pedagogical practice. Bryant illustrates how the London School of Economics (LSE) adopted a "Middle Out" (p. 49) model for technologically enhanced teaching and learning. The author claims that this model, designed around the student experience, has made possible a shift from a didactic to an experiential learning approach. Permitting learner empowerment gains through technology is important for Peña-López, who makes a powerful case for open educational resources (OERs) and other collaborative tools, including social media. OERs, they argue, improve institutional efficacy and efficiency, and help meet the demands for skills that graduates now require to form and connect to knowledge networks.

Knowledge networks and professional collaboration in the Florence School of Regulation (FSR) are profiled by Zorn, Sissonen & Canestrini, who discuss the merits of collaborative design for online courses. Profiling the FSR's flagship training course for professionals that was transformed to fully online delivery, they illustrate how the new format broadened access and opened the professional training to a global community. Within three years of the new format of delivery, professionals from seventy-six different countries were participating, facilitating the formation of communities of practice for networking, and sharing of ideas and best practices. Unanticipated benefits included the emergence of new processes for course design, and the inclusion of multi-media and learning activities that foster continuous engagement between learners and course facilitators.

Birdi provides an example of pedagogical change in practice by showcasing the Curriculum Open Resources in Economics (CORE) project. Readers learn about how an international group of economists collaborated

to transform a traditional year one undergraduate economics course to an enquiry-based participatory model of learning. Using a distributed model of authorship, teaching was resequenced and a problem-based learning approach with experiential role-playing activities, was adopted. The curriculum incorporates modern world theories, examples, datasets, and a multiplicity of viewpoints in an online, open access format.

Collaborative practice, knowledge making and sharing, according to Zorn, Haywood & Glachant, blurs the boundary between academia and professional practice. They argue that with visionary leadership and strategy it can be transformative. The relationship between academic leadership, organizational structure, and institutional flexibility is considered by Haywood, who offers five metrics for successful transitioning. Haywood makes a case for strategic goal identification, planning and practice, and attributes success in technological implementation trendsetting at the University of Edinburgh (email for all, to open education/open educational resources) to governance flexibility and leadership by nontenured/contractual academic senior management.

Social Media is the subject pursued by Stewart, who discusses open and digital scholarly leadership and provides a personal reflection on the use of social media vis a vis career development. Describing how Twitter has created a new domain of academic space for conversations, collaboration, and development of professional identity, Stewart asserts that digital traces can assist in building professional reputations. In addition, as social media is not yet subject to traditional gatekeeping practices, early career researchers and graduate students may find space to identify in this domain. Institutional supported blogging is examined by Williams & Gilson. They posit that the LSE embraced the challenge presented by social media by establishing their own blog platform. Using this medium, they insist, provides mission assistance with regards to the dissemination of knowledge and provides evidence of research impact for accountability purposes.

Bruegal, the Brussels based think tank, is profiled by Porcaro, who also addresses institutional goals. The key message to readers in this paper is the importance of building narratives aligned to audience and medium. Stressing that shifting to online media is not a guarantee of success, Porcaro explains Bruegel's communication strategy for dissemination of knowledge that was informed by the institution's identified goal of influencing policy directions. Porcaro offers a blueprint for goal attainment and success which includes monitoring reception and behaviours to ensure access to content and ease of navigation, guided by mission-informed strategy, alignment of message (policy papers, briefs, blogs etc.) and carriers (You Tube, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram etc.) all geared to audience. Further discussion of planning and strategy is examined by Zorn, Bernardo & Canestrini, who contend that institutional prestige can be enhanced through knowledge sharing and collaboration and that by harnessing new formats including livestreaming, webinars, pod casts, you tube videos and more, institutions can use new media for knowledge updating from within and from outside. This ensures real time curriculum and knowledge updates from a community of experts in the field and the academy.

Change within the field of ICTs and other technological tools is ongoing. Conservative readers may critically point to the promise and demise of MOOCs and maintain that traditional practices should prevail until clear winners emerge. That said, it may be difficult to refute the pedagogical gains to higher education facilitated by ICTs, as in the examples provided above. Whether critical or supportive, readers should note that the central tenet of the message in this book is that ICTs and their application to higher education is a rapidly evolving field, and institutions should embrace risk and be committed to willingness to trial, as in so doing they are more likely to successfully transform. This should not be ignored, but while this overall message may be seductive to those willing to instigate change, readers should note that the book is lacking mention of any counterarguments or debates about a number of core issues. Such omitted issues include maintaining academic integrity in a digital world, safeguarding intellectual property, and protectionist practices that threaten open resource access and collaborative sharing such as gatekeeping through paywalls. Each of these may lead to institutional vulnerabilities, and issues of curriculum and knowledge insecurity. Readers will also notice that while the blurring of faculty/practitioner roles is evident in many of the contributing papers and is touted as a success story, the concept of academic freedom in a digitalized higher education world goes unmentioned.