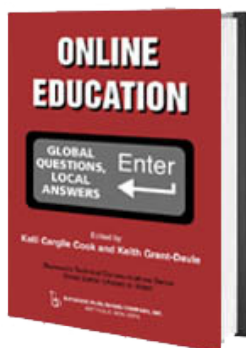


Book Review Editor

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***Online Education: Global Questions, Local Answers***

Editors

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Amityville, NY:

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As I read through the essays collected in *Online Education: Global Questions, Local Answers*, I find myself torn between nodding my head in agreement and shaking my head in frustration. However, sitting back and thinking about what I've read, I realize my differing responses are likely caused by two facts. First, most of this collection is targeted for those who do not have significant experience in developing and delivering online technical communication programs. Second, as is so often the problem with publishing books on current technologies, by the time the book is published, much of the material appears somewhat dated.

Assuming my realizations are correct, what should potential readers know about the collection? I would suggest that the playing field has changed since most of these essays were written. As I write this review in June 2008 (just as with discussions about technology, the date of composition may be as important as the date of access in Web citation), I think it is fair to generalize that almost every college or university now offers some online instruction. In addition, I think it is a safe to assume that every program that offers one technical communication course has, at least, thought about putting a course online or had an administrator suggest they offer

an online course. Even though we are only around five years removed from when these essays were written, we live in a world different from the one these pioneer online educators were facing.

Because we now live in a world where online courses are normal, the important message that readers of this collection need to take away is not whether to put a course or program online, but rather how to do so effectively. And in this crucial aspect, the authors of the various essays consistently provide information still worthy of attention. The essays only look at a handful of pioneer programs. However, the faculty who developed those programs consistently demonstrate that even at the beginning they understood some basic premises about online education. For example, despite the fantasies of administrators, the faculty who developed these online programs realized that the programs needed to exist to serve a particular population not to create an enormous new revenue stream. The reality is that online education costs money—especially if it's done correctly.

I would suggest then, that even though administrators of technical communication programs may have already learned this through experience, the collection provides them with credible evidence they can use when arguing this point with others. Years of administrative experience have taught me that citing published disciplinary evidence for programmatic decisions carries more weight with deans and provosts than my simple assertions. The essays in Section One of the collection certainly provide good information to help program administrators make their case for developing online courses and programs that hold to disciplinary principles and practices. One point that strikes me as essential is that all the programs described are different from one another, whether in name, location within the institution, or in the target population. For a program to be successful, all these factors need consideration. I'd suggest that what program administrators who read these essays take away is not the specific process each essay describes as much as the ability to develop a process that best fits a particular institutional context. Carolyn Rude specifically addresses this issue.

Another crucial point Rude makes in her essay is that online courses should be defined no differently from face-to-face classes. They are simply technical communication classes. Too often universities attempt to define online classes by the courseware software used to deliver the classes. These attempts lead to an assumption that the courses are somehow different from face-to-face classes. That misconception is never an issue with any of the essays in this collection. The authors are much more likely to debate the virtues of synchronous components of online classes over solely asynchronous classes. I suspect the overwhelming ambivalence to courseware shown in this

collection is a function of the fact that all these essays were written by technical communication faculty. Many faculty who have taught online courses allow courseware to become a hot button. There are many reasons for such an intense reaction. Faculty get used to what they are using and don't want to change. Courseware provides relatively nontechnical faculty with a simple interface to teach online. Yet these essays, especially those in Section Two, don't obsess over courseware. Their concern is, rather, as it should be, with developing good online pedagogies instead of on the software being used to develop those pedagogies.

I think a good analogy for this emphasis on developing good pedagogies comes from the writing center community. Those who have worked in writing centers often say that doing so has changed their classroom teaching forever in a positive way. Becoming more sensitive to how student learning takes place in a writing center makes them create situations in their classrooms that will engender the same kind of learning. Likewise, I think the same can be said for good online teaching. Being sensitive to developing good online pedagogies transfers over into good face-to-face pedagogies. This transference may be best demonstrated in Susan Lang's essay where she specifically chooses to look at pedagogies for graduate classes—something she consciously acknowledges is too rarely done.

Finally, I think the last two chapters present administrators of technical communication programs with the most interesting set of issues that remain to be resolved. Most institutions have decided on one courseware option. That option is usually, though, not always a commercial solution such as Blackboard, which is costing schools what seems to be an ever-increasing amount of money. Open source software gives institutions other options. Brenton Faber and Johndan Johnson-Eilola present a solid argument for open source solutions. However, perhaps the most thought-provoking chapter is the last one. Here Billie J. Wahlstrom and Linda S. Clemens raise questions that online education is forcing us to address. They are critical questions because they demand not just technical communication faculty but all of higher education to look at how we do business. Why do we think we can graduate students and be done with them, especially when all indicators show that people currently in the workforce need constant updating of skills and information? Why, for example, do we assume courses must all start at the same time? Why do we assume that a lone faculty member is the best way to design and deliver a class? The conversation Wahlstrom and Clemens begin is one that is only starting and only in certain places. Still it may well be more important than the decision of placing our programs online.