

## Creativity and Critique in Online Learning: Exploring and Examining Innovations in Online Pedagogy

Jacqueline Baxter, George Callaghan, and Jean McAvoy, *editors*

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Online learning has come a long way in twenty years. Although distance education has been around in one form or another for a really long time, *online* education had fairly humble beginnings in California in the late 1990s. As noted in the foreword of *Creativity and Critique in Online Learning*, “At the end of the 1990s the internet was seen as an interesting application, but not necessarily relevant to all subjects or modes of teaching” (vii). The initial benefit of distance and online education was that it would connect learners together in a networked classroom that spanned further than four cinderblock walls. What initially started as a distance enterprise, where students would log in to a remote learning server and be funneled into a class with potentially dozens to hundreds of other faceless paying customers (and may or may not have received an actual education), the Learning Management System (LMS) has evolved into a “commonplace and essential piece of technology infrastructure in almost every university” (viii). Yet creativity does not come without critique, as is often the case when boundaries are stretched and broken. This volume provides a summary of the creative side of online learning as well as a critique of the overall process, at least within the purview of Open University’s experience as a leader in online learning, answering significant challenges and squashing anecdotal myths throughout.

The editors and contributors, all of whom are either faculty at Open University or products of one of Open University’s online programs, seek to rewrite the narrative regarding online education. Rather than asking “Can online study really replicate the challenges and occasional joy of learning in a face to face environment?” (2), these contributors shift the focus to answering questions such as “How can [online learning] help teach the ‘hard to reach’ and how can it provide learning for those who have failed in (or rejected) learning in a face to face context?” (2). Putting aside such arguments as online education being more cost-effective in a bloated yet dwindling brick-and-mortar learning environment and what tools and techniques work the best in an online context, the contributors pull directly from their experience and ground their findings in action research that seeks to add a cogent and coherent voice to the ever-widening field of online learning studies. *Creativity and Critique in Online Learning* presents real-world problems with and in online learning with real-world solutions from real-world practitioners, some of which worked and some which did not. Of particular note in this volume are the chapters on developing effective forums (chapter 3), engaging students in informal learning communities (chapter 5), addressing concerns with academic dishonesty (chapter 7), and developing appropriate yet effective teacher-learner relationships (chapter 11).

Overall, I found this volume helpful. As the director of a completely online graduate program in biblical studies and Christian leadership, I recognize the growing challenge of developing online learning experiences that are academically rigorous while also developing spaces for relational connection and personal growth. I was afraid this book would be another “do it our way” argument. However, the essays are more akin to the casual conversations we catch over coffee at a professional conference than the peer-reviewed “expert” keynote that we actually paid to hear.