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Book Review: The Finest Blend: Graduate Education in Canada

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The Finest Blend: Graduate Education in Canada
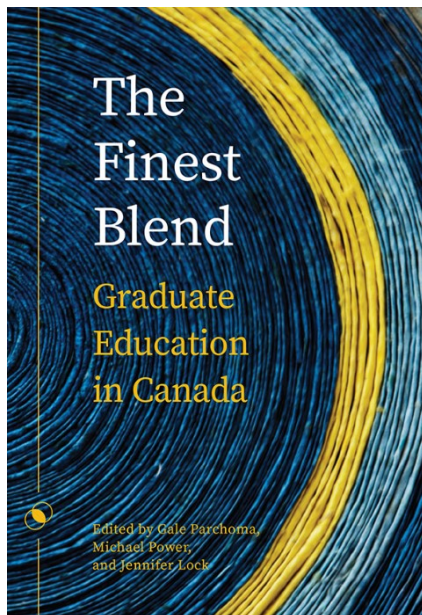
Editors: Gale Parchoma, Michael Power, and Jennifer Lock (Athabasca University Press, 2020, 375 pages) ISBN: 9781771992770

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The blended and online learning ecosystem is a complex multi-stakeholder environment. Not until the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic hit did technology-enabled education become an integral feature of many higher educational systems, including Canada's. Its scope has expanded massively and rapidly in recent years, and as a result, research priorities in this emerging field must also adapt. While the needs and conditions in societies where the research is taking place are critical, true knowledge about pertinent factors is rarely readily available (Holmberg, 2005). *The Finest Blend* fills the gap by delving further into the research and practice of blended and online learning in Canadian higher education and introduces the reader to the complexities of transitioning into technology-mediated instructional designs and practices.

To set the stage for the rest of the book, Michael Power (in Chapter 1) provides a historical review of how the traditional way of university class delivery and pedagogic practice through voice and text-based methods that are largely used in distance learning have intersected with evolving media and technology. Power uses the pendulum swing as a metaphor to denote open universities' efforts to facilitate graduate-level best practices in online and hybrid learning in the wake of technology advances and shortcomings. In the second chapter, Jay Wilson reflects on his autoethnographic research of a faculty member mentorship program and proposes a systematic approach to assisting professors in using technology and demonstrating how to apply frameworks throughout course preparation. Employing design-based research (DBR), Jennifer Lock and her colleagues (Chapter 3) investigate the instructional design of online orientation and its impact on students' readiness for learning online. They stress the instructor's critical role in allowing intentionality and flexibility for students with any skill sets to begin their online learning journeys, the requirement for orientation programs to reflect the real academic online environment, and the program designs from student perspectives to establish the required supports for students to build the capacities essential for success in an online learning environment.

Jane Costello and her colleagues (Chapter 4) share the reflections of four senior instructional designers' self-study on relationships with content authors and their crucial roles in supporting faculty practice and enabling the integration of media and technology in the graduate online learning environment. Wendy Kraglund-Gauthier (Chapter 5) performed a study on instructional designers' support of faculty practice through participatory action research. She examines faculty members' transition in teaching techniques and pedagogical thinking as they move from face-to-face classrooms to an online environment that incorporates synchronous and asynchronous interaction. In Chapter 6, Sawsen Lakhal showcases research results of a scholarship of teaching inquiry into current practices of the blended synchronous delivery mode in Quebec, highlighting the use of voice and text methods and the benefits and challenges that faculty members and students have encountered.

Following a survey of socioeconomic factors influencing the use of open educational resources in modern blended online graduate programs and three related case studies, Kathy Snow (Chapter 7) sheds light on the efforts made and challenges faced by a publicly funded university in developing sustainable "open" education initiatives to make learning a social process and to foster a learning ecosystem that extends beyond the time and space constraints of typical university education. Maurice Taylor and his collaborators (Chapter 8), using a qualitative case study research design, explore the learning needs and preferences of professors and students in their current practices of blended graduate program learning. In addition, they showcase initial insights into the balance between text and voice in their graduate blended learning program. Chapter 9 presents the findings of a virtual ethnographic investigation by Gale Parchoma and her collaborators into synchronous and asynchronous instructional designs in a doctoral course, as well as student engagement and embodiment. The concluding chapter by Jennifer Lock and Michael Power summarizes the primary ideas, problems, and issues raised in the preceding chapters, as well as the practical implications and future research directions.

The edited collection's core strength lies in the eclectic positionality of the contributors. Twenty-two authors from diverse backgrounds in eight "dual mode" universities with English and French language delivery across Canada have contributed to this 375-page volume. They are well-known scholars and researchers in technology-enabled and blended online education. Besides the editors themselves (Gale Parchoma, Michael Power, and Jennifer Lock), who are prominent figures known for their scholarship of teaching and learning in Canadian higher education, the contributors are recognized specialists in instructional science and design in higher education. Furthermore, this book includes experiential material in practical examples that help the reader see the contributors' concerns in technology-enhanced innovation of contemporary university learning design. They showcase comprehensive exploration of how graduate learning practices have changed, looking at pan-Canadian views, and discuss the different lines of models and methodologies employed within graduate university contexts. What has come out of this book is also an insight into how text and voice are used in graduate education programs delivered in a hybrid or online format across Canada.

However, more elaboration at the beginning of the book about the voice- and text-based learning environments in the Canadian context could have helped novice readers from broader backgrounds to gain deeper comprehension about the (initial) situation in context. In addition, amidst several technology-

enabled blended and online learning innovations and strategies highlighted in this book, only a few brief elaborations on the particular technologies employed or/and integrated are present.

Despite these concerns, the volume successfully confirms the importance of equitable instructional designs and pedagogical practices in the emerging educational transformation to open and borderless blended online learning environments. It provides perspectives from a wide range of blended online learning scholars and empirical and personal accounts in higher education. The book is a valuable resource to academics, scholars, postgraduate students, educators, policymakers, instructional design specialists, administrators, and other stakeholders interested in educational innovation in areas such as technology-mediated pedagogy, virtual-based research, and blended online learning experiences in postsecondary contexts.

Acknowledgements

References

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