Janet Macdonald. *Blended Learning and Online Tutoring: A Good Practice Guide.* Cornwall: Gower, 2006. 191p.

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"Blended learning" strategies for tutoring have become increasingly popular in the last decade, with both distance and campus-based university institutions. There is a current assumption that blended learning equates to the mixture of asynchronous online conferencing with more traditional "face-to-face" contact. An important addition to Janet Macdonald's study, then, is her inclusion of two chapters on the provision of online synchronous tools for education, which will no doubt become increasingly useful as institutions realize that "no single intervention strategy using one medium could possibly support all students effectively" (4). Predominantly this study concerns experiences of practitioners at the Open University in the UK, in their adaptation of asynchronous and synchronous teaching media to higher-level learning.

This book addresses "practitioners who are contemplating blended learning and online tutoring for their course," as well as "staff developers who wish to encourage others" (5-6). The tone is straightforward, and the structure is easy to follow, with chapters in the first part containing a mixture of theory, research findings, and reflective exercises for the reader as to their own experiences.

Janet Macdonald's largely practical study opens with Part One presenting an overview of current practice, supported with evidence from case studies in England, Europe, and Australasia. Chapter Two discusses practices in tutor-mediated support, and presents data collected from the SOLACE project (Supporting Open Learners in a Changing Environment), recently undertaken at the Open University. As part of this, tutors kept logs of the kinds of contact they had with their students. Tutors at the University of Glasgow also contributed logs, and the findings are used here to draw parallels between the provision at distance and campus-based institutions. Current practice shows that "in some courses, online conferencing is employed effectively as a replacement for face-to-face tutorials, with online activities forming an integral part of the course." This is largely dependant on the type of course, and the ways in which the curriculum can be sent to be effectively communicated through these mediums. More often, "computer conferences were used as an adjunct to face-to-face tutorials" (16). In this way, the most common application of the technologies is in the provision of an online "messageboard" for the group, or the use of conferencing to provide practical information and study skills tuition.

Certain key issues are raised as a result of this work, such as the central role that "informal exchanges" play in the development of tutor-student-tutor group

relationships. In courses relying solely on asynchronous online tutoring, these relationships are necessarily problematized: "The deployment of online media for tutor-mediated support has meant that many of the traditional boundaries between formal and informal, or alternatively group and individual contact, have been eroded" (19). The movement towards blended learning strategies may help in this case, but also raises issues for campus-based learning, if a loss of face-to-face contact is experienced. In this, the emphasis must be upon balance.

For instance, a positive result of blending support strategies is an ability to react to the fluctuating demands and requirements of the student group as the course progresses. This recognizes that the development of the student in line with the progress of the course is not a constant, and thus the demands on the tutor in terms of support will also necessarily change over time: "The number of interactions waxed and waned from week to week in response to major events such as course start-up, tutorials or assignment deadlines. Some contacts were initiated by the tutor, and others by the students themselves" (15). Having a fixed strategy is perhaps then too rigid for the successful provision of support, and taking a blended approach will benefit both the tutor and student. For instance, at some points in the course whole-group synchronous feedback activities may alleviate the need for a series of individual support meetings, whereas at others (particularly pre-assignment), asynchronous email exchanges on an individual basis may be of higher value. Adapting tutors' support strategies to the demands of different stages of the course, and in making full use of the variety of tools now available to them, will ultimately make for a more cost-effective employment of tutors' time.

Chapter Three addresses issues as to the "quality of intervention," and seeks to define the most appropriate application of the different support means available at present. Macdonald finds that face-to-face provision excels "in terms of its affective contribution, interactivity, flexibility, and the fact that it provides a focus for the group," while recognizing that other synchronous provision—such as telephone conferencing or desktop video conferencing—could offer similar advantages, if properly integrated. The effectiveness of asynchronous tools (such as email and conferencing), benefit "reflection, timeliness or flexibility, open up new options for tuition" (28). This chapter is particularly useful to the practitioner who is considering the application of blended learning to their course, in that it provides an opportunity to reflect on how the requirements of any course can be fulfilled through a mixture of approach.

Chapter Four presents current practice in blended learning, supported by the results of 48 case studies from 37 educational institutions in 17 countries, mainly "campus-based institutions who were making use of distance education to a greater

or lesser extent." The results demonstrate a significant shift in the application of these learning strategies; whereas in the past these courses were aimed primarily at postgraduates, here "two-thirds of our case studies described courses at undergraduate level." This significant development testifies to the increasing diversity of higher educational courses, with a greater emphasis on access. In practice, this suggests that "undergraduates are now clearly expected to have, or to acquire, the kind of skills required for independent study previously attributed to postgraduates, and to derive benefits from a flexible learning environment" (34). This realization will no doubt have a significant effect on the kinds of courses that are provided for undergraduates at HE level, and suggests that the development of blended learning strategies will not only complement, but actually contribute to, an alteration in the kinds of curriculum offered to undergraduates. There is also a further recognition of the growth in the market for lifelong learners, which in itself will have an impact upon the kinds of courses offered at undergraduate level, and the kinds of vocational skills this provision will then need to develop to answer the demands of the prospective student.

Whereas in Chapter Two Macdonald seeks to develop a framework in which the similarities between distance and campus-based institutions can be viewed, in Chapter Four we see the different ways in which online learning provision is applied. In campus-based institutions, the medium for communication of course content, as well as the provision of both formal and informal support, relies heavily on face-to-face contact. However, in order "to accommodate variations in study patterns, or pressure of increasing numbers, course designers have adopted online media [leading to] the redeployment of contact time, with the substitution of some of the face-to-face time…with self-study printed or web-based resources, in addition to introducing opportunities for discussion through asynchronous computer conferencing." The key change here is "the occasional or partial separation, and sometimes partial asynchronicity, in content delivery and tutor-mediated support" (37). This is not to say that the movement to online tools negates the need for face-to-face provision, but that the blending of these media opens up new and exciting opportunities for the tutor in delivering a fuller education to the students.

On the other hand, one of the primary reasons for students choosing to study "at distance" is flexibility. The asynchronous learning environment can then appear to offer the kind of educational provision that allows for reflection and flexibility in terms of "attendance" at tutorials. In my experience, an online asynchronous conference runs over the space of a week, with more flexibility and self-direction in the students' approach to time management. The existence of a "tutor group" in this environment gives the opportunity to build a group identity (if managed well

at induction), and can lead to effective collaborative work over the course of the tutorials. In this kind of course there are few opportunities for informal contact, and email with the tutor becomes the primary medium for tutor-support. However, since the trial of asynchronous learning environments, there has been "a recognition that it is best supplemented by face-to-face contact, or synchronous alternatives such as the telephone" (40). This is particularly important in building the "tutor-student-tutor group" relationship, which will ultimately benefit the construction of collaborative work practices within the tutor group. Interestingly, in Australia, where dual-mode provision is common, "some have found that certain campus-based students prefer the flexibility of distance learning, if given the choice" (41). This could have implications for the kinds of provision offered at campus-based institutions internationally, depending on limitations imposed by demands on staff workload and access to the technologies involved.

In Chapter Five, Macdonald moves on to the relatively new area of research into the provision of synchronous tutor-mediated support. This recognizes that "if we really believe that synchronous contact is of central importance for students on some courses, then it cannot be an optional part of a blended strategy" (54). The central importance of including asynchronous tools in education is that they are important for reflection and in supporting a more student-centred approach to study. They can be profitably used to extend classroom discussion, for instance, but the central tenet of blended learning is that every element of provision complements the other, and that this integrated provision develops a fuller learning experience for the students.

Part Two demonstrates practical examples of conferencing from the Open University UK and other "blended learning" institutions. This discusses two kinds of online conference, and the difficulties faced in constructing these as effective learning environments. The small group conference is defined as having c. 4-30 students, with a constant membership of identifiable individuals (similar to a face-to-face seminar group), whereas a "plenary group" contains "c. 50- several hundred" with variable membership, according to "interest and relevance" (73). In this, "models of conferencing" are provided, with comments on the role of the tutor-moderator, again giving the reader an opportunity to reflect on the appropriateness of these tools for their own workplace. A series of "bright ideas" textboxes provide practical suggestions from current practitioners, of particular use to those new to this area of teaching.

The specific problems that are raised here in relation to asynchronous conferencing are largely to do with student expectation and participation. Even in face-to-face environments, an emphasis on the need for active student discussion can be difficult

to achieve. With the largely anonymous world of online conferencing, this can be further exacerbated. In my experience, problems can also arise as to the appropriateness of student response, depending on their personal previous experience with online tools. Establishing concepts of "appropriate" response is absolutely necessary for the effective production of this mode of learning. For instance, the need to provide "evidence" to back up assertion is imperative, as many students will be used to the idea of "blogging," or membership in live chatrooms, where purely subjective points can be stated without rationale. Again, this is a training issue, and it applies as much to face-to-face as to online provision of small group teaching.

Other chapters in this section look at the role of the moderator—skills such as introducing, archiving, threading—as well as the importance of managing personal time in this new role. Chapter Eight looks at the provision of support through synchronous tools such as the telephone, along with other online tools such as whiteboard, application sharing, "handraising," and video. In this, and, as in all these chapters, Macdonald provides practical advice and guidance on the fulfilment of these roles.

Part Three discusses the implications blended learning strategies will have on the roles of both students and tutors, and how to aid retention by the provision of full training and support in these new roles. Here, then, we need to recognize that both groups need further and different support than that which may be currently offered. The final chapter provides important information as to the central role that staff development will play in the effective implementation of these ideas. Chapters Twelve to Fourteen consider how to support the development of students as e-investigators, e-writers, and e-collaborators respectively, "which are all facets of self-directed learning" (109). In this, clear advice as to the expectations that these new roles hold will be important, as well as a need to plan for diversity. Hartley (1998) suggests that "lifelong learners may have an advantage over younger students in [that] they may be better equipped to study independently than younger students" (111). This has implications for the development of learning environments at all institutions, for all populations, and for the entire structure of education in our countries.

Macdonald states that "if there is currently a recipe for a blended strategy, it is a broth of pedagogy, heavily peppered with pragmatism" (54). This text is then the recipe book aiming to meet that order, with a good balance between discussion and guidance, and with plenty of opportunity for the reader's individual reflection on current pedagogical practices. However, this book is not only applicable to institutions that have a clear blended learning strategy, or one in the process of development. This text answers certain issues concerning the kind of skills we are currently expected to encourage and support in students at HE level, making this relevant to all tutors.

Particularly useful in this are the chapters on developing effective "e-investigators" and "e-writers," as these are processes pertinent to all students, whether or not their course currently demands this of them. The use of the internet as a research and communication tool is a key component in students' work in education, and issues with plagiarism will only increase without clearer training in these areas. This text is a thorough introduction to many of the key components of blended learning, and marks a clear starting point for further research into the effective integration of learning tools in all subjects and all institutions. ❋