

Voices from the Digital Classroom

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Volume 47, numéro 2, été 2024

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1113864ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.53967/cje-rce.6719>

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Éditeur(s)

Canadian Society for the Study of Education

ISSN

0380-2361 (imprimé)

1918-5979 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Bishop, M. (2024). Compte rendu de [Voices from the Digital Classroom].
Canadian Journal of Education / Revue canadienne de l'éducation, 47(2), xi–xiii.
<https://doi.org/10.53967/cje-rce.6719>

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Book Review

Voices from the Digital Classroom

Edited by: Sandra Abegglen, Fabian Neuhaus, and Kylie Wilson
University of Calgary LCR Publishing Services, 2022, 238 pages
ISBN: 978177385282

Reviewed by:

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In 10 years, I hope that higher education will be really playful, and a space where faculty have more time to be innovative and creative in their approaches. I do not believe it is wise to maintain status quos for over 500 years. Things change, the students change, and the things we are teaching change” (Abegglen et al., 2022, p. 192).

I began my doctoral journey and career as an emerging scholar amid the COVID-19 pandemic, where Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) became collaborative spaces and communities of practices that supported the sustained effort needed to abruptly transition to synchronous teaching and learning. The book review request was timely, and as I lingered amid the carefully curated list of books, I paused on Abegglen et al.’s (2022) *Voices from the Digital Classroom*. Diving in, I sought to highlight areas of tension in VLEs while drawing parallels between Abegglen et al.’s text and my doctoral research exploring the narratives of teachers’ VLE experiences in an early elementary context.

Abegglen et al. set the parameters of the book in their opening, grounding readers in the Teaching and Learning Network Online (TALON) framework. This section presents as a type of abstract for the chapters to come; however, it does not trouble the reader

with the great details one would expect from an academic journal. Approaching the content in this way makes it possible for readers to see themselves reflected within an easily digestible text. Further, readers seeking to engage in literature and research regarding VLEs without extensive academic jargon will find the authors have provided a rich text drawing upon the lived experiences of instructors.

This text differs from other texts in the field by providing readers with transcriptions of professors' experiences teaching in Higher Education (HE). Through a narrative smoothing¹ process, I suspect, readers are situated in the midst of the interview process and are taken on a journey through teaching at a distance during a time of uncertainty. One key aspect that sets apart the book from a traditional compilation of interviews, is the reflection provided by each individual interviewed. Woven throughout the book are reflections from practitioners speaking to alternative pedagogy, playful learning in higher education, and their reflections on the VLE in higher education.

The authors attempt to add a human element by including images of collaborators and interviewers midway through the text. Not only does this serve as a humanizing element in the VLE conversation, but it allows the reader to pause, put a face to the name, so to speak, and delve deeper into the individuals behind the transcriptions. Further, although not outwardly identified, readers critically engaging with the text begin to identify common themes embedded in each of the interviews. These are woven throughout conversations with collaborators and discussed further in the TALON Manifesto that concludes the book. Although the text appears to have begun in the period-specific COVID-19 era, it does not linger in this timeframe. In the interview collection, collaborators discuss past experiences in VLEs and seek to provide possibilities for future VLEs in higher education.

As I critically analyzed the text, I noted the parallels between my work in VLEs with in-service and pre-service teachers. Of particular interest is the interview with Lisa Forbes and David Thomas where they discuss playfulness in the VLE. In their discussion, Thomas states, “[.] being fearless about how play can change teaching” (p. 182). Although they speak to the nature of playfulness in a higher education context, I found

1 Narrative Smoothing: “The central act of presenting a narrative is narrative smoothing done by researchers which renders participants’ messy, scattered and apparently disjointed components into a logical and coherent narrative that is engaging the readers (Kim, 2016) and it is the pivotal component of story-telling” (Coley, et al., 2024)

myself in pieces of their interview advocating for play in VLEs and play as a healing practice, particularly in times of turmoil.

Voices from the Digital Classroom will appeal to educators seeking to deepen their understanding of the Virtual Classroom Environment in higher education. However, it should not be discounted for readers in elementary and secondary education or those seeking innovative modes of employing various teaching strategies in VLEs. Although the interviews are presented with reflective practices, the authors do not provide a deep critical analysis of the emerging themes and discussions embedded within the text. However, perhaps the intent of Abegglen et al. is to involve readers in critical conversations in leveraging digital technology in their classrooms, opening space to challenge hegemonic threads that so often infiltrate digital learning spaces and pose barriers to teaching in VLEs.