



# Book Review: George Veletsianos's 'Learning Online: The Student Experience'

A review by Ken Currie (1<sup>st</sup> September 2020)

DOI: 10.34190/JEL.18.6.010

Author: George Veletsianos

Publisher: Johns Hopkins University Press

Year of publication: 2020

This is a book from a highly respected author that draws on many of his past journal publications and other writings. He is also an author steeped in the recent history of distance and online education in North America. If online distance education is really going to be accepted and integrated into the culture of our universities and other educational establishments, then there has to be an holistic understanding of how its development should be approached, how it should be targeted and how it can be delivered to be as effective as more traditional study modes.

The author offers a distillation of his experiences and observations via a series of short narratives about particular students and the circumstances of their studies.

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## 1. The audience

Probably the first thing to ask of a book is "who will read this?". I struggled to think who this book was being aimed at.

There is more than a hint in the Introduction, which suggests that the many institutional players involved in online education (instructors, researchers, instructional designers, policymakers, technology developers amongst others) need to better understand the requirements and experience of students opting for this mode of study. Perhaps I am naïve in thinking that this is something that institutions should already be well aware of, but the massive uptake of online learning and development should be seen as a welcome opportunity to being a bit more serious about doing this in a much more principled manner?

However, back to the question. If a prospective student were to read this book, then it might put him/her off. There are very many viewpoints (do I really need all these skills and literacies, the passion and motivation, and the staying power?), no single strong message, and it doesn't really paint a coherent picture of what they might be getting themselves into.

Perhaps it is really aimed at the strategic planners and developers in a university? Well, it certainly presents student viewpoints (some of which I can agree with) but it doesn't offer much suggestion about how to proceed and succeed with online learning. I was reminded of Bob Hope in *Son of Paleface* as he is about to get involved in a gun fight. He receives so much information that it confuses him (a bit like the advice I've been given at golf). If I were a strategist I might be interested in online learning to open up new, and lucrative, income streams and/or to internationalise. I would also certainly be thinking about new markets, not merely offering alternative support to existing markets, but I would need to have a clear set of goals and indicators of success. This book would offer no help in that respect.

I did find the chapter titles to be interesting as listed in the index, but much of this interest did not come through in the chapters themselves and they did not address some of the issues I would have liked to have seen covered in such a text. For example, I would really have wanted to hear the views of students who have been studying distance and online for many years at, say, the UK Open University. The OU's 50 year history was not even acknowledged, though it has been a global leader in many aspects of today's non-traditional study. The University of London has an even longer history so their students' views would have been of interest. The experience of these institutions would have provided a foundation for the more contemporary technology-led institutions to build on. I do find it interesting that the Coursera and FutureLearns (an OU spin-out) of this world have embarked on, and are beginning to shape, online learning despite lacking the pedagogical experience learning the lessons that the OU has been through over many decades. This was a glaring omission for me as this would have been my opening chapter on which to judge all other student views.

So, back to the question of who should read this book? Prospective online students? They might be put off as the reality is simpler. Teachers who lack the digital skills and proficiency to develop for online learning? Few, if any, would act on their own to improve their position but this book did not offer guidance on how to do so. Universities and colleges providing online learning? They don't act strategically enough to react to this, plus they suffer from a general apathy towards change.

Perhaps it should be influencers such as Governments and funders? Despite the funding, the research and the self-praise from institutions about how good they are at online learning, all were caught napping when Covid-19 struck. They exhibited a general ability to respond to disruption and most paid little attention to quality. Perhaps future funding should be targeted better at more visionary sets of goals capable of transformational and measurable change?

## 2. Insight and advice

Another general lack of comment was in the area of relevance. Yes, the book talks about the student who studied to get promotion but there was no comment about how well aligned courses and programmes on offer are to real needs, e.g. competency frameworks, industry skills, etc. If there is one thing that online learning should herald, it is the opportunity to address the failings of traditional learning, i.e. to make learning relevant, timeous, competency-based, etc.

Many, if not most of the chapters, could be skimmed as the bullet-point summaries at the end said just as much as the narrative. This would have made it quicker for me to find out if the book addressed some of the questions I would have asked as a student, for example: "why does X university charge just as much for online learning as on-campus?" or "what makes for a good course?". With regards the latter, I always advise students to look for an online course that has a fully operational demonstrator course so that you can see the quality, the presentation and the range of features that will be on offer. Do not sign up to a (paid) course with only a general description.

I felt that reading the book was akin to participating in a MOOC – you start with enthusiasm but end up just reading the summaries to get it over with. There were highlights. Sentences such as "... MOOCs is their potential to act as vehicles for digital neocolonialism, propagating western ideologies, ways of thought, and morals to diverse populations globally" made me think (though I am still thinking about what this means). Curiously, the chapter on Social Networking touched on 'alternative' learning environments acting as more than simple content repositories but the references were all quite old (10+ years), which reinforced my thinking that many of the views expressed were rather dated.

I can see what the book was trying to do in presenting a wide range of views, but it really didn't pull anything together for me. There are a huge number of online courses out there today, but this book would not have helped me separate the wheat from the (abundant) chaff which, as a student, is probably the key factor I would take into account when embarking on such a course. On a personal note, I am always disappointed when *quality* is not seriously addressed. Are students not interested in what makes for a course of acceptable, or exceptional, quality? This takes us right back to fundamentals such as content. If we start with dumb content, we end up with dumb courses and no amount of AI, or other wizardry, will improve on this and learning analytics will be trivial in nature. There is much to learn about in online learning so everyone has to start by building lasting foundations for improvement.

## 3. Conclusion

There is no harm in reading this book but I suspect you could save time by just looking at the bullet points at the end of each chapter. Treat it as a MOOC or a bit of an 'airport read'. For me it was a bit like watching the movie 'Love Actually', as opposed to 'The Searchers'. A *4 out of 10* offering and not one I would dip back into.