Book Review

McDougall, J. (2021). *Critical Approaches to Online Learning.* St Albans: Critical Publishing Ltd.

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> "How can you use the online space to positively move away from and beyond the 'habitus clash' which students often experience on campus?"
> (p.17)

McDougall uses questions like this to challenge the reader to rethink their approach to learning and teaching and to critique existing norms. His stated aim is to draw together "a range of research, practice and arguments around online learning in higher education" (p.1) with a view to providing a synthesis for critical discussion. Despite the "pivot" to online learning and teaching during the pandemic, the intention is not to focus on "emergency remote" online learning, but rather to take a critical look at online learning as a way of doing higher education.

The author's standpoint is about promoting social justice, decolonising higher education, and co-creating learning, with a view to students imagining how they will "change the world through the redistribution of power" (p.12). A deep distrust of neoliberal approaches is apparent throughout, in particular in relation to educational technology solutions.

The book is split into five chapters, which follow a similar structure. As illustrated above, each chapter includes "critical questions for practice", which could in principle encourage the reader to construct their own learning, arguably aligning with the principles expounded in the book. This may have been more effective had many of the questions

been less leading, less wordy and more applied to the readers' practice. Some chapters include examples of teaching, learning and assessment, which are drawn from different disciplines, institutions, and indeed different countries. These examples help to illuminate the theories outlined, as well as providing potential avenues for a reader to explore. Each chapter ends with a useful concise summary, followed by an annotated reading list. Indeed, a particular strength of the book is the summary of vast amounts of research into online learning, including extensive quotations, and it could be particularly pertinent as a starting point for researchers. The book probably works best for a "cover-to-cover" reader, but the "dipper" might find it helpful to look at the clearly signposted examples and follow the recommended links, which are much easier to follow via the e-book.

The opening chapter focuses on the relationship between space and time in different configurations of learning design. There is a discussion about the online environment as a "third space" (home is first space, campus is second space), which concludes that at the end of the day, there is just space. Likewise, rather than blended, synchronous, asynchronous learning, there is just learning. The author advocates that the learning space should be used to challenge hierarchies and oppression, and there should be

> "the possibility at least of transforming the space so that its occupants can work (from within) as allies in decentring learning."
> (p.13)

Chapter two moves on to problematise various aspects of HE structure and practice, including equating the notion of employability with neoliberalism, apparently suggesting that promoting student employability is somehow at odds with the partnership approaches to learning proposed. I have to pause to get on my employability soap box at this stage. The learning strategies suggested in this book, where students are active participants co-creating their own learning, are likely to enable them to take control of their own development in their future roles within and outside the workplace – which sounds very much like employability to me. Echoing chapter one, this chapter concludes that the notion

of "virtual" learning should become obsolete; there is a false binary between virtual and "real"; at the end of the day, it is just learning.

In chapter three the author focuses on assessment in the context of inclusion and social justice, starting with the need to transform assessment to align with dynamic learning design. He moves on to critique some of the affordances of educational technology, including the use of learner analytics by teaching staff – another form of assessment – and online proctoring of examinations. A final section explores feedback methods and alternative assessments, including an interesting example of a video essay.

In the following chapter, the author goes on to explore ways in which the online environment might be used to disrupt the status quo, with some valuable examples which readers might use to challenge their own approaches, moving from good intentions to practice.

The final chapter focuses on how we might move forward, in particular highlighting that the online space is not neutral and we need to think critically about it, just as we would in a face-to-face environment – maybe more so as the identity of the university is at stake. Three approaches to considering the future are used in this chapter, but perhaps the greatest emphasis is on a conversation between a group of academics in March 2021. The conversation seems to be reported verbatim, and focuses on the future of the university in an online environment. Although unconventional, I felt that this was an innovative and thought provoking approach to sharing broader perspectives. To align with the principles of this book in terms of diversity and co-creation, it might also have been relevant to include a similar conversation with students – and indeed, with people who missed out on being students because of the exclusive nature of HE. The book concludes with an argument that each university should create its own educational technology, and with a critique of the JISC 2030 Digital Framework.

If you approach this relatively short (80 pages) book expecting a light read and a "quick fix" of online teaching methods, you will be disappointed. However, you might find something you were not looking for and did not know you needed. If you put time aside and truly engage with the content, you may well find you have moved through a paradigm shift, not just in relation to your views on online learning, but also in relation to learning and teaching in general. You may or may not be comfortable with the author's views and style of writing, nonetheless there is great value in stepping back and critically examining your practice, your learning philosophy and indeed, the future definition and role of a university.