

BOOK REVIEW

The Encyclopedia of Female Pioneers in Online Learning

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The encyclopedia of female pioneers in online learning is a fascinating compilation about the work of thirty leading educational experts who have lived and worked in eighteen countries across the globe. Their knowledge and contribution to the field has shaped and improved how people learn online. The women in this book were some of the first to introduce new ideas, concepts and applications in distance education and online learning, and they continue to contribute to Distance Education, e-learning and Open and Distance Learning. As strong proponents for phenomenology, the authors, Bainbridge and Wark, have given these women a platform to share their subjective interpretation of experiences as pioneers in online learning.

Bainbridge and Wark contend that the contributions of female pioneers to the development of online learning have traditionally been missing in literary references and so they set out to conduct research to confirm the validity of their speculations. They concluded that literature on female pioneers in online learning appeared as “a paragraph or two” in journal articles, “a single podcast” and largely on educational institution faculty web pages. They agreed that this was an injustice that needed correcting and initially thought to write a reference book but chose instead to honor the voices of the women. Given that a great number of the pioneers were, at the time, still alive, they preferred to let the women tell their stories in person. The result is an encyclopedia that has something for everyone. It introduces female pioneers in online learning to historians, writers, educators, students and journalists, in an easy to access handbook. The data from the interviews and the authors’ analysis of this data offers researchers and scholars a critique of perspectives, experiences and contributions made by female pioneers and thought for future research.

Any internet search for interview-based books yields a long list of books based on a single famous person; this encyclopedia is a rich 30-person interview repository. In terms of genre and subject matter, the closest volume is *The encyclopedia of distance learning*, 2nd ed. (Rogers et al., 2009). While an excellent rendition, *The encyclopedia of distance learning* focuses on trends, topics and technologies with an emphasis on emerging trends. The more than 100 research articles add to the body of literature but the reader ends up with no better understanding of the renowned experts who wrote the articles. Bainbridge and Wark have it the other way around. The autobiographical approach has been tweaked to amplify the voices of female pioneers in a way that is unique and refreshing. They introduce readers to the person, allow each pioneer to tell her story, and only then provide readers with a list of



publications, and research articles. An embedded YouTube link and QR code allow the reader to listen to each recorded interview, bringing the reader even closer to the pioneer.

The book is organised into two main parts. Part One, Chapter 1, “Initial Thoughts” is an introductory chapter focusing on the background, aim, scope, content and structure of the encyclopedia. Part Two begins at Chapter 32 and is set out in the form of a conventional thesis, explaining the methodological and analytical processes undertaken by the authors.

Chapter 1 explains how the thirty women included in the book were selected. Firstly, the authors agreed on the definition of a “Pioneer” and the scope of time in which one could be considered a pioneer. Potential candidates had to fit the profile of a founder/trailblazer, leader, researcher/writer who initiated their activities between 1970 and 2000. Bainbridge and Wark argue that if a woman chosen began her pioneering activity after 2000 it was likely because online learning had already been introduced into her country, or because she had introduced an activity new to her context. The women selected were also asked to suggest the names of other females who could potentially be included in the book.

In discussing their selection, Bainbridge and Wark make an interesting statement regarding what they refer to as the “historical pattern of development in online learning”. The pioneers were selected based on their ability to communicate in English. The authors link this ability to communicate in English to the internet and expansion of the World Wide Web which began in North America and spread to other countries. I find this link presents a jarring note as it seems to assume that pioneering work in online learning was only possible in English-speaking countries. One wonders whether greater effort could have been made to find pioneers in non-English speaking countries to provide a richer and more diverse perspective, perhaps even challenging the historical pattern mentioned earlier.

Chapters 2 to 31 present the detailed transcripts of interviews conducted with each pioneer. The chapters present the pioneers in alphabetical order, weaving a story from past to present as the reader follows each woman on her journey. The same set of 14 questions was used for all interviews, allowing for the collection of comparable data. A question asking the pioneers to discuss any interesting memories or thoughts that they wanted to share with other stakeholders yielded answers that are as varied as the pioneers’ own journeys and perceptions, giving a rich depth to the standard interview questions.

The chapters begin with a photograph and biography of the pioneer, revealing a rich diversity of educational backgrounds ranging from agriculture to psychology. The common thread in these backgrounds is that pioneers in online learning did not necessarily have any training in the field; they went on to acquire their knowledge and passion and skill through further studies, work and professional experiences. On page 417, Bainbridge and Wark state that three-quarters (74.1%) of the pioneers interviewed had educational backgrounds not connected to distance learning, education or technology. A logical explanation given is that when many of these women were students, online learning was non-existent, and the use of information and communication technologies was not widespread in education. Only four of the pioneers had any experience as a distance education learner prior to working in the field, making their work as educators more extraordinary.

Each pioneer discusses the circumstances that led her into distance education, and the state of distance education when she entered the field. Social justice is rated as the highest initiator. The pioneers stated they were interested in dealing with issues such as learner support, marginalised groups, adult education and education for women. They were further influenced by female colleagues, leaders and mentors, although eleven pioneers indicated no one piqued their interest in online learning.

In exploring the experiences of the pioneers, Bainbridge and Wark looked at the challenges the women encountered in the field of distance education over the years. The biggest challenge was acceptance or understanding. Since distance education was not the norm, they faced both personal challenges, such as credibility and gender bias, as well as institutional challenges ranging from funding and developing systems, to overcoming institutional skepticism.

All the pioneers went on to influence developments in online learning not just in their own countries, but in diverse institutions all over the globe. When asked what accomplishments in the field of distance education they wished to share, the pioneers' answers demonstrate why they deserve this accolade. They have set up or upgraded learning centres, developed and implemented new programmes and courses, researched, written and published and collaborated internally in their institutions and countries, and externally with institutions beyond their borders. The greatest changes mentioned over time with regard to online learning include advances in technology, changes in the Distance Education model and moving fully online. Other notable changes were acceptance and understanding and research in online learning. The research interests mentioned include computer-mediated communication, policy and governance, learner autonomy and open educational resources.

It is worth noting as an overview of the biographical section of this encyclopedia that Bainbridge and Wark compare each transcript to others in the encyclopedia. This comparison allows the reader to see the similarities and differences across the parent themes. Fourteen parent codes were identified and are presented in the order of most discussed to least discussed: background, benefits of distance learning, learning environment, challenges, accomplishments, changes over time, research interests, goals, interesting memories, early founders, others for the book, career history, final thoughts and gender general comments. Some did not respond to all the questions, or in some instances gave very brief answers. As a result, some interview transcripts are much longer than others. Traditional scientific rigor would have omitted incomplete transcripts but, in keeping with a phenomenological approach, the authors have published what they were given, resulting in an authentic and believable compilation.

Part Two of *The encyclopedia of female pioneers in online learning* will be of interest primarily to scholars and researchers who wish to thoroughly understand the process of data collection and analysis that resulted in this volume. Chapter 32, "Analysis of Interviews," reads like a 48-page conventional thesis, a richly detailed description of the process the authors took on to create this book. The chapter begins with a discussion and definition of terms. It is interesting to note that the authors did not force a single definition of online learning on their respondents; rather, they allowed interviewees to interchangeably use the terms Distance Education, Computer-mediated Communication, Open and Distance Learning, and online learning as these terms have evolved over time and are used differently in various contexts. The authors did set out criteria for inclusion as a pioneer, encompassing the following key terms: founders, leaders, researchers, writers.

Qualitative research methodology was selected to collect and analyse data. While the interview script was in English, it was altered slightly for those for whom English is a second language. In the transcripts the authors are careful to show for which pioneers the interviews were not in English. It is in keeping with the theme of online learning that only one interview was conducted in person; the rest were either in a telephone or virtual meeting. The interviews were conducted between 2018 and 2019.

The section on Selection of Respondents in this chapter is a detailed explanation of how the candidates' list was developed and the inclusion and exclusion criteria that resulted in 30 pioneers. The reader is reminded that earlier in Chapter 1 Bainbridge and Wark mentioned that they initially thought to write a reference book from secondary sources and ended up employing a two-phase snowball sampling strategy. The exhaustive process is a clear indicator that the pioneers we read about in this volume are at the top of their field.

The rest of the chapter discusses the data analysis process, results, coding themes, background of where the respondents work or had worked and includes helpful visuals that summarise the data-heavy information. The authors discuss each of the 14 parent codes, giving an in-depth analysis of the sub-themes (child, grand-child and great grandchild codes) generated from each. Researchers interested in qualitative analysis will find the discussion informative, while quantitative researchers and general readers will benefit from the explanation of codes and units in the section titled Data Analysis Process. Three of the parent codes were emergent, while two other parent codes, technology and gender, cut across most of the parent codes. Bainbridge and Wark discuss these emergent issues, illustrating their explanation with interview quotations and literary references.

In concluding Chapter 32, the data analysis process is well summarised. It presents the reader with the authors' perceptions of the findings and is useful for a reader who may not want to read through the entire chapter; however, it offers little in the way of conclusions. This candid look at the Research Limitations is refreshing. The authors acknowledge that reliance on the English language limited access to potential candidates, and scarcity of resources made it difficult to identify candidates. One improvement that may have increased ease of use was to give readers a timeline. The authors chose to present the pioneers alphabetically. Since the women all worked from 1970 to 2000, a timeline summary could have been included. This would have given readers a fresh perspective of the contributions over time, of each of these pioneers.

Final Thoughts are offered in Chapter 33. The recap begins by presenting a summary of the Key Findings, Key Implications for Stakeholders, and Future Research. Researchers taking up the future research questions already have a rich resource in this encyclopedia, not only in the interviews conducted but also in the papers, articles and books attributed to each pioneer and the references provided by the authors.

One begins reading *The encyclopedia of female pioneers in online learning* expecting bare facts and data. But from the very beginning the reader is drawn into the individual lives of these incredible women — their successes as well as their challenges. Bainbridge and Wark have given visibility to 30 women's voices and faces. By asking the pioneers they interviewed to suggest names of other women that could be included in the book, Bainbridge and Wark ended up with a list of potential candidates for future

consideration. This offers readers the hope that Volume II of this incredible encyclopedia is in the planning.

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