Book Review

Quick Hits for Teaching with Technology: Successful strategies by award-winning teachers
Robin K Morgan and Kimberly T Olivares (eds.)
Faculty Colloquium on Excellence in Teaching (FACET)
Review by Peter Norrington

What could I use in my teaching and why?
Technology moves on without waiting for teaching practices or pedagogic research to keep up. Our students come year on year with new skills, and new expectations. This book provides an example of what may be the best solution: experiences of fellow practitioners that can inform our choices. The book covers technologies used in the classroom (physical and online), as part of blended learning environments and specifically for distance learning.

The book is divided into four sections: Promoting engagement, Providing access, Enhancing evaluation, and Becoming more efficient. The sections contain some fifteen to twenty short practice reports, each report consisting of three parts: a framework setting background and literature, making it work, describing and discussing implementation, and future implications for how the author wants to further extend or review what they present.

Who would benefit from reading this? As it’s made up of over 60 pieces, over a wide range of topics, you won’t have time individually to try out everything in one go. I found it best dipped into rather than read at one sitting. It could be useful passed round a group of education students, lecturers or other teaching staff on a post-grad education course, or otherwise sharable. It would also benefit those who want a quick view of a range of activities with educational technologies. As the contents cover a wide range of discipline backgrounds, the examples are adaptable, and any subject jargon probably won’t distract you.

The section headings don’t particularly work for me. I find it hard to imagine an activity that, providing one of the benefits, would be valuable if it didn’t provide the others! Yet the section intros are interesting orientation points; you could easily imagine them presented as mini-essays towards the front.

What about content? Rather than reviewing individual pieces, here is a small flavour of content: reducing online isolation, business strategy simulation; to podcast or not to podcast; gigapixel panoramas for virtual field trips; teaching applications for mobile devices; grading discussion forums; personal sales pitches; online etiquette; professional communication through email; pre-classroom student preparation activities; locating and using free online resources.

Although describing experiences in US universities, much of this book is intelligible in the UK – for example, though some terms might need an explanation. But the more important aspect – the pedagogy – is easily recognisable: social learning, constructive alignment, realistic learning, authentic learning, learner engagement, co-production. I did wonder if some of the activities were supported by teaching assistants, as it isn’t easy to determine from short pieces the full background to activity delivery. One particular difference between US and UK systems does stand out, the US practice of giving extra credit for additional or extended activities. The extent to which this makes some of the activities (fully) workable as presented would need greater analysis than is possible here. In general though, it is obvious that lecturers in the US have very similar concerns about their learning environments to us here.

Something which is hidden by this kind of quick tips approach – but this is not a failing of this book in itself – is how availability of a technology and training and support for it in a department or wider institution changes its accessibility for staff, and indeed students, regardless of the merits of the technology itself. For example, blogs are
ubiquitous, there are plenty to read and anyone can set one up for free, so they can be learnt without a virtual learning environment or even any support at all. Clickers, however, require at least purchase of software and physical equipment (and then its storage, classroom use and maintenance), and use alongside presentation software; one author in this book bought their own set.

Quibbles are minor. I found the combination of typeface, size and spacing a little hard on my eye, which affected the speed I could skim the text at, and I’m not keen on article titles in all-caps. A handful of articles could have done with some friendly editing for style, although that can be seen as interfering with the author’s voice.

Overall, yes. You won’t absorb it or use it all in one go (unless you want to take that as a challenge!). If you have a copy between colleagues, you still won’t. And that makes it worth getting. If it encourages you to try something new, change what you are doing, evaluate in a different way, or develop a departmental collection of teaching ideas, then that alone will make it worth it.