



Raranga te Kete Aronui—Weaving the Basket: Continuing With Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning

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Abstract

This issue of the *Journal* uses the metaphor of raranga te kete aronui (weaving the basket of the pursuit of knowledge) as it continues the conversation of developing areas of open, flexible, and distance learning (OFDL). It comes at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted traditional face-to-face teaching in classrooms on a global scale, and the value of open, flexible, and distance learning has become starkly apparent. This issue has five articles which contribute to the ongoing knowledge presented in this issue. There are two articles based on educational theory: Higgins explores the theoretical history of OFDL, and the work of Nichols et al. is based on Mezirow's 10 stages of transformative learning. Three research articles provide insight into a range of specific areas: Sime et al. use networked learning theory to investigate the design of a social exploration MOOC, Irons and Hartnett present exploratory research into the teaching of computational thinking in junior classrooms in New Zealand, and Nyugen describes the design and development of qualifications in early childhood education and care to meet a demand for New Zealand home-based early childhood educators to be qualified. These are all contributions to our weaving and filling of te kete aronui.

Keywords: educational theory; flexible learning; online learning; learning design

Introduction

This has been a fragmented and disrupted year, with the response to COVID-19 creating many issues for traditional face-to-face learning. Countries have experienced different levels of disruption, with some open again now for school attendance, others retreating into periodic lockdowns, and still others at stages in between. Some of the challenges facing learners involve the rapid and often unplanned move to online learning. Although it's tempting to focus on the experience of teaching and learning during the pandemic, the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning (JOFDL)* continues to move forward with high-quality research articles on the improvement and refinement of open, flexible, and distance learning.

The metaphor of the kete, a woven basket, is part of the culture of New Zealand. In Māori mythology, the god Tāne retrieved three kete during a quest: te kete tuatea (the basket of light), te kete tuauri (the basket of darkness) and te kete aronui (the basket of pursuit). One interpretation of these is: “the basket of light is present knowledge, the basket of darkness is things unknown, and the basket of pursuit is the knowledge humans currently seek” (Taonui, 2006). We are continuing our weaving of this last basket, raranga te kete aronui, by building a knowledge base for those working in this developing area of open, flexible, and distance learning.

Papers in this issue

The papers in this issue present a wide range of topics in open, flexible, and distance learning through one position piece, three primary studies, and one FLANZ 2020 conference paper. We begin with the position piece by Andrew Higgins. Higgins' longstanding involvement in distance learning in Australia and New Zealand forms the basis of his thoughts in "Paradigms, Distance Learning, Education, and Philosophy". He explores the educational philosophy behind distance education, reaching back to Plato and the rediscovery of Greek and Roman educational practices during the Enlightenment. He then considers the effect of British social reform and the development of correspondence schools in Australia and New Zealand before looking at a number of theories relating to this area of education. Distance learning has a long history. Higgins outlines some of these foundations, and then considers the more recent effect of digital technology in this field. His final sections bring the debate about theoretical foundations of distance learning into the current time. He notes the challenges and significance of decisions made by distance learning practitioners today, and the underlying theories and philosophies of learning that support them.

An international group headed by Julie-Ann Sime has contributed the second article, which looks at designing a social exploration MOOC. The team (from the UK, Greece, and Cyprus) consider how to develop an online learning community within a MOOC, using the MOOC titled "Visual Literacies: Exploring Educational Practices and Technologies" in their study. More specifically, the authors considered how an online learning community could be designed to promote social exploration through the contribution of gamification and a live-streamed seminar. Sime et al. used networked learning theory, an approach that "emphasises openness and democratic relationships between teachers and learners, and supports diversity and inclusivity of participants" to build a more interactive, participatory, and effective MOOC. This was linked with active tutor contribution to facilitate some of the mechanics and operation of the community. The work is a useful contribution to research in the design of learning communities and identifies further areas for later exploration in this field.

Irons and Hartnett present exploratory research into the teaching of computational thinking in junior classrooms in New Zealand, following the introduction of computational thinking in the New Zealand technology curriculum in junior schools from 2020. They explain that "the purpose of the computational-thinking curriculum is to teach New Zealand students to be more than consumers of technology, and to develop a greater appreciation of existing digital devices and how to create innovative digital technologies". Their focus is on teacher preparedness for this new area of curriculum with insights gathered from interviews with junior-school teachers in the areas of understanding, attitudes, perceived benefits, and assessment of computational thinking. The need for teachers to have support (in the form of professional development and resources) is discussed. This timely article is of immediate value for junior-school teachers in New Zealand in this emerging area of teaching where there is currently little other literature.

The article by Nichols' et al. explores transformative learning in vocational online and distance education. Using Mezirow's 10 stages of transformative learning to underpin the study, this research investigated the transformative learning experiences of 499 students (past and current), across seven discipline areas, studying online at Open Polytechnic—a major online and distance vocation education provider in Australasia. Results indicated that online learning can be transformative and, when perspective transformation did occur, it was more common at the earlier stages of Mezirow's model. Perspective transformation also tended to occur at the earlier stages of a programme of study (i.e., in the first year) and at different levels of study (i.e., diploma students indicated transformation had occurred for them as much as for students undertaking degrees). This article demonstrates that online education is a viable mechanism for transformative education.

The next article is also situated in the context of Open Polytechnic in New Zealand. Nguyen et al. originally planned to present this work at the April 2020 Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand (FLANZ) Conference, which did not go ahead due to the COVID-19 lockdown. It reports on the design and development of a Level 4 New Zealand certificate in early childhood education and care to meet the growing demand due to the introduction of a mandatory requirement for all home-based early childhood educators to be qualified. The design and development of the new certificate was informed by the CSI model (a pedagogical model for integrating constructivist and sociocultural learning principles with information and communication technology). The article presents a detailed account of the design and development phases in addition to initial feedback from students and employers from the first intake in 2020. Reflections by staff closely involved in the work provide insight into what was required to develop a successful online programme.

Together these articles provide a balance of practical research, application, and theory, focusing on different aspects of open, flexible, and distance learning.

References

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Biographical notes

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Alison is an information scientist and Director of Research at InfoSolutions. She conducts research in health information, and contracts in the education sector. She is a Fellow of the Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA) and has a Doctorate in Education. Her research areas encompass elearning, online learner support, health information, library services, and continuing professional development. Alison is an executive member of FLANZ and Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*.

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