

Introduction

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It is with great pleasure that we present, as the new editors, this volume of the *Journal of Distance Learning*. We are living in an extremely interesting period in which education as we know it is challenged by the arrival of new technologies and the demands of increasingly complex lives. We hope that the journal can provide a barometer on how the innovations are being adopted and used within a range of educational settings. To this end, we hope in future issues to bring to you a range of evaluation studies, position papers and case studies of new and innovative approaches to open, distance and flexible learning.

The majority of the papers in this volume were presented in an earlier form at the DEANZ Conference 2000 at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand. A predominant theme of the conference concerned how students are learning using new technologies for open, distance and flexible learning. It was interesting to note the difference between the last two conferences. In 1998, many presenters were the early adopters of new technologies for teaching and were explaining their forays in new frontiers of

teaching. By 2000, a number of speakers from New Zealand, Australia and North America were discussing the issues arising from the use of technology for teaching. One of the questions we often like to ask the ardent advocates of new technology in various educational contexts is the following: "Have you got beyond the early adopters yet?" The 2000 conference suggested that in many areas of education, the use of the Internet, in particular, is beginning to bed down into becoming an accepted and acceptable media for many learners. The overwhelming message, however, was that new technologies continue to perform best when there is a compelling reason for studying by the advocated method.

Archee and Saunders present some valuable insights on the differences between novices and experts and their choice of media for teaching and learning, with some surprising insights about students' choices about synchronous and asynchronous approaches. Their findings about impact on academic workload confirm what many conference presenters also argued, that new technologies do not reduce

teaching load, they simply change what that load looks like.

Campbell, Yates and McGee also present useful insights into how students are learning using online learning technology. Campbell et al. are pioneers in New Zealand in terms of online delivery of teacher education, and evaluations of the effectiveness of these programmes have been eagerly awaited by those of us involved in teacher education. Campbell et al. identify similar features to Archee and Saunders in the success of programmes. It is interesting to note the emergence of a set of themes associated with multimodal delivery of education, which parallels the early literature on successful distance education, such as that advocated by Lockwood, Race, Rumble and others.

The paper by Kinshuk, Patel, Oppermann and Russell is an interesting addition to the DEANZ stable, because a group who is primarily interested in the design of computer systems has written it. We think this is an exciting development, because it suggests that those interested in design of software are reflecting on the role of teaching and learning in a way that becomes accessible to those intimately involved in teaching and learning. One of the strengths of the conference at which this paper was originally presented was that the computer experts and the teachers were engaged in a meaningful dialogue which may help to overcome the barriers associated for both teachers and learners in the use of new technology. For those of us who get readily frustrated by computer systems based on the "guess what is in the mind of the designer" model (such as the Microsoft Excel help file!), it is deeply reassuring to read that Kinshuk et al. are advocating a system

which keeps a real human teacher in mind as the primary target user!

The paper by Rabel and Higgins provides some valuable data on the impact of flexible learning methods at the University of Otago. Many of us have been awaiting with interest the evaluations of whether the University of Otago's considerable investment in flexible learning has resulted in improved student learning outcomes. Although the authors present mixed results, they identify the features that make any university teaching a challenge: dry subject matter and variable motivation and interest on the part of the student. It is indeed reassuring to know that the teachers of this century will face the same challenges as their ancestors!

The final paper in this volume is a research note by Ken Stevens, who is well known by many DEANZ members. It is nice to receive an update on Ken's activities in the frozen and isolated north of Canada, following his recent visit to many of us in New Zealand last year. There is no doubt that the issues that Ken raises are applicable to many remote areas of New Zealand, Australia and elsewhere. We look forward to Ken's full evaluation of the approaches being trialled in Newfoundland.

We hope that you enjoy this volume of the journal and will be inspired to put into print your own stories of successes and failures in open, distance and flexible learning! We would welcome your suggestions on what you would like to read about in future volumes of the journal. Please send us any requests and we will attempt to honour them.

Best wishes for 2001.