

Editorial

Since undertaking my own Masters study with the Open University, UK, I have been a strong advocate for the efficacy of distance education. Working at Open Polytechnic is the fulfilment of a desire that can be traced back to completion of my MA in Open and Distance Education, graduating in 2001.¹ I have experienced the potential of distance education and have benefited greatly from the opportunities it provides. My PhD thesis, progressing less quickly than I had hoped, compares the benefits of distance education with on-campus education in the context of theological education.

‘Efficacy’ essentially refers to the effectiveness of something, the capacity of something to provide a desired outcome. It is not uncommon for the efficacy of distance education to be challenged on the grounds that students are isolated during their distance study and are less likely to succeed. Such challenges need to be confronted. In the New Zealand tertiary education context, where outcomes in the form of Education Performance Indicators evaluate the success of student learning, it is easy to claim that lower results for distance students are a result of their mode of study. The Tertiary Education Commission notes that:

The nature of enrolments at a specific ITP will influence its performance. For example, part-time and extra-mural students often have work or family commitments and cannot devote as much time and energy to their studies. They may also have different study goals.

This is no doubt true. However, distance educators should not be quick to excuse themselves for poor outcomes on the basis of students’ life commitments, or misplaced suggestions that students do not complete because they have met their lifelong learning goals. In my own work (Nichols, 2010) I have demonstrated how distance educators can improve practice by taking a ‘spot the leaks’ approach to student completions. The results of such investigations can have a significant influence on education performance. In short, lower-than-average completion statistics represent an opportunity for improved practice, not the discovery of a ceiling to distance education’s suitability.

It remains my solid conviction that distance education, done well, provides accessible, effective and transformative education in ways that are scalable and complementary to the demands of everyday life. I am pleased to say that, at Open Polytechnic at least, we continually challenge our practice toward improvement across all student-serving functions. In the latest (2011) Education Performance Indicator results published by the Tertiary Education Commission, course completions across all levels of study at Open Polytechnic were at 73%. For Levels 7 and 8, course completion reached 83%. These are good results; however, we know that some leaks are still to be spotted.

Improving distance education practice requires engagement with scholarly discourse. Exploring the efficacy of distance education, and learning about the leaks others have spotted and fixed, develops the perspective distance educators need to refine their craft. I am pleased to introduce three articles and three book reviews that will assist readers of the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning* to think further on their efforts.

This issue begins with Anderson and Simpson’s article “History and heritage in distance education”. The article was requested to remind *JOFDL* readership of the rich history and theory underpinning distance education, and to give two leading authors an opportunity to discuss the ideas that have informed their own approach. It is no surprise to see the work of Sören Nipper, Michael Moore, Zane Burge, Borge Holmberg, and Sir John Daniel mentioned—among others.

¹ I graduated in my pyjamas, attending the virtual (synchronous) ceremony online. My special moment was at 3am. Sadly, my dial-up connection crashed just as I was capped. Receiving the entire ceremony on CD-ROM later was appreciated!

Anderson and Simpson's bibliography cites many valuable works which any theorist in distance education should be familiar with, and their seven signposts provide ample scope for further research work.

Our second article, by Barbara Craig and Ken Stevens, focuses on teacher education and is drawn from New Zealand and Canadian research. The reach of distance education into small rural communities, and the investment made in internet connectivity, provide large networks for collaboration. These networks have implications for both schools and teachers, which Craig and Stevens critique. The authors suggest three implications for teachers and teacher educators.

In our final article, Namsook Jahng considers literature related to small-group (online) communication in tertiary or post-secondary settings. Although the study has its limitations, Jahng's critical focus on the literature highlights methodological shortcomings. One of these is the "lack of experimental or quasi-experimental studies" (p.37) in literature, something I noticed myself when preparing the E-Primer series synthesising e-learning literature. All studies take place within a rich educational context. Unless variables are specifically identified and isolated, generalising from findings (establishing the "causal relationships between variables" mentioned by Jahng) cannot be done with confidence.

Finally, we have three book reviews based on recent works that are likely to be of interest to *JOFDL* readers.

I am conscious that the beginning of this editorial reads somewhat like a personal eulogy. In fact it is. This is my last editorial for the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, and so marks the end of 4 years of editorship and co-editorship. The last years have seen the journal expand its Editorial Advisory Board, change its name, move to an open and online format, and publish two issues each year (2011, 2012). Ben Kehrwald and I have worked hard to achieve these outcomes, and we have had the satisfaction of seeing the journal grow and develop under our co-editorship. Working with Kate Hunt has also been thoroughly enjoyable, and Julie Mackey (and, before Julie, Mary Simpson) has provided great support as review editor. I resign co-editorship because I sense it is time for a fresh stage of development and leadership for the journal. Like each of you, I eagerly await future volumes.

It has been a pleasure serving you.

Mark Nichols

Woburn

September, 2012.

References

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doi:10.1080/01587911003725048