

Primary and secondary distance education: Expanding the knowledge base in the schools sector

The use of distance education at the primary and secondary levels began in New Zealand around 1922 with the introduction of The Correspondence School (Barbour, 2011a). The roots of web-based or online distance education in the schools sector trace back to 1993, and have been firmly entrenched in the nation's schools sector since 2002 (Davis, 2010). With the implementation of the Rural Broadband Initiative and Ultra Fast Broadband in Schools programmes, there is an opportunity to develop research-based initiatives to leverage the learning potential provided by this increased connectivity. However, to date there has been little published research on the use of distance education in the primary and secondary environment in New Zealand. For example, Barbour (2011b) examined 262 articles from the main distance education journals for Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States (including the *Journal of Flexible, Open, and Distance Learning*) from 2006 to 2010 and found only one of the 262 articles related to distance education in the schools sector in New Zealand. Further, during this 5-year period only three of the 21 articles published by the *Journal of Flexible, Open, and Distance Learning* related to primary and secondary distance education in any country.

Unfortunately, this lack of coverage in the academic literature is not consistent with the level of activity that is actually occurring. At present, The Correspondence School (now Te Aho o Te Kura Ponamu, or Te Kura) is making the transition from a primarily correspondence model to incorporating more and more online delivery of their curriculum. The e-learning clusters of the Virtual Learning Network (VLN) are maturing, becoming sustainable, and expanding in their traditional rural areas, while the development of urban-based clusters and loops are starting to occur. Over the past 2 years a cluster focused specifically on providing distance education to primary students has been established. At the same time, the number of tertiary institutions providing distance education opportunities for secondary students is also increasing. There are many different and diverse models of distance education delivery happening in the schools sector, much of which is going unnoticed by the larger distance education community. This special issue begins to address the lack of research into schools sector distance education.

The first article in this special issue, from Keryn Pratt and Ken Pullar, focuses on OtagoNet—one of the early VLN e-learning clusters. In this article, the authors explore the organisational model used by OtagoNet, and evaluate promising practices for teaching and learning that have developed in the cluster. The transition teachers experienced from traditional transmission models to more interactive models of teaching (a transition that others have noted and have even reported spilling over into the teachers' face-to-face instruction [Lowes, 2005]), is highlighted. The second article in this special issue explores teaching at another of the early VLN e-learning clusters, FarNet. Michael Barbour and Carolyn Bennett examine teacher perceptions of promising practices for teaching in the VLN environment. Their research also reveals that these FarNet teachers were particularly concerned about both the content and the delivery model of the professional development provided to VLN teachers. Similar results were found with virtual school teachers in the United States, where Rice and Dawley (2007) found that these individuals were under-trained and desired a focus on pedagogical issues.

While these first two articles focus on the notion of “connected schools” in rural jurisdictions of New Zealand, the final article in this special issue provides an example of a “networked school” in an urban area (Wenmoth, 2010). Pinelopi Zaka explores the concept of blended learning in a secondary school, and how blended learning can help to change the ecosystem of a school. In her piece, which is consistent with the first two articles, Zaka notes the importance of the teacher,

and the critical role that teachers play in positively affecting the climate of a school and adoption of a new form of educational delivery.

This special issue also features two book reviews. The first is by Darren Sudlow, Director of eLearning for the CantaNet eLearning Cluster (the first of the VLN e-learning clusters). Sudlow reviews *E-learning: Implementing a National Strategy for ICT in Education, 1998–2010*, which is edited by Vince Ham and Derek Wenmoth of CORE Education. This book examines numerous government initiatives and the effect those projects had on the delivery of education in New Zealand. The second book review, by David Adelstein, explores the lessons that those teaching online can learn from Kerry Rice's *Making the Move to K–12 Online Teaching: Research-Based Strategies and Practices*.

The special issue concludes with an interview with Eddie Reisch, conducted by Hazel Owens (Director of Ethos Consultancy NZ). Reisch has been involved with virtual learning in New Zealand for approximately two decades. Owens' interview with Reisch explores a variety of national e-learning initiatives, and the direct effect that they have had on virtual learning.

Finally, we would like to conclude our editorial with a profound thank-you to Mark Nichols and Ben Kehrwald for their willingness to publish this special issue, and much gratitude to Kate Hunt for her editorial support throughout the process.

Michael Barbour, Wayne State University
Keryn Pratt, University of Otago

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