# Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning in a Post-Truth World

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## Abstract

The times they are a-changin'. It's a prophetic song, and one that's been around long enough to attest to times that are always changing, because very little stands still for long. This editorial notes many changes, including changes in the editorial team, changes in the profile of this journal, and changes in the way open, flexible, and distance learning are both given and received in the post-truth world. Increased skills in information literacy and digital literacy have become fundamental in this new landscape, enabling able learners to navigate their way in this new world with an open mind and a critical eye. There will be changes for educators as well, as we try to manage teaching and learning in this new educational setting.

**Keywords:** open learning; post-truth; information literacy; digital literacy

## Introduction

Sir Peter Gluckman, Chief Science Advisor to the Prime Minister of New Zealand, has outlined his advice on science and information this year:

> Most of us would hopefully accept that governments will make better decisions if they use well-developed evidence wisely. At the same time however, evidence can be ignored, manipulated or even falsely constructed for particular ends. The ability for misleading information to become the basis of political advocacy, strategy and policy making is not new but it has now become much more apparent and is creating great concern. Nor is this a crisis of knowledge or expertise as some would argue. Rather, what has changed is the nature, speed and pervasiveness of communication and the ease with which individuals can themselves generate and transmit information, whether it is true, altered or false. (Gluckman, 2017)

Gluckman is speaking of the post-truth world that we now find ourselves in: not as something new, but as something happening on a scale not seen before. In this editorial we provide a glimpse of what this means to open, flexible, and distance learning—and to all in the information age. Alongside this insight sits the journal's business as usual: two announcements and a look at the papers in this issue.

## Change in editorial roles

We are pleased to announce Alison Fields has taken the role of Editor-In-Chief of the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, following the excellent work undertaken since 2014 by Distinguished Professor Niki Davis.

Alison, of The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, has been working in the role of Associate Editor alongside fellow Associate Editor Dr Maggie Hartnett of Massey University. She is now

taking the helm as Niki Davis of University of Canterbury steps back to take on an Associate Editor role, and to focus on other work outside the journal. We thank Niki for the care and expertise she has provided to both the journal and the editorial team and look forward to continuing to work with her in this new role.

Alison is a senior lecturer at the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, where she teaches Information and Library Studies. She is a Fellow of LIANZA (Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa) and has served six years on their Professional Registration Board. Her research areas encompass e-learning, library services, and continuing professional development. Her research background includes previous editorship of the New Zealand Library and Information Management Journal, joint editorship of the book *Informing New Zealand* (5th ed.), and numerous articles and papers.

This development of the expertise in the editorial team will ensure that the journal will continue its current high standards, and ably serve the growing needs of the flexible learning communities in Aotearoa New Zealand, the Pacific Rim, and worldwide.

## Inclusion of *JOFDL* in the *Directory of Selected Journals in Online and Distance Learning*

Contact North | Contact Nord is a distance education and training network that operates from Ontario, Canada, and is described as providing:

> Over 4 million Ontarians in 600 small, remote, rural, Indigenous and Francophone communities across the province … [with] online and distance programs and courses from Ontario's 24 public colleges, 22 public universities, 76 district school boards, and 250 literacy and basic skills and training providers without having to leave their community… [It is also acting as] an advocate, catalyst and facilitator of innovation in online and distance learning." (Contact North|Contact Nord, 2017)

In this second role of building the resources that are needed for facilitating distance education, Contact North|Contact Nord has recently released a range of new searchable directories in the area of online learning. These resources, which have been described as ground-breaking, are all available through TeachOnline https://teachonline.ca/, and include:

- *Directory of Online, Open & Distance Learning Associations and Consortia Throughout the World* https://teachonline.ca/tools-trends/directory-online-open-distance-learning-associations-consortia
- *Searchable Directory of Selected Journals in Online and Distance Learning* https://teachonline.ca/tools-trends/journals (includes more than 60 selected journals in online and distance learning)
- *Searchable Directory of 75+ EdTech Startups* https://teachonline.ca/tools-trends/best-practices-around-world-including-ontario/edtech-startups-directory
- *Directory of Vendors of Online Learning Products and Services* https://teachonline.ca/tools-trends/directory-vendors-online-learning-products-and-services (more than 2,400 vendors of online learning products and services worldwide)
- *Upcoming Conferences from Around the World* https://teachonline.ca/training-opportunities/upcoming-conferences (over 1,700 upcoming education and technology conferences, including a good selection of New Zealand conferences among the global coverage).

It's good to see that the Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand is one of the 81 associations listed in the *Directory of Online, Open & Distance Learning Associations and Consortia Throughout the World*, confirming its place in the global arena.

Equally notable is that the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning* is listed among the more than 60 *Select Journals in Online and Distance Learning,* indicating the journal's global recognition as one of the limited number of journals identified and listed in this area of education.

## Open learning in a post-truth world

Every year Oxford University, through its Oxford Dictionaries, announces its Word of the Year. Last year, in 2016, the Word of the Year was 'post-truth' (Oxford University Press, 2017c). In fact 'post-truth' echoed so loudly in the ears of the world that it was chosen by Oxford as both the United Kingdom Word of the Year and the United States Word of Year. It has certainly risen to prominence quickly and convincingly, and has become one of the key phrases appearing in news reports, official and unofficial communications, blogs, tweets, and other social media.

Oxford defines 'post-truth' as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Oxford University Press, 2017b). We were tempted to dissect this definition and analyse it phrase by phrase, but just don't have the heart—or the stomach— to do so. And in the wake of 'post-truth', there are more new words and phrases barraging the landscape, including the now-widely known 'alternative facts' and 'fake news'. These concepts introduce a whole new world and change many boundaries that until now have seemed sacrosanct in education.

The education sector, along with others, has been swift to react to this post-truth world: many articles, presentations, editorials, blogs, and other items have been written; some courses now being taught actively cover this phenomenon or identify ways to combat it; and researchers and students are being explicitly guided in ways to identify quality information sources. Resources are being developed and shared widely to help people navigate their way safely in this post-truth world.

For example:

- *How to spot fake news.* A step-by-step guide by FactCheck.Org for determining the quality of an information resource. http://www.factcheck.org/2016/11/how-to-spot-fake-news/
- *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.* Based on the idea of information literacy as an education reform movement, this framework guides the teaching and use of information literacy to find, understand, and use quality, reputable information. http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework
- *News: Fake news: A library resource round-up.* Offers links to quality webinars, library guides, and resources, news, and further reading. http://www.programminglibrarian.org/articles/fake-news-library-round

Google searches present a bewildering array of reading: at the time of writing, 'post-truth' identified 450,000 search results, 'Alternative facts' identified 3,730,000 results, and 'Fake news' identified a huge 32,000,000 results.

Given the wealth of information now available about how to navigate in the post-truth world, it is easy to get immersed in the rhetoric and not look beyond the immediate. So here is the question that we need to think about: What does this mean for open learning'? Or, in the words of Sepp

(2016), "For educators, the question is not 'When will this go away?', but 'How do we educate young people to be sufficiently active in their civil engagement?'"

'Open learning', according to the Oxford English Dictionary (2017a), is defined as "Learning based on independent study or initiative rather than formal classroom instruction". Again, we won't dissect this definition phrase by phrase, but note that—as a bare definition—this looks solely at the process of learning, and quite rightly so. But in the post-truth world, does unmoderated open learning produce quality education results? This also raises more questions than answers—what are quality education results? Do they matter? And who moderates the learning? Everything is so very open to interpretation, and there are fewer boundaries around open learning than there are around many other forms of instruction. Open learners are more responsible for their own learning, direction, understanding, and implementation of new knowledge. In a post-truth world, open learning has become more difficult to navigate. While flexible and distance learning are not at the extreme of the vulnerable end of post-truth influence, we do need to exercise more caution.

Analyses and approaches to managing the new landscape are helpfully offered from multiple authors and sources, although even these need to be taken with a pinch of salt. Campbell (2016) provides an analysis in which he concludes "many others have also come to the conclusion that increasingly, truth doesn't matter". He also looks at information behaviour and states that "The Information Age has provided an endless stream of information that people now use to confirm what they believe. Rather than ushering in a new enlightenment, more information has led to greater ignorance" (Campbell, 2016). Sepp's (2016) approach is to offer guidance on ways to navigate this new world: in response to his own question about how to manage "in an education setting", he offers pointers and discussion on using multiple perspectives, assessing credibility, using critical inquiry and analysis, deferring to experts, and guiding and discussing.

So what can we do about learning in this new environment? The editors of the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning* are facilitating open access to quality content on open, flexible, and distance learning within the journal's scope. The journal carries peer reviewed, referenced, and professionally edited articles and items. We highlight issues involved in open learning in a post-truth world through the editorials. Readers should take advantage of this and other opportunities to keep themselves informed of changes affecting the education world, and to ponder some of the issues raised in the editorials and articles. Everyone, including learners themselves, are now more responsible for their own assessment of the quality of their education and learning. It is time to get educated about getting educated!

## Articles in this issue

The five articles in this issue all originate from the Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand (FLANZ) 2016 conference. Each started as a conference submission and has since been developed into a full journal article.

The first article, by Alahmadi and Drew, describes research undertaken to evaluate the accessibility of several top-ranked university websites for students with disabilities in the Oceanian and Arab regions. Data was gathered for the years 2005–2015, and results indicate there was no noticeable improvement during this period. There is still considerable work to be done to improve online learning materials for students with disabilities.

Osborne and Dibben's article reports on a University of Tasmania initiative, in which "breadth units" have the dual purpose of developing transdisciplinary approaches to interpreting the complex challenges of the real world and, in the process, evidencing student experience. The paper highlights some of the success and issues of adopting this kind of approach.

In the third article, Adam returns to a theme featured in recent issues, that of culture. Adam argues that teachers' pedagogical and technological practices cannot be fully understood without considering social and cultural norms. With that in mind, this research specifically explores teacher educators' practices in a Maldivian university context. Results indicate that culture influences pedagogical and technological practices and the author presents an emergent model named the Pedagogical and Technological Cultural Habitus (PATCH).

The fourth paper in this issue is by Moore and Greenland, who present the findings from a large qualitative study from Australia's largest online tertiary provider, Open Universities Australia (OUA). The authors were interested in exploring assessment policy practices as they related to student attrition—in particular, dropout in relation to unavoidable employment-related circumstances (which was highlighted by students as a major reason for non-completion of online courses). Results indicated many institutions that are part of OUA do not identify work-related issues as a valid reason for requesting an assessment extension. The study also highlighted a bigger issue—that assessment policies may be more suited to traditional on-campus students and may not be fit for purpose for part-time online students who require flexibility in their studies.

The final article in this issue also highlights the importance of context for learning. In this case, physical context is explored by Tull, Dabner, and Ayebi-Arthur. Here, the authors report on findings from several studies that identified resilient practices at the University of Canterbury as a result of Christchurch earthquakes in 2010 and 2011. Results demonstrated that combining the use of social media and e-learning for teaching, learning, and communication encouraged resilience not only among students but also among staff and throughout the organisation.

## Conclusion

*The Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning* is working to address the challenges in the education environment arising from the post-truth world and the change to information distribution and usage patterns that come with it. Sharing information and bringing ideas to the fore for consideration by the wider open, flexible, and distance learning community is just part of this. Sustaining scholarship at a steady level and continuing with peer review and considered editorial practice is another. The contribution of the authors in this issue highlights expertise in individual areas that are shared with all who read and use this journal. This rounded issue seeks to serve the open, flexible, and distance learning community by freely sharing this information.

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