# Introduction

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At last year's Distance Education Association of New Zealand conference I became acutely aware of the broad range of settings in which the members of DEANZ practice their craft. Most members use distance education in ways that are not immediately transferable to other settings. Members of DEANZ are predominantly in the tertiary sector; however, there are also significant numbers in industry, and in the primary and secondary school sectors. We therefore bring different assumptions, concerns, and practices to our common interest of distance education.

In a volume that celebrates 30 years of *Distance Education*, the journal for the Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia (ODLAA), J. Michael Spector reflects on the diversity of distance education today. Spector notes that the boundaries between face-to-face and distance education are becoming increasingly blurred. However, he adds that "Research and development in the field of distance education has and is likely to continue to inform educational research and practice in general" (2009, p. 160). There is indeed great value in maintaining journals that provide a means of expression for a community of practice that has distance education in common.

The diverse membership in DEANZ presents both an opportunity and challenges for a journal such as the *Journal of Distance Learning.* There is opportunity in the potential for enrichment, because different perspectives always broaden our minds and deepen our understanding. While the issues and practices others use may not be immediately transferable to our own situations, there is still great value in considering what our professional colleagues have done and why they have done it; what they think and why they think it. The *Journal of Distance Learning* is a valuable forum for ideas, expression, and debate. But herein also lies the challenge. Variance in membership can make preparing the journal a fairly 'hit and miss' affair. Articles tend to be grounded in specific situations or written for specific groups, and require a certain level of commitment if they are to be read attentively. I'm certain that, like me, you tend to look at a journal's table of

contents fairly judiciously. My hope is that, in this issue, you will find articles worthy of your consideration and engagement.

The first article in this volume is both a summary and an expansion of Michael Barbour's excellent keynote address at the 2008 DEANZ conference in Wellington. Barbour starts with a critique of the Net Generation, and journeys through to a conclusion that places virtual schooling in sober context. While Barbour's work focuses on the K12 sector, his coverage addresses the diversity across the virtual school movement, and pays particular attention to technology use and overall approach. General readers will no doubt benefit from Barbour's comments about the differences between synchronous and asynchronous teaching quality with reference to K–12 teachers, and his concluding comments.

Our next article, by Hamish Anderson of Massey University, considers how online quizzes are used in a large distance education course. There is nothing novel in this—online quiz tools have long been available in learning management systems. Anderson, however, has maximised online quizzes in ways that are appropriate to his specific teaching context. His approach reveals a dedication to student success, informed practice, and measured innovation; the resulting benefits are very real improvements to engagement, effectiveness, and efficiency (Spector, 2009). Anderson's approach is very transferable, and provides an example of how well-established technology can add true value to student learning. While it could be argued that successful students will tend to self-select for formative exercises, it should be noted that Anderson's online approach saw the percentage of students choosing to complete the formative assessment increase from 59 percent to 92 percent. Anderson also specifically comments on the performance of what might be considered "borderline and academically weaker students" in his analysis.

Distance educators in industry settings and with an interest in employment issues for distance education graduates will be particularly interested in the contribution in this volume by Chan Chi Wai, Assistant Professor at the Open University of Hong Kong. Chan evaluates the earning potential of distance education graduates. He starts by acknowledging that the efficiencies of what might be considered 'mass production' distance education tend to make the quality of distance education graduates appear doubtful. Using statistical analysis from two Hong Kong censuses (2001, 2006), Chan puts this suspicion to the ultimate test: how does earning a distance education qualification affect graduates' levels of income? Chan's analysis is both thought-provoking and reassuring.

There is a more theoretical approach in the next paper, where Gary Mersham (The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand) considers distance education in relation to the dialogical model of communication. Mersham raises the potential for misunderstanding in asynchronous e-learning environments, and takes a critical perspective on asynchronous online discourse. While Mersham might appear to overstate his case in places, his is a vivid critique of online learning from a perspective of communications theory. Mersham's piece is included to provoke thought; it certainly addresses issues of online education from an 'out of the paradigm' point of view that invites a critical response.

The final two articles in this volume deal with specific technologies. Terry Stewart (winner of the DEANZ award 2008), Mark Brown, and Anna Weatherstone, all from Massey University, outline a process for developing problem-based education scenarios. The SBL Interactive tool they describe has attracted considerable international attention. SBL Interactive makes it possible for students to explore narrative scenarios in ways that increase active engagement. In their paper Stewart et al. focus on the dynamics of scenario creation in general, and their work will be of benefit to anyone interested in the development of scenarios, not just SBL Interactive users.

Finally, Rachel Roberts of Stratford High School summarises the development of video conferencing in New Zealand's secondary school sector. Roberts gives insight into the rich availability and use of video conferencing, and she reveals the collaboration that is taking place across schools to make it all possible. Using synchronous video conferencing makes it easier to match teaching expertise with student needs across the country. However, synchronous video is not without its challenges, which range from operational to strategic.

We also include three book reviews by notable practitioners of distance learning.

So this issue of the *Journal of Distance Learning* has plenty to think on, disagree with, and learn from. I trust you find this volume of the journal much enriched by the variety of contributions, and on behalf of the editorial board I look forward to receiving any contribution you may wish to make.

## References

Spector, M. J. (2009). Reconsidering the notion of distance in distance education. *Distance Education 30*(1), 157–161.