Future Themes for Research in Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning

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Abstract

This editorial addresses persistent and emerging themes in open, flexible, and distance learning. Despite technological advances, many challenges remain perennial. Key issues include the educational design skills gap, in which higher education professionals often lack pedagogical expertise; language and terminology inconsistencies, which hinder effective communication; and the balance of autonomy and support in flexible learning environments which is crucial, as is discerning the value of new technologies. Other themes requiring ongoing research effort include socio-economic disparities that affect access to education, and the rise of AI which necessitates a re-evaluation of assessment strategies. All of these issues will undoubtedly affect faculty development and student engagement, both of which are critical for success. Institutional sustainability and cultural shifts towards flexible learning are also essential for long-term implementation at scale. Continued research and reflection on these themes are vital to enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of flexible learning practices.

Keywords: Emergent themes, research, evolving OFDL

Introduction

Although it can appear that what we are collectively experiencing is an ever-increasing pace of technological development, shifting territories beneath our feet, and an ever-evolving landscape of flexible learning around us—in truth, many of our current obstacles are simply recast versions of perennial challenges. Many of these challenges can be represented as opportunities as we, as a community, work to ensure effective and engaging learning experiences. In the most recent issue of this journal [Vol 27 Issue 2, 2023] we looked at a range of previously published (some updated) articles from earlier issues. They provided useful historical vantage points, and we took the opportunity to reflect as a community on where we have been. In the coming years we believe it will be important to explore a number of persistent and emergent themes in the fields of open, flexible, and distance learning, and to encourage colleagues to consider researching, analysing, and publishing on these themes.

Future research themes

The first theme, and possibly the foremost challenge affecting formal educational providers, is the educational design skills gap. Many tertiary level academics do not learn to design learning experiences in the way that trained K–12 teachers do. The rising demand for flexible learning and e-learning has exposed a shortage of educational design skills among teaching professionals, particularly in higher education (HE) and further education (FE). Designing effective online courses requires a blend of pedagogical expertise and technical know-how (Saroyan &

Amundsen, 2023). Bridging this gap is crucial for creating engaging and effective learning experiences. The differences between face-to-face instructional approaches and their online versions often disguise their similarities. Whether one chooses to align oneself with a pseudo-Vygotskian approach and emphasise the social nature of learning or not, there is undoubtedly a need for the learning experience to relate closely to the life experience of learners if it is to be effective (Morris, 2020). The shift from knowledge exposure to learning experience remains a challenge for all learning designers—regardless of context.

The next theme relates to the nature of language used throughout the English-speaking community served by this publication. Language and terminology present a significant challenge. In the world of education, it sometimes feels as though practitioners are speaking different dialects. We use common words differently. "Blended learning" represents a hugely diverse range of learning formulations; "assessment" and "evaluation" are used differently in the United States and the United Kingdom. The lack of a common language, especially when discussing flexible learning, can hinder collaboration and understanding, certainly when one is designing learning that is intended to be applicable to multiple English-speaking quality assurance realms (Atkinson, 2023; Nichols, 2024). Clear terminology and shared concepts are essential for effective communication among practitioners, researchers, and policymakers.

Another theme reflects the challenge of accommodating multiple learning approaches within a single formal offering. It is rare to see a course or programme being promoted by a university, college, or school that says anything about the alignment of their offering to a defined set of characteristics amongst its successful learners. There is a trend towards more and more open learning opportunities, in which it is down to the individual to decide whether a course is suitable for their learning approach. Balancing autonomy and support is a delicate aspect of open, flexible, and distance learning design. Autonomy may be part of the education agenda for an institution that wants to create autonomous, or independent, learners, but some students will always require (or at least desire) support. For many students the decision to study in a face-to-face context comes with a realisation that they are more likely to succeed if they function in a cohort of fellow students. Online learning communities can also develop over time but these are more uncertain and fractious. While flexible learning aims to empower students by allowing them to choose how, what, when, and where they learn, finding the right balance between autonomy and support can be tricky (Navaitienė & Stasiūnaitienė, 2021). Ensuring students have enough guidance without stifling their independence is a delicate dance that requires careful consideration. While the underlying principles that underpin the concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) may be sound, the effectiveness and realism of its ambition remain open to enquiry (Sewell et al., 2022).

A fourth theme is the allure of new technologies. In recent decades we have seen the rise and fall of institutional virtual learning environments, student management systems, and many forms of personalised learning platforms. These have overlapped and evolved with increasingly analytical capabilities, and now often attach the label of "artificial intelligence" (AI). We have also seen the in-class leveraging of social media applications as tools of interactivity, progress tracking, and assessment. Not every tool lives up to the hype, and flexible learning practitioners must navigate the ever-expanding landscape of educational technologies (Mhlongo et al., 2023). In early 2023 one could have been forgiven for imagining that within 12 months the world would have been transformed beyond recognition through the rapidly developing capabilities of the large language models that drive AI applications, which appeared to be ubiquitous. Separating genuinely transformative tools from overhyped ones is an ongoing challenge that requires discernment and experience.

Here in Aotearoa New Zealand, as in much of the English-speaking world, we benefit from living, learning, and working in a heterogenous multi-cultural community. However, we must not

overlook the socio-economic discrepancies that emerge from such complex societal structures. Opportunities differ between rural and urban communities, between the connected and disconnected, and between the linguistic majority and the minority. The digital divide, most clearly represented through lack of access to devices and connectivity, affects not just educational opportunity but all facets of social engagement (Fisk et al., 2023). Equity and access are critical considerations in flexible learning, but although flexible learning promises accessibility, it does not automatically guarantee equal opportunities for all students. Even if we narrow this equity issue to digital access, it remains evident that students may lack reliable internet access, suitable devices, or quiet study spaces. Addressing these disparities is essential to ensure that flexible learning benefits everyone, regardless of their circumstances.

Assessment strategies have come into sharp focus in recent years with the rise of AI applications. Distance educators have long learnt to trace students' performance through an informal ipsative assessment process that is not scientific or objective, but humane and sensitive to the individual's progress. These practices are potentially threatened by over-reliance on AI. Now, with the advent of writing aids such as ChatGPT, the challenge for educators is to reconsider what they are actually choosing to assess, what outcomes are being represented in a piece of student work, and how to interpret them. Designing outcomes-based learning makes this alignment easier, but it is still challenging. As many institutions found during the COVID-19 pandemic, their problematic assessment approaches were barium meals for inadequate course design. Maintaining academic rigour while accommodating diverse learning pathways can be like solving a puzzle. Finding innovative assessment methods that align with flexible learning goals is the holy grail, sought to accurately measure student learning (Wanner et al., 2024).

Another theme worthy of further elaboration through research is the perceived need for faculty development and training. In recent years, many academics and teachers have been expected to simply adapt their learning approaches from in-class interactions to online asynchronous support. Many made that transition quite successfully, others less so. In the post-pandemic return to "normal", we have seen tension between the flexibility that students enjoyed and senior management's desire to reinstall a vibrant flesh-and-blood community on campus. Educators need support when adapting to the complexities of flexible learning. Faculty members need ongoing professional development in the technology and pedagogical approaches that enhance flexibility (Ramsay & Dick, 2019). Investing in faculty development pays dividends in student success and the overall effectiveness of flexible learning initiatives.

While faculty require support, there is also a challenge in ensuring students' disposition for learning is accounted for in its provision. Student engagement and motivation in flexible learning environments remain challenging. Flexibility does not automatically translate to engagement. Many students have been reluctant to attend face-to-face classes, knowing that the class is either being recorded for those that cannot attend, or could be recorded. But turning off in-class recordings of lectures that were available during pandemic's periodic lockdowns has also proved unpopular with many students who have realised that they benefit from being able to watch, pause, and review recorded content to get the best learning experience. Keeping many students motivated and connected in virtual or blended environments requires building interactive, community-driven learning experiences that foster a sense of belonging and participation. This is extremely hard—and further research into the motivational levers would be valuable.

The last two themes we would like to see addressed in future research are more institutional and relate to policy. The first of these is sustainability and scalability. Creating flexible learning opportunities often involves rethinking traditional structures. There is a requirement to innovate in the ways in which courses are created, platformed, delivered, supported, and assessed. Ensuring that these innovations are sustainable over the long term, and can be scaled across

entire institutions, is a significant challenge that requires strategic planning and resource allocation.

Finally, changing organisational cultures to embrace flexible learning approaches continues to disrupt the status quo. Flexibility challenges established norms, administrative structures, and institutional cultures. If campuses are now less occupied by flesh-and-blood students, do institutions need to have strategies for divesting property? Are faculty roles evolving in your institution to make it more likely that a teaching assistant facilitates interactivity for online content created by a lecturer? Are assessment protocols moving towards ongoing reflective assessment portfolios and away from end-of-course examinations? What are the implications for all, or some, of these innovations on your practice, and on the quality of learning outcomes? Encouraging openness to change and fostering a culture that embraces innovation are essential steps in successfully implementing flexible learning models. We have seen scholarly reviews of higher education's challenges since the COVID-19 pandemic (Crawford, 2023) but research is scant across the educational spectrum.

Despite these issues, every challenge presents an opportunity to be seized. As practitioners, we adapt, iterate, and learn together. We would welcome your research and reflections on these challenges.

In this issue

In this issue we share four learned articles and a book review. The article "Virtual Learning for Māori Students: Examining Culturally Responsive Pedagogies and Equity", by Carolyn Rood and Michael Barbour (2024), offers an in-depth analysis of virtual learning in Aotearoa New Zealand, with a particular emphasis on Māori learners. The authors trace the historical development of virtual learning, from early correspondence courses to contemporary e-learning clusters and digital technology. They highlight the distinctions between virtual and traditional face-to-face learning, focusing on the unique pedagogical approaches, challenges, and support structures necessary for effective online instruction and student engagement. The review of culturally responsive pedagogies for engaging Māori learners is particularly insightful, providing frameworks for applying these approaches to online learning. The article also examines the potential of virtual learning to offer equitable educational opportunities for Māori students, especially in rural areas, while acknowledging barriers such as socioeconomic inequalities and the digital divide, which were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors underscore the scarcity of research specifically on Māori students' experiences in virtual learning contexts and call for further investigation to ensure culturally responsive and equitable virtual education. This synthesis provides valuable insights into virtual learning for Māori students in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Piera Biccard and Ningi Sibisi's article, "Distance Education Support Services: Sensemaking Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic" (2024), explores how support staff at a distance education institution navigated remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic, using sensemaking as a theoretical framework. The study highlights the experience of four support staff members who adapted to new roles and environments due to lockdown measures. The sensemaking framework is used to understand how staff adapted, focusing on exploring the wider system, creating a map of their new work environment, acting to change their work system, and learning from it. Staff faced challenges such as limited internet access and the need for new communication methods. They adapted by involving others, securing data solutions, and organising training sessions. Sensemaking involved both emotional and cognitive aspects, with staff experiencing stress and frustration but also finding innovative solutions. The article suggests using sensemaking theories to better understand and support staff during times of change, emphasising the importance of infrastructure, policy flexibility, and continuous adaptation.

The article by Tae Kyung Park and Nadine Stuehm (2024) ("A Simple but Powerful Way to Enhance Critical Thinking Skills among BSW in Online Class: Strength-based Feedback") on enhancing critical-thinking skills among undergraduate social-work students in an online course using a strength-based instructional method, presents a compelling case study . Critical thinking, as described by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), involves problem-solving, cognitive and practical reasoning, and reflexivity. Teaching these skills online is challenging, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic made online education essential. The strength-based approach, which focuses on clients' strengths rather than deficits, can be applied to teaching, with positive, individualised feedback helping to maintain and enhance students' motivation and critical-thinking skills. The study involved 22 students and used course evaluations, word counts in assignments, and the quality of prompts to assess impact. Results showed that strength-based feedback effectively improved critical-thinking skills, with student responses increasing in length and quality over time. The study concludes that online courses can effectively develop critical-thinking skills with appropriate instructional strategies, and recommends further research with rigorous measurements.

Dr Janet Kesterson Isbell's article "Held Captive and Told to Play: Takeaways From Training for Online Modality in Higher Education" (2024), discusses her experience of transitioning two doctoral courses to an online modality through a professional development programme at Tennessee Tech University. The programme included a 10-week foundation course in online teaching, focusing on course design, accessibility, instructional roles, and community building, with participants receiving one-on-one support from instructional designers. Despite a busy summer, the incentives, including a stipend and certification, motivated Isbell to complete the rigorous training and course redesign. She highlights the importance of having clear course objectives, efficient course navigation, and new digital tools such as Padlet and infographics to enhance student engagement and teaching presence. Isbell suggests that universities should offer adequate compensation, continuous support, and opportunities for faculty to explore new technologies to successfully transition to online teaching. She concludes that the programme helped her to improve her teaching skills and course content, making her a more efficient and productive professor.

Finally, this issue includes a book review by Azizah Binhuwaimel (2024), who summarises key points from Paul E. France's "Humanizing Distance Learning: Centering Equity and Humanity in Times of Crisis". France emphasises a human-centred approach to distance learning, focusing on student independence and liberation while dismantling white supremacy in education. The book advocates for trauma-informed teaching, promoting safety, connectedness, and hope, especially during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. France highlights the importance of building a supportive classroom culture and encouraging discussions about identity, leveraging personal narratives and culturally relevant teaching. The book critiques traditional assessment methods and promotes humanising assessments, discussing the digital divide and advocating for minimal use of edtech to enhance student engagement and independence. Binhuwaimel concludes that each chapter provides practical tips and resources for educators to implement these approaches in both in-person and online learning environments.

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