Editorial – Volume 14, Issue Number 4

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It is a terrifying honour to be entrusted to write this editorial for the first issue of *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* for which my co-editor, Dr. Rory McGreal, and I are now jointly responsible. Rory and I extend our thanks to our colleague Dr. Terry Anderson who has steered the *IRRODL* ship so energetically and astutely for the past 10 years. Terry's leadership has placed *IRRODL* in the forefront of our field's academic journals and Rory and I will work hard to maintain the level of quality that you have come to expect. And quantity! Volume 14, Issue 4 offers readers 14 research articles and one leadership note from all corners of the globe – a splendid feature that has become a hallmark of this journal.

In a fitting opening to such a large and varied issue, the UK's Alan Tait, a familiar voice in our field, presents a framework of ideas drawing in particular on the capability approaches proposed by Amartya Sen in order to analyse theories of development and social justice that are claimed or may be inherent in the mission statements of 12 of the world's leading open universities. Supporting his premise with references to similar large-scope works by colleagues such as Rumble, Daniel, Bowles and Gintis as well as his own previous work, and citing incidents from institutions such as the Commonwealth of Learning and UNESCO, he concludes that reviewing institutions' statements of purpose and strategy will help them rise above operational levels that are potentially rhetorical.

Wayne Atchley, Gary Wingenbach, and Cindy Akers from Texas tackle another recurring topic in our field, that of comparing completion and performance between traditional and online courses. Recalling Russell's well-known "no significant difference" study (2001), the authors found that there were differences in completion rates among disciplines; however, student characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, classification, major, and experience with online course delivery were not considered in this research, and more study will be necessary to further understand the nature of learning in the many formats available to us today.

Somewhat similarly, Chadchadaporn Pukkaew's Thailand-based study compares the results for distance and non distance students in a computer programming class using a VCLass live e-platform and found that all participants, including the instructor, preferred using Facebook as a social networking tool over the computer-mediated communication tools available through the platform.

The critically important issues of online community, empowerment and engagement are also at the heart of Yu-Chang Hsu and Yu-Hui Ching's article on non-programmer adult learners' experience with mobile apps. Hsu and Ching found that students appreciated the rich level of peer support in their virtual learning community and they conclude that their study shows the educational value of mobile app design activities, and the possibility and practicality of teaching/learning mobile app design online.

In exploring the application of another current platform, Scott P. Anstadt, Shannon Bradley, and Ashley Burnette surveyed users of educationally and health focused SIMS (simulations) to discover what motivates their Second Life (SL) and real life (RL) interactions in several areas, potentially addressing the future role of educating social work students regarding research methodology in online virtual reality interactions. Implications for social work are discussed including engaging clients using incentives for social participation built into the SL milieu.

In keeping with Tait's "let's examine our institutional *raison d'etre*" focus and Atchley, Wingenbach, and Akers' consideration of comparative performance, this issue contains several other articles that take the wide view on emerging and intriguing issues within ODL. Ross McKerlich, Cindy Ives, and Rory McGreal contemplate the OER initiative, now a decade old but slowly gaining acceptance in higher education. Using a survey to measure the readiness of faculty and staff to adopt OER, their research identifies factors to increase the readiness of faculty and staff to adopt OER, finding that creating OERs encourages greater acceptance of open resources than merely using them.

Ishan Sudeera Abeywardena, Chee Seng Chan, and Choy Yoong Tham, in another OER-themed article, lament the lack of viable search engines to locate appropriately academic OERs for teaching purposes. Their research puts forth OERScout, a technology framework based on text-mining solutions.

This issue's third OER-themed piece, by John Levi Hilton III, Donna Gaudet, Phil Clark, Jared Robinson and David Wiley, considers the high cost of textbooks as a concern not only to college students but also to society as a whole. To this end, their research examined one community college's adoption of a collection of open resources across five different mathematics classes and compared results between the previous two years in terms of the number of students who withdrew from the courses and the number that completed the courses with a C grade or better, finding no significant change in educational outcomes but a cost saving to students and a generally favourable perception of the technology.

Like OERs, MOOCs are also exciting "new kids" on the ODL block, represented in this issue in an article by Jenny Mackness, Marion Waite, George Roberts and Elizabeth Lovegrove that reports on an investigation into the pedagogy in Oxford Brookes University's First Steps in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education MOOC. Using this relatively small MOOC (200 participants registered from 24 countries), the study sought to provide evidence on how learning occurred in the course and also considered implications for teaching and learning in higher education. The researchers concluded that small, task-oriented MOOCs can effectively support professional development of open academic practice and found that MOOC "veterans" served as role models and strong supports for the less experienced.

This issue also includes several geographically focused pieces that attend to important concerns within our field. In one such article, Hyoseon Choi, Yekyung Lee, Insung Jung and Colin Latchem focus on the relationship between learners' personal factors and perceived barriers for DE at the Korea National Open University, concluding that this study may go some way towards suggesting how to create practical support systems that fit the different needs of various student groups in any distance education provider. Mann Hyung Hur and Yeonwook Im, also working with data from Korea but from the government sector, explore the influence of e-learning on individual and collective empowerment by using data collected from e-learning class participants of Korea's Cyber-Education Center, finding that online discussion classes, if designed to encourage interactivity, can enhance the promotion of empowerment.

From China, Yi (Leaf) Zhang explored the influence of Confucian-heritage culture on 12 Chinese learners' online learning and engagement in an online course in a southwestern US university. Chinese learners, intimidated by their instructors and viewed in an authoritarian light, tended to seek help from peers, particularly those who shared similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

From South Africa, Lynette Jacobs and Corene De Wet report on an alliance formed to develop a short credentialing programme to address a training gap for Further Education and Training college (FETC) lecturers. Jacobs and De Wet hope their results may inform and support the future development of a full credential for FETC lecturers. The need for enhanced student support and improved administration is also highlighted by their study.

And from Canada, Robert Power offers a note on leader-member exchange theory in higher and distance education.

What better way to conclude this wide-ranging introduction of IRRODL's Volume 14, Issue 4 offerings than by the mention of Jen Ross, Michael Sean Gallagher, and Hamish Macleod's piece from the "New Geographies of Learning" project, a research project exploring the notions of space and institution at the University of Edinburgh, and from literature on distance learning and online community? Examining the comings and goings, and arrivals and departures of part-time distance students, they suggest a fluid

and temporary assemblage of engagement, not a permanent or stable state of either "presence" or "distance," and they conclude that interruptions and subsequent returns should therefore be seen as normal in ODL, and teachers and institutions should work to help students develop *resilience* in negotiating various states of "nearness". Strategies for increasing this resilience are proposed. Resilience, space, presence and non-presence, the "comings and goings" of engagement at a distance – are these not all facets of our struggle to establish identity as teachers and learners as our palates become ever more varied and colourful?

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