



Improving Remote Teaching and Online Learning

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Abstract

This issue of the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning* (JOFDL) contains an invited piece from a well-known author in the field. The intention is to include an invited piece in subsequent issues. This contribution from Rick Shearer focuses on theory in open, flexible, and distance education. The choice of topic is timely given the experiences of emergency remote teaching (ERT) by teachers and academics over the last 18 months, and the prevailing view that online learning and teaching and ERT are equivalent. In addition to the invited article, this issue has four articles—a descriptive piece and three articles from presentations at the recent FLANZ 2021 Conference.

Keywords: emergency remote teaching; online learning; flexible learning; learning theory

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is still with us and is likely to be for some time to come. When the SARS-CoV-2 virus first emerged, universities and schools shifted to emergency remote teaching (ERT), using online technologies to ensure their educational offerings could continue. Although online teaching and learning are not new phenomena, the unique circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has required teachers, academics, schools, and universities to rethink how they provide teaching. Moving instruction online can enable flexible teaching and learning anywhere, anytime, but much of the online learning that has occurred during the pandemic has been a hurried response to a crisis rather than well-planned and designed online learning experiences and courses (Hodges et al., 2020).

As countries move in and out of lockdowns, there is a growing demand from teachers, academics, and institutions for high-quality research and guidance on effective online teaching. The *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning* (JOFDL) is one such source of quality resources.

With a view to continuing to provide high-quality research, the first issue for this year has an invited piece from well-known author and researcher Rick Shearer, Director of World Campus Learning Design at Pennsylvania State University. In his piece, Shearer discusses the importance of theory in online, distance, and open education. He has chosen two foundational theoretical frameworks—namely, the theory of transactional distance (Moore, 1993) and the Community of Inquiry model (Garrison et al., 2000)—to illustrate the importance of good theory. These conceptual frameworks have been hugely influential in the development of the field, and Shearer draws attention to the rich research base available to those who are new to the field. Starting with a theoretical piece also demonstrates how flexible, open, and distance learning is distinct from emergency remote teaching.

Papers in this issue

The papers in this issue contain a mixture of topics and include an invited article, a descriptive piece, and three articles from research presented at the recent 2021 FLANZ (Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand) Conference held in Wellington and online 14–15 April 2021. The first piece is Shearer's invited article, which is described above.

In the second article, Carr investigates best practice in using collaborative online workshops to support doctoral students who are supervised at a distance. Finding suitable ways to provide connection and interaction in distance doctoral study can help to minimise isolation, particularly at key junctions during a long programme of study. The move from cohort-based studies to individual work with supervisors is one transition point at which collaborative online workshops can provide additional support for these students. This is vital when distance is multi-faceted and includes geographical and cultural distance, as happens when students are studying from other countries. Carr gives details of an instance of this practice in action, and analyses the method and effects.

Nkomo and Daniel explore the way higher education students interact and engage with lecture recordings as part of their studies, and consider how access to these resources contributes to student learning. Questionnaire results from 660 students indicated that availability of lecture recordings did not influence decisions to attend lectures, and that new uses were found for this resource to enhance learning with flexible and adaptive elements. These uses are described more fully in the article, which contributes to the literature on institutional digital technologies and their contribution to flexible learning.

Education for Sustainability (EfS) in schools is addressed by Mostafa in an article that looks at the use of social media as a flexible collaborative learning space to support teaching in this part of the curriculum. The slant of this article is the use of social media for teacher professional learning in New Zealand, an area which is yet to be fully utilised for teachers engaged in EfS. A thorough study using questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis explores this area, and the potential for social media for teacher professional learning in EfS is identified. There is particular reference to the flexible and collaborative nature of social media being a drawcard for teachers. Findings identify the collaborative nature of social media and its reach into more remote areas as helping to overcome teacher isolation in EfS.

Hawi, Heinrich, and Lal present research that focuses on informal learning practices and how these are broadening participation in Kenyan universities. Informal learning practices are identified as a way to address disparities caused by the inability of many rural learners to attend classes in the same way as those in more urban areas. The effect of growing PC-ownership and successive generations of technology-enhanced learning provides the platform for wider learning opportunities. Results from a survey of Kenyan higher education students show there is widespread ownership of smartphones, and that these are the primary device for education. The authors quantify the ways in which this technology is used, and how informal learning practices are integral to successful student engagement and learning.

We trust you will find something of particular interest among the articles in this issue, and that the overall theme of improving remote teaching and online learning will stand you in good stead in these evolving fields.

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Hartnett, M., & Field, A. (2020). Improving Remote Teaching and Online Learning. <i>Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning</i> , 25(1), [1–3.].
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