



Editorial: Charting Flexible Pathways in Open, Mobile and Distance Education

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Abstract

This editorial offers an overview of extended papers presented at the biennial DEANZ2016 conference held at the University of Waikato, New Zealand, from 17–20th April, 2016. In tandem with the conference theme, *There and back: Charting flexible pathways in open, mobile and distance education*, this special issue highlights think pieces from the three keynote speakers and five papers that offer insights into developments and practices in open, flexible, and distance learning contexts. As such, the collection is a rich repository of ideas and research that contribute to our interrogation of how digital technologies influence teaching and learning and work in a range of New Zealand and international educational contexts.

Keywords: DEANZ2016 conference; flexible learning; teacher and learner experience; digital technologies; open learning

Introduction

This special issue of the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning (JOFDL)* features extended papers presented at the DEANZ2016 biennial conference held at the University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand, from 17–20th April, 2016. This conference was the last conducted by DEANZ, as the organisation underwent a name change at the conference and was rebranded as the Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand (FLANZ).. The conference theme, *There and back: Charting flexible pathways in open, mobile and distance education*, was inspired by Hamilton's close proximity to the Hobbiton movie set—a permanent legacy from the Sir Peter Jackson-directed trilogies based on the books by J. R. R. Tolkien.

Importantly, the conference was an opportunity for the organisation and presenters to reflect on the organisation's origins as well as current digital developments for learning. It was also an opportunity to be visionary in charting a future course that fosters research and best practices in open, flexible, and distance learning contexts. The conference, therefore, brought together a wide range of national and international presenters whose contributions added to the richness of the discussions and debates on the extent to which digital technologies can strengthen teaching, learning, and professional development across educational and multidisciplinary contexts.

As a result of the overwhelming response to our invitation for submissions to the 2016 *JOFDL* special issue, we are delighted to consider two special issues. As conference convenors of the DEANZ2016 conference, we have the privilege of co-editing this current special issue. The remaining papers are being edited by the *JOFDL* editorial team led by Niki Davis, Alison Fields, and Maggie Hartnett.

For the 2016 special issue, we have brought together two types of contributions.

A think piece from each of the three conference keynote speakers

These pieces have evolved from the keynote presentations, and offer readers a nuanced view of the way each speaker has approached and used technology. Curt Bonk, Dianne Forbes, and Carolyn Alexander-Bennett begin their think pieces with their personal encounters of how digital technologies have made a difference in their teaching and learning journey, then introduce their philosophies for incorporating technology to influence their practice, and give a personal account of the wider general trends that impinge on current educational practice. These wider trends include opportunities and challenges, and suggestions for enriching teachers' and learners' experiences.

Five of the submitted conference-refereed papers, which have been expanded into full articles after presentation at the conference

The feedback from the conference delegates, and subsequent discussions with peers during conference breaks, gave authors further ideas for enhancing the quality of their paper as they extended it for peer-reviewed submission to *JOFDL*. These five papers are, therefore, the outcome of a rigorous and value-added process to inform, challenge, and spur discussions on the ways digital technologies can be harnessed to serve education.

Keynote think pieces

Curt Bonk's think piece invites readers to consider the state of e-learning by highlighting three mega-trends impacting on teaching and learning today. These overarching trends are learner engagement, pervasive access to learning, and customisation and personalisation of learning. Bonk begins by foregrounding Plato's ideals for education and how these ideals are still relevant to and anchor many of the educational innovations to ensure best practices in today's Education 3.0 learning era. He argues for 30 ways in which learning is changing—through the plethora of technologies such as mobile devices; online tools that offer access to multimodal learning opportunities, collaboration, digital repositories, and open resources; gaming, virtual reality, and immersive systems that are available to support learners learning from anywhere, anytime, and at their own pace. Curt encourages instructors to leverage these technologies in combination with sound pedagogical approaches to create more engaging, empowered, and equitable learning environments for today's tech-savvy students.

Dianne Forbes's think piece identifies key aspects of blended learning that feature in the University of Waikato's mixed methods programme (MMP) for an undergraduate initial teacher education bachelor degree. The Faculty of Education's intention when offering the programme was to include people who had difficulty leaving their homes to study, but who could work in a local primary school during their degree programme. In her presentation, Dianne explained that she had sought feedback from students and lecturers of the programme to paint a picture of its value—especially for young mothers and those living in rural and isolated communities. Some unexpected findings were also very pleasing, such as these new teachers becoming highly digitally proficient and leading the development of digital technologies in the local school. Another was that local, rural, and often isolated schools benefitted from the presence of new teachers who have new ideas and thinking. Dianne's think piece also shows how working digitally has benefited her own professional practices as an online teacher educator.

Carolyn Alexander-Bennett's think piece explicates the origins and developments of FarNet, which is now a decade old. FarNet is an online cluster of schools catering for the teaching and learning needs of rural secondary schools in the Far North of New Zealand. The Far North has a predominantly Māori population and FarNet has strong Māori cultural underpinnings to cater for Māori participants in the region. Carolyn describes how FarNet is informed by international

literature, before summarising the opportunities and challenges offered through digital technologies to support teachers and learners in FarNet and the national virtual learning community. She concludes by encouraging the wider educational community to adopt partnership principles to ensure the equity and success of future online students.

Special issue articles

The articles following the think pieces represent a variety of contexts and experience in open, flexible, and distance learning. As such, they are a rich repository of ideas and research that contribute to our interrogation of how digital technologies influence teaching and learning and work in a range of educational contexts. These articles encompass initiatives undertaken at the macro level of systems or institution-wide policies that impinge on technology access and delivery of quality teaching and learning programmes, and those that focus on the micro level. These micro initiatives include individual practitioners undertaking trials in innovative uses of digital technologies such as mobile devices to foster teaching and professional development.

Colleen Halupa's literature review begins this section. Her focus is on the increasingly changing and complex roles that deans and heads of departments of small private educational institutions need to take to ensure their institutions remain competitive and relevant in an era dominated by open and flexible learning initiatives and resources. Her review spotlights institutions in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand because, she argues, their educational systems share origins that emanate from the philosophical establishment of the British university. Her paper details some of the challenges faced by small private institutions—such as student recruitment, limited financial capital (especially for marketing) and staff recruitment, and higher institutional fees. She gives a comprehensive yet concise guide to the additional and non-traditional roles undertaken by department heads. She highlights issues such as cost control, fundraising, marketing, recruitment and retention of students, outreach and innovation, and curricular and staff management.

Guimei Liu and John Clayton's paper describes a transnational initiative between New Zealand and China through the New Zealand–China Vocational Education and Training Model Programme, which aims to enhance the development and delivery of quality programmes offered in the context of technical vocational education and training (TVET) as part of facilitating access to New Zealand qualifications in China. One of the outcomes of this particular collaboration is establishing foundations for joint model programmes that are collaboratively designed, developed, and delivered. As part of this programme, they argue that it is important to establish performance indicators and measures of learner and institutional success. Institutions can therefore identify gaps between policy rhetoric and actual classroom reality. Such measures, they argue, need to be framed by outcomes and process measures to generate a more robust understanding of the learner experience. The authors then detail the development of a user-driven and flexible online instrument to gather student perceptions to identify when, how, and where the policy intent versus classroom reality gap occurs in TVET learning environments. Although such an instrument is currently in the development stage, the authors expect it will provide institutional decision-makers in both countries with reliable evidence of the effect of the model programme on learners' experience and achievement. They hope it will make a significant contribution to teaching, learning, and research in the TVET sector.

Dilani Gedera's paper is also set in a polytechnic context, and addresses concerns relating to quality programme design, development, and delivery. Her paper overviews an institution-wide initiative known as Designing for Learner Success (D4LS) at Otago Polytechnic. The Design 4 Learning Success initiative adopts a collaborative and agile approach to course redevelopment. D4LS encourages subject matter experts to collaborate with course developers to produce quality teaching and learning materials and activities intended to enhance learner success and

satisfaction and develop learner capabilities. Of the four key systematic phases (design, development, delivery, and evaluation) in the D4LS project, Gedera's work focuses on the development phase where she explicates, from an e-learning designer's perspective, some inherent challenges and limitations. Her paper therefore offers important insights into the value of a collaborative approach to course development and provides recommendations for e-learning designers and course developers in similar institution-wide enterprises.

Kamila Hoffmann-Dumienski's article focuses on the development of facilitators working in a blended learning environment across remote islands of the Cook Islands. Through semi-structured interviews that were designed to elicit facilitators' own perceptions of their professional lives, the findings suggest positive outcomes for engaging in an online professional community. Through this engagement, facilitators had ongoing opportunities for learning, development, and support. This combination, Hoffmann-Dumienski found, appeared to reduce facilitators' feelings of isolation, which had previously been a feature of the remoteness of their geographical locations. The finding speaks to the power of the internet to bring people together virtually, without physical proximity, when common interests sustain a community.

Positive relationships arising through connecting with internet-enabled devices are also a key feature of Jo Tilton and Maggie Harnett's article. Tilton and Hartnett provide a snapshot of digital practices in a German International School, where students in a secondary school classroom used mobile devices (principally iPads) to learn English. Findings focus on the perspectives of teachers (who were interviewed three times over a school year) in their first year of implementing a specific one-to-one iPad programme. Tilton and Hartnett suggest that the teachers' successes were important. Their experience led to developing efficacy and confidence in using these mobile devices for learning purposes, and continuing to use them. They describe how teachers ascribed importance to building students' efficacy in tandem with their own confidence. This co-developmental support helped build teachers' individual self-efficacy, and relationships between teachers and learners. Tilton and Hartnett also discovered that the affordances inherent in the device contributed to this self-efficacy, even in the face of some barriers to teachers integrating the devices regularly into their programmes.

We hope you enjoy the selection of articles in this special issue. They promise to provoke and offer nuanced insights into the possibilities, promise, and practices of technology-supported teaching and learning as well as wider institutional developments that leverage the affordances of these technologies. If you attended the DEANZ2016 conference, these articles will remind you of the broad diversity of presentations that contributed so well to the success of the event.

If you were unable to attend the conference, you can access the full proceedings and video recordings of key sessions at <http://bit.ly/2e8YFS0>

Last but not least, we are indebted to the many people who contributed to the DEANZ2016 conference and the preparation of this issue. We thank our conference organising committee at the University of Waikato for their enthusiasm and commitment, the FLANZ Executive committee for their support of the conference, and the reviewers of articles submitted for their time and critique. We also acknowledge the guidance of the *JOFDL* editorial team led by Niki Davis with Maggie Hartnett and Alison Fields. The contributions by reviewers and editors have been key to the success of this issue.

Enjoy!

Biographical notes

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Khoo, E., & Wright, N. (2016). Editorial: Charting flexible pathways in open, mobile and distance education. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning, 20(2)*, [1–5].



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