

## Openness and flexibility are the norm, but what are the challenges?

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To cite this article: Som Naidu (2017) Openness and flexibility are the norm, but what are the challenges?, Distance Education, 38:1, 1-4, DOI: [10.1080/01587919.2017.1297185](https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2017.1297185)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2017.1297185>



Published online: 02 Apr 2017.




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## EDITORIAL

# Openness and flexibility are the norm, but what are the challenges?

A key attraction of distance education has always been the flexibility it affords in terms of the time, place and pace of learning and teaching. At the heart of distance education is freedom from uniform schedules and location to be able to learn or teach. And distance education is by nature the most flexible form of learning and teaching. This flexibility may go far beyond the freedom from time, place and pace to include freedom of choice in relation to issues and topics one might study as well as the type of assessment activities that one might choose to take in return for what kind of credit and at what cost.

In the event of this level of flexibility, distance education serves as a minimalist educational provision, devoid of much of the thrills and frills of residential campus-based educational experience. In distance education, many of these accompaniments of the campus-based learning and teaching transaction such as frequent interaction of students with their teachers, other students and the educational organization are considered useful, but not essential to the achievement of the learning outcomes. In fact, distance education is better for it without the need for too much interaction, especially among students. Open access to learning opportunity, and flexibility at least in relation to where a student chooses to study, when and at what pace are its threshold principles within limits of course, such that examinations can be administered at specific times, and students are able to take them when they are offered.

Stakeholders understand the nature of the distance education transaction. Distance learners often do not seek or aspire to be in constant contact with their teachers, other students and the educational organization. They understand and expect that much of their studies will be designed as independent study with the need for only occasional support from a local tutor in person or online. Distance educators and the educational organizations are, likewise, aware of their responsibilities in relation to the management and support of the distance teaching and learning experience without too much fuss for the distance learners (see Northcott, 1984; White, 1982).

The degree of structure and guidance in this transaction in different educational contexts will vary and depend on a whole range of factors including the level of study, the nature of the subject matter and skill that is being learned and the learning and teaching context. Neither more interaction nor greater independence might be best as the need for constant communication and interaction can run the risk of negating the benefits of independent learning, place strains on the distance teaching mode by increasing costs and limit the flexibility it can afford (see Daniel & Uvalic-Trumbic, 2011; Hülsmann & Shabalala, 2016; Immerwhar, Johnson, & Gasbarra, 2008). Too much independence, on the other hand, will run the risk of isolating distance learners from their teachers, peers and the educational organisation, causing procrastination, delay and eventually attrition from the program (see Klingsieck, Fries, Horz, & Hofer, 2012; Lim, 2016). The goal in relation to this is about getting the mixture right between the degree of independence and interaction in the distance education transaction to achieve optimal balance between the two attributes (see Anderson, 2003; Daniel & Marquis, 1988).

One size will not fit all. And distance education, as we have known it, may have not gone wrong (see Baggaley, 2008). It's just that there is a need for different models of distance education

provision for different educational contexts just as there are different models of the campus-based experience for different contexts. The threshold principles at the heart of all models of distance education remain openness and flexibility which we see as value principles, much like we see diversity, equity or equality in education and society more broadly. And in the contemporary world, both in the developed and developing contexts, technological tools and infrastructure are key components of it.

While distance education is largely responsible for the articulation and spearheading of openness and flexibility as desirable value principles, these educational goals are fast becoming universally attractive across all sectors and modes of education. This is a growing trend that is illuminated by the growth of online distance learning and recent developments in this space including massive open, online courses (MOOCs). But effectively integrating openness and flexibility in learning and teaching remains patchy, although there are reports of many successful and some not so successful attempts that have been reported in this journal and others as well. The current crop of articles in this issue of the journal shed further insights into the challenges faced in this regard.

One of these challenges has to do with the sustainability of MOOCs (see Daniel & Uvalic-Trumbic, 2011; Immerwhar et al., 2008). Despite its origins in the power of connectionism (see Medler, 1998), and the imperatives for opening up access to educational opportunity, the exponential growth of MOOCs is largely driven by a desire to profit from them, and not altruism. And as the business models in relation to this are still being worked through, the article 'How OpenLearn Supports a Business Model for OER' by Patrina Law and Leigh-Anne Perryman of the United Kingdom Open University (UKOU) offers useful insights on how MOOCs can be made to work for learners and educational organizations. This article reports on a longitudinal study of the characteristics of learners who enrol in the subjects offered by the UKOU as part of its OpenLearn platform. Data collected over a three-year period as part of this study reveals that the informal learning opportunities they offer, serve as a bridge into formal learning. They also offer learners, and especially those with no or little fortitude for formal learning, an opportunity to try before they buy, which is a marketing strategy that is very popular outside the education sector. Offering something for free may not lead to revenue generation immediately, or in the short term, but it does lead to the promotion of a brand which has the potential for revenue generation through registrations in the long term.

Another challenge in these open educational environments is student persistence or its converse, attrition. Not an uncommon phenomenon in distance education, some of the causes for this are the minimalist nature of this form of educational provision (see Naidu, 2016). Other reasons for a high attrition rate in such educational contexts have to do with the learning goals and aspirations of students. Many distance education students often do not set out to complete a full program of study and often withdraw for very personal reasons which have nothing to do with the quality of their study program. As such, it is incorrect to expect that the completion rates of students in distance education programs would be the same as that of students in conventional campus-based educational settings. Distance learners have different learning goals and completion may not be their end game.

Two articles in this issue of the journal address these issues. The article 'Persistence Factors Revealed: Students' Reflections on Completing a Fully Online Program' by Dazhi Yang, Chareen Snelson, and Sally Baldwin from Boise State University investigated student and program related characteristics that influence persistence in large online distance education courses. Student characteristics included career goals, time and effort available for study and perceptions of the utility of their learning, while program attributes comprised student satisfaction with their studies and their perceptions of its relevance to personal and professional needs. The article 'Distance Learners' Multiple Goals, Learning and Achievement in Different Situations' by Clarence Ng shows how a clearer understanding of the learning goals and aspirations of students can be utilized to

predict their interest in their learning as well as their utilization of self-regulatory strategies. These are important contributions to our understanding of the critical issues around these challenges and the design of distance education programs that are able to minimize student attrition and promote persistence and completion.

A useful indicator of student persistence and success is their engagement patterns with learning and teaching activities. And that is the focus of the article 'Predicting Student Success by Modeling Student Interaction in Asynchronous Online Courses' by Brett Shelton, Jui-Long Hung, and Patrick Lowenthal of Boise State University. Learning engagement patterns have to do with things like how much time students spend on their learning activities and with what kind of regularity. It also includes how students regulate their behavior patterns in interacting with their teachers, other students and the subject matter of their study. This is the subject of the article 'Self-regulation in Three Types of Online Interaction: A Scale Development' by Moon-Heum Cho and Yoon Jung Cho from South Korea. Failure to effectively engage with teachers, other students and the subject matter content can and does serve as early warning signs of at-risk students. And the importance of this is underscored by the insightful and reflective commentary 'Learner-content Interaction in Distance Education: The Weakest Link in Interaction Research' by Junhong Xiao. The good news in this regard is that, along with developments in learning analytics, the tools for tracking learner engagement patterns are improving.

A lot can also be done to minimise attrition and promote persistence and completion with better design of the student learning experience. And there is much that we already know about how to do that. The two remaining articles in this issue add to that body of literature. The first article, 'Interdependence of Roles, Role Rotation, and Sense of Community in Online Distance Learning' by Wenting Jiang, is about better design and scaffolding of group-based learning experiences with the assignment of specific roles to students as opposed to simply assuming that a learning community will emerge just because participants are connected. The other article, 'Creating First-year Assessment Support: Lecturer Perspectives and Student Access' by Joanne Dargusch, Lois Harris, Kerry Reid-Searl, and Benjamin Taylor, is about better design and provision of cues to support students' engagement with their assessment activities. This study explored how different teachers communicate these expectations about assessment to students, and how students accessed and made use of these cues in their learning.

So, there you are. I hope you find the insights offered in these articles useful and that they add to your knowledge and understanding of the issues and topics they raise. Enjoy! The next edition of this journal is a special themed issue on the topic *Social Presence and Identity in Online Learning*, which is guest edited by Patrick Lowenthal (Boise State University, USA) and Vanessa Dennen (Florida State University, USA). Articles published in this issue (volume 38/2) will be out online soon after May 2017. And calls are now out for expressions of interest in guest editing a special themed issue of the journal to appear around May 2018 (see <http://explore.tandfonline.com/page/ed/cdie-cfp-2017>).

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