Editorial

The changing narratives of open, flexible and online learning

Increasing access to information and communications technologies worldwide, along with the opportunities that they afford for learning and teaching, is changing the narratives of open and flexible learning. Two recent reports tracking the development of online and distance education in the United States suggest that while campus-based registrations are down overall, distance education enrolments are on the rise, with one in three students in the US higher education sector taking at least one online distance education course (Legon, Gareett, & Fredericksen, 2019; Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018).

This picture is not that dissimilar in other developed as well as many developing countries. For instance, recent surveys of student access to information and communications technologies at the University of the South Pacific, which has fourteen campuses on very small island states of the southwest Pacific region, show that around 80% of its students have access to mobile devices such as laptops and smartphones along with reliable access to the Internet (Jione, Fong, & Naidu, 2019). Availability of this kind of infrastructure means that a wider range of students from high school graduates to those who are working fulltime can have access to educational opportunities. It also means access to flexible learning opportunities, and a chance to upskill and reorient while still in employment.

As a result, fewer and fewer students across the higher education sector, and around the world, are either studying or working at any one time. Instead, many are living their lives at the junction of multiple student identities, working and studying at the same time, and in search for a curriculum and qualification that will best meet their needs and career aspirations now and in the future. The implications of this kind of learning and teaching landscape for educational institutions are numerous. They include not only the need for an understanding of contemporary learners and their learning contexts, but also the design of a curriculum and its suitability for the complex learning environment that they will inhabit in the future.

This journal has a long and strong track record of publishing research and reflections that have sought to understand learning and teaching in this complex and changing contemporary higher education space. It has included reviews of relevant academic narratives and approaches to learning and teaching in order to be able to propose models for best practices for an inclusive and productive learning experience. This has comprised showcasing authentic voices of students and teachers, and understanding and responding to the particular challenges that they face, and the specific contributions they make. It has also included an examination of the appropriateness of the curriculum and its approach to a very complex learning community that is no longer simply campus based and resident in one country.

One of these groups of learners that is growing substantially on conventional campuses, and especially in the English-speaking world, is international students. There are two categories of international students. There are those who have moved from their home base to study at an institution in a foreign country, and there are those who are studying at an institution in a foreign country without moving physically from their home base. The dynamics of the learning transactions for the two groups couldn’t be more different in relation to their roles and responsibilities and that of the educational institutions with which they are engaged. It is this second category of international students that is the subject of the article by Kyungmee Lee and Brett Bligh “Four Narratives about Online International Students: A critical literature review”. In this article Lee and Bligh review the literature there is on this topic that seeks to understand the unique circumstances and the narratives of this group of international students. Their review reveals four types of narratives which sees these students as (1) unspecific others; (2) specific others with deficits; (3) specific others as pedagogical resources; and (4) active participants in international learning communities. The implications of these narratives for these learners, and the educational institutions with which they are registered, are discussed.

Another such group of students is those with disabilities. Access to learning opportunities has significant benefits for the quality of life of students with disabilities. And it is no surprise that with growing online learning opportunities, their participation in higher education is on the rise. This is the subject of the article, “Towards Another Kind of Borderlessness: Online Students with Disabilities” by Yasuhiro Kotera, Vicky Cockerill, Pauline Green, Lucy Hutchinson, Paula Shaw, and Nicholas Bowskill. This article looks beyond the economic benefits of educational access, to the promotion of inclusivity in higher education that open, flexible and online learning opportunities offer for both, students with disabilities and the educational institutions with which they are registered. From in-depth interviews, this investigation revealed three distinct themes that have the potential to help the development of more inclusive practices for students with disabilities. These are (1) having control over studies as an advantage of online learning; (2) personal touch helps these students’ online learning experience; and (3) the challenges students with disabilities experience with the social element of online learning.

Open, flexible and online learning has its advantages for many such groups of learners, but for the same reasons, it poses problems for many, and not only students with disabilities. For instance, while one might promote social presence in the form of asynchronous student-teacher and student-student interaction as a strength of online learning, students with disabilities find this kind of activity somewhat challenging. Learners who are combining learning with their many other responsibilities at home and at work find a lack of structure and guidance in open and flexible learning environments, as is in the case in MOOCs for instance, also problematic. And this is the subject of the article “Factors influencing the Pursuit of Personal Learning Goals in MOOCs” by Maartje Henderikx, Karel Kreijns, Jonatan Castaño Muñoz, and Marco Kalz.

Nevertheless, a lot can be done to sustain learner engagement and their satisfaction with the effective and efficient design of the online and flexible learning experiences of learners. Learning and teaching outside the boundaries of the physical classroom does not mean an absence of structure, guidance and support. In fact, a great deal of structure and guidance can be provided in online learning contexts with carefully designed acts related to teaching, and the social and cognitive presence of participants. When this is the case, a positive relationship has been found between teaching presence and students’ perceptions and satisfaction with their learning. The article “Exploring Presence in Online Learning through Three Forms of Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis” by Meina Zhu, Susan Herring, and Curtis Bonk demonstrates just that. This study employed three innovative complementary measures (i.e., participation analysis, linguistic inquiry and word count, and the CMC speech act taxonomy) to understand how social, cognitive and teaching presence works in online learning environments.

There are numerous ways in which these types of influences manifest themselves. Teacher presence, for instance, can manifest itself in several different ways, and invoke different kinds of responses from learners. The article “Effects of Different Types of Instructor Comments in Online Discussions” by Kyungbin Kwon, Su Jin Park, Suhkyung Shin, and Chae Young Chang examines the potential influences of three types of these comments. These are (1) praise-oriented comments, agreeing with students’ initial messages and recapping their ideas; (2) elaboration-encouraging comments, requesting elaboration on the initial messages; and (3) perspective-widening comments, suggesting different or thought-provoking opinions responding to the initial messages. This study found that perspective-widening and elaboration-encouraging comments seemed to be able to invoke much deeper levels of cognitive processing than praise-oriented comments, which didn’t seem to matter much to learners.

In the use of videos for the presentation of content, as is in the case of MOOCs, scaffolding techniques such as sequencing and fading have also been found to be useful. And this is the focus of the article “How Sequencing and Fading affects the Relationship between Intrinsic and Germane Cognitive Load” by Christopher Lange and Jamie Costley. This large-scale study explored the role of sequencing and fading in mitigating the influences on cognitive load for learners. Its results show that sequencing and fading can be used to positively influence the relationship between the nature of the content and its understanding.

Analytics of this kind is critical for a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of learners, teachers and the teaching institutions in a complex and changing learning and teaching landscape. Approaches to the gathering of this kind of intelligence are several. One of these techniques is explored in the article “Chronicling Engagement: Students’ Experience of Online Learning over Time” by Tracey Muir, Naomi Milthorpe, Cathy Stone, Janet Dyment, Elizabeth Freeman, and Belinda Hopwood. This study employed ethnographic techniques to capture the learning experience of one student over an extended period of time. Because techniques such as these have the ability to develop a more nuanced and deeper understanding of learners’ engagement with the learning and teaching transaction, they are far more powerful than the usual surveys for understanding the influences of complex intrinsic variables such as motivation, self-regulation, persistence and resilience and the part they play in learning and success.

Another such complex variable integral to learning is attention, as in the time devoted to a task. Open and flexible learning environments such as MOOCs for some people may seem too unstructured and overloaded with too many resources to explore, putting a premium on their attention span. How attention is allowed to flow to support and promote learning while preventing cognitive overload is the subject of the article “Modeling Collective Attention in Online and Flexible Learning Environments” by Jingjing Zhang, Xiaodan Lou, Hanjie Zhang, and Jiang Zhang. This study suggests that since cognitive overload affects attention, understanding its parameters is integral to the design of learning environments.

I hope that you find these articles and the issues they raise interesting and useful in your work around the design and development of productive open and flexible learning environments. The next two issues of this journal are special themed issues. Issue number three explores the topic of “learning analytics: its scope and potential in open, flexible and distance learning”. Guest editors of this issue are Jingjing Zhang (Beijing Normal University, China), Daniel Burgos (Universidad Internacional de La Rioja, Spain), and Shane Dawson (University of South Australia). And in issue number four, the last issue of this 40th anniversary volume, we will bring to you a collection of reflections on four decades of research and scholarship in the field from a number of scholars, both young and old. Looking forward to it!!

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**Som Naidu**

**Executive Editor**

[**sommnaidu@gmail.com**](mailto:sommnaidu@gmail.com)**;** [**som.naidu@usp.ac.fj**](mailto:som.naidu@usp.ac.fj)