

## Introduction

Welcome to this first open-source and online volume of the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*.

In my 2010 editorial I remarked on our journal's new title and stated, "This is not the time to go into definitions ... " (p. 2). My experience over the past year has led me to believe that some comment on definitions is, in fact, necessary. It is a sad indictment that the terms 'open', 'flexible', and 'distance' tend to be themselves open to interpretation, flexible in their use, and distant in their usefulness. The terms 'blended' and 'online' add to the general confusion.

Rather than attempt to bring finality to what ought to be more openly debated than is the case, I would rather use this space to provide my own views, which broadly reflect those of the *Journal of Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning*. These are designed to be indicative not dogmatic.

- **Open:** Education that is specifically designed to be accessible for learners, typically through open enrolment periods but also through relaxed entry criteria. 'Open', like 'flexible', is always relative.
- **Flexible:** Education that provides learners with more choice over where, how, and when they learn. Flexibility is always a relative feature of formal study; however, particular techniques that are usually applied to enhance flexibility over traditional on-campus learning make the term appropriate. Distance learning tends to be flexible by nature.
- **Distance:** Education that does not require a learner to attend on-campus or contact classes. Stated positively, distance education enables a learner to study from the location of their choice for the duration of their formal enrolment.
- **Blended:** Education that deliberately mixes the features of classroom contact and online or distance learning experiences. Typically a blended course makes online resources and experiences available to learners in order to make their learning more flexible.
- **Online:** Education that emphasises the use of online (internet) technology for study.

The definition of 'online' is particularly broad because the great variety of potential online platforms, user devices, and pedagogical approaches makes anything more specific unhelpful. Personally I find the definitions above very useful; however, it is often necessary to be more specific when using them in conversation. Although online and distance are frequently contrasted, in my definitions they are quite complementary. In my own institution, use of the term 'blended' is somewhat unhelpful at present because it tends to be used to imply the addition of online approaches to traditional distance education. Using the term 'blended' in this way is particularly problematic because some of the educational approaches we use at The Open Polytechnic "deliberately mix the features of classroom contact and online or distance learning experiences", leaving us with inadequate terminology for describing what that represents! I trust readers will be able to identify their own frustrations with terminology, and I certainly welcome any feedback, improvements or exceptions to the suggestions above. While the terms 'blended' and 'online' are not specifically included in the title of this journal, these proposed definitions show that they cannot be neatly separated from the terms 'open', 'flexible', and 'distance'.

These broad definitions help to explain the common thread across the contributions in this issue. The subjects of each article may seem ad hoc unless the shared commitment to principles of openness, flexibility, or distance is appreciated.

We begin with three primary investigation studies. Hartnett et al explore an important question for online educators: “In what ways do social and contextual factors undermine learner autonomy and competence when unique circumstances are not taken into account?” (2011, p. 4). The case-study methodology reveals factors that influence student motivation during the problem-based learning (PBL) assignment, contrasting the experiences of co-located and distance participants’ experiences of an online forum. Hartnett et al clearly show the importance of considering student motivation and student circumstances when designing student learning experiences. Following this, Fletcher et al propose how e-learning can be applied to encourage and motivate adults toward success in LLN learning, based on a case-study approach. The findings, which also draw on a literature review, reveal a rich set of benefits for LLN based on e-learning. Davis et al also hint at the innovative possibilities permitted by an e-learning approach. Our third primary study by Maathius-Smith et al considers how distance educators might work to improve Education Performance Indicators (EPis) such as course completion, and provides excellent insight into good open and distance learning practice. Maathius-Smith et al also provide six recommendations that will no doubt resonate with seasoned ODL practitioners.

We have two descriptive pieces in this issue. Khoo and Cowie suggest a framework for online learning communities, drawing on previous primary research. The guiding principles suggested give valuable guidance for practitioners seeking to maximise student engagement with online discussion. The Khoo and Cowie article also demonstrates how these principles have been applied to assist an educator who is new to the online environment to enhance his teaching. Owen gives us insight into the workings of a pilot professional learning and development model applied to New Zealand teachers, based on an online approach.

Finally, we have a position piece by Powell and Barbour, comparing the K–12 education e-learning related policies of the New Zealand Ministry of Education with the situation in North America, particularly Canada. Powell and Barbour conclude that the growth of e-learning in New Zealand is largely the result of visionary policy.

I trust that you enjoy the new format and, more importantly, that you learn from and consider contributing to the various scholarly conversations underway in this issue. It is gratifying to present an issue of *Journal of Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning* that features New Zealand scholarship and practice so prominently.

## References

Nichols, M. (2010). Introduction. *Journal of Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning* 14(1), 2–5.

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