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Editorial ~ Open Access in Action!

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Mid 2006 finds the academic research community engaged in an ideological and fiscal war related to Open Access publishing. Open Access requires that the full text of publications be made available at no cost to anyone on the open Internet. Recent position and discussion papers in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and other countries, have called for dialogue amongst academics and strongly hinted that research supported by public funds should be made available freely to the general public. The resulting discussion has clearly split the academic community with both support and rejection of the notion from all sides of the politic and discipline spectra.

IRRODL's position is, as expected, to be solidly behind all moves to insure Open Access publication. We are proudly listed with the 2,256 other journals in the Directory of Open Access Journals and our publisher, Athabasca University, is a signature to the Budapest Open Access Initiative.

The argument for continued restriction and closed publication seems to come from two sources. The first is from academics associated with non-profit societies who feel that without substantial subscription revenue (even if consumed by a commercial publisher) they will be unable to sustain the mostly paper based dissemination models that have defined their publication for many years. They argue that paper copy is critically important (they seem to have never learned how to print from the screen!) and that Open Access somehow diminishes the value of their peer review and editorial contribution. From six years of producing IRRODL, we know that editing and reviewing are non-trivial tasks that take time, skill, and creative energy, and we certainly do not subscribe to any notion that devalues this contribution to scholarly life. The second source of resistance comes from the commercial publishers who echo this resentment from a pecuniary perspective that reflects the high potential for lost income in a business line that, for a number of publishers, is their most profitable publishing activity.

I would like to enlarge this debate by including the authors, researchers, and administrators who contribute articles and focus their discussion on our discipline of distance education research. For authors, the prime consideration for publishing is impact in their community. There is a growing number of studies reporting that Open Access results in increased dissemination (see an online bibliographies of articles documenting the impact of Open Access at <http://opcit.eprints.org/oacitation-biblio.html>). These reviews are near unanimous in their conclusion that "freely available articles do have a greater research impact"(Atelman, 2004); however, there are differences in impact and the amount of Open Access across the disciplines.

What of articles in distance education journals? I recently performed a quick experiment using Google Scholar to compare the number of citations of articles in five of the most popular distance education related journals. The method by which Goggle spiders find articles is quite obscure, so there is no way of telling if the engine itself has systemic bias. Nonetheless, I counted the average

number of citations for the ten most popular articles published by these journals in the past 5 years.

Table 1. Open Access vs. Closed Access distance education journals' citations

Journal Title	Country	Aver. # of Citations	Publication
IRRODL	Canada	29.4	Open Access
American Journal of DE	USA	27.8	Closed
Journal of Distance Education	Canada	27.1	Open Access
Distance Education	Australia	24.2	Closed
Open Learning	UK	20.9	Closed

The data above shows that the two Open Access journals have higher number of citations than all but the American Journal of Distance Education. Given the wider circulation and much smaller number of articles published in the American Journal of Distance Education, it is perhaps not surprising that they have relatively high citation ratings as well. However, clearly the Open Access journals have (on average) greater number of citations and impact than closed publications. The point I draw from this is that authors wishing to maximize the impact of their research in our field are advised to select Open Access outlets.

A second view on this debate comes from an administrative and humanistic perspective. For many academics in the developed world, access to restricted or closed publications is not problematic due to access through large aggregators who sell subscriptions to university libraries. These indices often contain the full text of thousands of closed publications and they are relatively easy to use. Access for the privileged serves to obscure the seriousness of 'access issues' from a global perspective. I inquired of the cost of these databases and was told that a small university like Athabasca University pays approximately \$300,000 per year for these subscriptions. Given that collectively Athabasca researchers publish slightly more than 100 peer reviewed articles per year, one can see that the cost of this mode of academic dissemination (at least for one university) is about \$3,000 per article. Surely with this amount of money being distributed we can collectively find ways to cover the legitimate costs of editing, peer review, and distribution of scholarly articles without using means that restrict access by the vast majority of human beings on this planet. Open Access challenges researchers and practitioners to continuously strive for vehicles and techniques that allow dissemination and application of our research to the maximum number of users at the lowest possible cost.

Moving next from the political to the practical, we introduce IRRODL readers, authors, and reviewers to the Open Journal System (OJS) used as the backend and technology this issue. OJS is an open source system developed at the University of British Columbia (and now Simon Fraser University) that supports both the display and distribution of online journals, along with the submission, review, and editorial processes involved in their production. We have work yet to do in the presentation of IRRODL, and are in the midst of a learning curve as we (and our faithful authors and reviewers) learn how to effectively manage this complex system. We are convinced, however, that OJS will allow us to more effectively manage IRRODL and should reduce the time it takes all parts of the production of IRRODL.

From a reader perspective, the new layout provides a number of enriched citation and further research tools, as well as much improved search capacity across all issues. Unfortunately, the database move forced us to assign new URL's to past issues and articles. However, we hope that the new search system will allow readers to quickly find past issues and trust that the URL's will

not change again. We welcome feedback from readers, authors and reviewers as to ways that the lively OJS community can continue to improve this publishing and display system.

Finally, to a brief introduction to the contents of this issue . . .

This issue leads off with a study on plagiarism – a challenge to all educators, but perhaps one more acute for distance educators where opportunities for close supervision are reduced creating both challenge and opportunity. This study by Christine L. Jocoy and David DiBiase provides very useful information comparing the commercial service TurnItIn to teacher review. It also documents the efficacy of a plagiarism awareness program. The second article by Sherri Melrose and Kim Bergeron provides a qualitative analysis of learners' perceptions of immediacy in online learning. Immediacy has been studied in face-to-face and in synchronous models of learning, but much less work has been done illustrating the way in which instructor immediacy is expressed and perceived in asynchronous forms of online learning. David Olugbenga Ojo's and Felix Kayode Olakulehin's article next evaluates Nigerian students attitudes' to their experience of distance versus conventional education. Ojo's and Okakulehin's paper highlights the capacity of distance education to provide higher education access in regions where access to many potential students, is severely limited. Teddi S. Deka's and Patrick McMurray's article reveals significant individual factors associated with success in both face-to-face and learning via teleclasses. Given the amount of choice provided in the learning modality offered to learners today, and likelihood of even greater choice in the future, studies such as this are useful for advisors and students to gauge their likelihood of success.

Christine Grandzol and John Grandzol provide a useful and practical review of the literature relevant to online business education in the Notes section of this issue. Their summary will be of value to both academics and administrators developing and reviewing programs in this very popular subject area for online delivery. Finally, this issue features four book reviews of recent distance education texts and three Technical Notes produced by Master's degree students at Athabasca University.

We trust you will enjoy the new format and will take the opportunity to try listening to an article on your MP3 player. We also hope you will share at least one article with a colleague. If you have concerns or suggestions please email myself or IRRODL's Managing Editor, Paula Smith at paulah@athabascau.ca

References

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