

Editorial - Volume 13, Issue Number 3



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Here in the Northern Hemisphere, most of us are about to break our formal studies and work activities for a summer holiday. At Athabasca University, our graduate-paced courses are mostly finished for the term and convocation is over for another year, but like an increasing number of global workers, some parts of our organization continue 365 days a year, which includes our 25,000 undergraduate students (and their diligent teachers) who work throughout the summer, allowing formal education to provide not only physical accessibility, but temporal flexibility as well. However flexibility comes at a cost, and thus we thank the families, the work mates, and the supporting friends of all distance education students, those taking the summer off and those using the summer break to accelerate their studies.

For those who just can't leave a good research article unread, this issue will be very useful to meet your summer reading quota and expectations. It contains 16 research articles and two book reviews. My review will be short and I highlight the research articles.

The first article "Odyssey of the Mind: Social Networking in a Cyberschool" is especially relevant to those interested in either the growing number of distance programs designed for school-age children and youth or those interested in the use of new social media and Web 2.0 networked applications. This USA-based study asks, how can social media be used to reduce the loneliness of the distance learner and begin to bring us closer to the rich social interaction that can flourish in campus-based education?

There are many reasons for the generally lower completion rates of distance compared to campus-based learners. In the second article of this issue, the researchers investigate "Motivation Levels among Traditional and Open Learning Undergraduate Students in India."

They find significant differences between campus and distance students and suggest that the absence of extrinsic motivation may explain these differences.

We turn to a study from Turkey in which the “Development and Validation of the Online Student Connectedness Survey” is explored in order to measure distance students’ perceptions of connectivity in an online program. The instrument has four scales: (1) community, (2) comfort, (3) facilitation, and (4) interaction and collaboration. The development and more importantly the reuse of prevalidated instruments is important work that allows us to develop a coherent and consistent approach to research in distance education.

Next from China we learn of “Quality Assurance in E-Learning: PDPP Evaluation Model and its Application,” which explains the development of another instrument, this time designed to evaluate the planning, development, process, and product (PDPP) outcomes of a distance education program. The authors hope that the “PDPP evaluation model and its application can provide a benchmark for establishing a wider e-learning quality assurance mechanism in educational institutions.”

The increasing emphasis on accountability and quality control in both campus and distance education focuses attention on evaluation of distance education teachers. However evaluation can sometimes be destructive to productive mentoring and improvement. In this USA study, “Creating a Sustainable Online Instructor Observation System: A Case Study Highlighting Flaws when Blending Mentoring and Evaluation” the authors demonstrate how an evaluation system “provides a useful tool but no panacea for increasing quality in online teaching and learning!

Our next research article covers a familiar but unresolved issue when educational programming spans context and culture through international delivery. From South Africa, “Mapping the Interplay between Open Distance Learning and Internationalisation Principles” reminds us that transporting educational programming across national and cultural barriers is easy, but making it work effectively is much harder.

You’ve likely heard how long summer holidays can cause us to forget how to do complex tasks, notably mathematics. So to insure this doesn’t happen to IRRODL readers, we present a study from China, “Economies of Scope in Distance Education: The Case of Chinese Research Universities,” which features extensive mathematical analysis to investigate the contentious relationship between teaching and research and the costs of both.

One of the greatest sources of contention and fear among teachers is the time it takes to teach online. Research to date has been inconclusive with a host of factors, notably the instructional design and the experience of the teacher, confounding simple answers. In this USA study, researchers study “Teaching Time Investment: Does Online Really Take More Time than Face-to-Face?” They conclude that “overall, face-to-face teaching required more time per student, but certain aspects of online teaching take considerably more time per student than in the face-to-face classroom.”

Our next study, from Pakistan, studies “M-Learning Adoption: A Perspective from a Developing Country.” We all know how pervasive mobile technologies are becoming, even in the poorest regions of the world, but this does not mean they are, can, or even should be adopted for quality delivery of distance education programming. This study finds that adoption of m-learning is not that much different from adoption of earlier technologies. “Perceived usefulness, ease of use, and facilitating conditions significantly affect the students’ intention to adopt m-learning.”

Faithful readers of IRRODL probably have read articles from almost every region and most countries of the world (OK, still no article from Antarctica). But they may be surprised that this is only our second article from Russia in 13 years of publication. This is not because distance education is an unimportant means of education in Russia – one institution alone enrolls over 110,000 students – but as you see in “The Development of Distance Education in the Russian Federation and the Former Soviet Union,” research has rarely surfaced in scholarly media. We hope this is the first of many more articles from this important region.

Jumping around the world in our global exposition, we turn back to Africa to study the “Delivery of Open, Distance, and E-Learning in Kenya.” We learn “that efficient and optimal delivery of ODeL in Kenya faces both economic and infrastructural challenges,” but still distance education promises a solution to the shortages of opportunity for African students.

The use of games to increase motivation has been championed by many educational pundits, but empirically studied much less. In this article from Germany, researchers study “Learning in Educational Computer Games for Novices: The Impact of Support Provision Types on Virtual Presence, Cognitive Load, and Learning Outcomes.” The study looked at different support services that can be integrated with games and found that “the game equipped with support devices enhances learning outcomes, although no differences in cognitive load were found.”

My first research study in distance education involved audio teleconference. In those days students had to travel (sometimes many kilometers) to a community learning centre, and still the delivery network I directed (Contact North) had an annual telephone bill of \$600,000. Today both video and audio conferencing are approaching negligible costs at least when using home computers and free services such as Skype. In this study from the USA, “Examining Interactivity in Synchronous Virtual Classrooms,” the authors demonstrate the enhanced quality of interaction and feedback that this technology supports.

In a follow-up study, our friends and former guest editors from Utah, USA provide more data on the compelling case for the use of open textbooks in both distance and campus-based education. In “A Preliminary Examination of the Cost Savings and Learning Impacts of Using Open Textbooks in Middle and High School Science Classes,” the authors demonstrate 50% cost savings with no significant differences in measured student learning outcomes.

Our second last article (at last one from Canada!!) focuses on mobile learning adoption: “Using Self-Efficacy to Assess the Readiness of Nursing Educators and Students for Mobile Learning.” This article also presents a new instrument, this time to measure self-efficacy in regard to using mobile devices. It is also unique in that it focuses on learning in the workplace as opposed to classroom or home distance education study.

We end this issue with an article from Greece that deals with adaptive testing, that seemingly always ‘just around the corner’ technology that allows tests to be revised in real time in response to individual student behaviour. In “Identification of Conflicting Questions in the PARES System,” the authors demonstrate sophisticated algorithms to bring us one step closer to truly adaptive learning and testing.

We end this issue with two book reviews. The first review of *Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Distance Education and E-Learning: Models, Policies and Research* overviews the increasing importance, the techniques, and the challenges of quality control in distance education. The second targets an equally challenging topic of measuring the quality of research and of individual researchers through the use of citation analysis in *The Publish or Perish Book: Your Guide to Effective and Responsible Citation Analysis*.

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