

Editorial: Global Diversity of Distance Education

Peter S. Cookson

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Editorial: Global Diversity of Distance Education

Peter Cookson
Athabasca University

In a panel presentation at the recent International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) world conference in Dusseldorf, Germany, I had the opportunity to explain the unique role and mission of *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning (IRRODL)* vis-à-vis our more established sister journals: *Open Praxis*, *Open Learning*, *Journal of Distance Education*, *Distance Education*, and *American Journal of Distance Education*. Although all of these journals share a common commitment to the advancement of the knowledge and practice of open and distance education, each one has a unique role and mission. As the non-refereed international publication of ICDE, *Open Praxis* focuses primarily on distance education practice worldwide. As a refereed journal based at the Open University (UK), *Open Learning* regularly publishes articles relating to other parts of the world, although its primary emphasis is distance education theory, research, and practice with a British accent. As the official publication of the Canadian Association of Distance Education, *Journal of Distance Education* understandably focuses on Canadian distance education, although a significant number of articles in each issue relate to other parts of the world. As another example of an official publication of a national association, (Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia), *Distance Education* features several articles in most issues describing theory, research and/or practice in other countries. As is consonant with the geographical scope explicit in its title, *American Journal of Distance Education* emphasizes North American contributions to the theory, research and practice of distance education in North America, although contributions appear occasionally from other parts of the globe.

In contrast to the respective national and regional domains of these well established print journals, *IRRODL* is dedicated to the advancement and diffusion of knowledge relating to the theory, research, and practice of open and distance education in all nations and regions throughout the world. In soliciting manuscripts for “theme issues” and in receiving unsolicited manuscripts for “open issues,” no single country or area of the world is given priority over another. Even when articles focus on experience gained in one country or region of the world, it is anticipated that they will contain “lessons” or “insights” of relevance to distance educators in other countries and regions. Our commitment is to have our geographically diverse content reflect the full diversity of global perspectives, not just those of Anglophone and Francophone North America. Our sponsor, Athabasca University, as Canada’s Open University, is dedicated to the removal of barriers to access to education. With subscriptions free of cost for anyone connected to the Internet anywhere in the world, *IRRODL* is likewise

dedicated to the removal of barriers experienced by many distance educators, in both industrialized and non-industrialized countries, who cannot afford paid subscription fees or who otherwise do not have convenient access to a library able to pay the commercial subscription fees normally charged by academic refereed journals. By removing the economic constraints on access to subscriptions, the free subscription policy of *IRRODL* parallels the growing popular movement to favor open source software that eschews the global hegemony of commercial software.

This issue reflects the global diversity of knowledge about international distance education to which this journal is dedicated.

In their article, Jim Taylor and Peter Swannell describe how the University of Southern Queensland marked and followed a course of intentional evolution to become a *dual mode* (campus and distance teaching) university. Internal organizational structures and procedures were deliberately created and amended in order to reach out beyond the single Australian state to develop a unique higher education market niche, via the Internet, as a world class international distance education university. Taylor and Swannell's analysis demonstrates the axiom that advancement of distance education requires far more than applications of information and communications technologies.

In his article, Lorenzo García Aretio recounts the history of technologies that have been adopted by the National Distance Education University (UNED) in Spain since its founding in 1972. In turn, print, radio and audio recordings, television and video recordings, online applications via the Internet and cellular phones – each of these is described along with their respective weaknesses and strengths. This article will be of great interest to distance educators who are considering the full range of distance education technologies that are possible as well as those that are only now emerging.

Next, Insung Jung describes what appears to be a successful national teacher training program, nationwide in scope in Korea, delivered via the Internet. Jung's report on the evaluation of the Cyber Teacher Training Center analyzes the major results of online teacher training, and makes recommendations for improving the quality of such initiatives. In terms of learning achieved and applied, if not in terms of being less expensive, this experience demonstrates a cost-effective model and offers valuable lessons for countries interested in upgrading the professional qualifications of teachers.

Terry Evans, Elizabeth Stacey, and Karen Tregenza continue the theme of distance education technologies with their account of an application of technology that fell far short of its expectations – not because the technology did not work, but because the organizational structures and procedures needed to accompany and complement the instructional delivery were not consistently and adequately put in place. This article reminds us of the constant need for comprehensive program planning of all aspects of educational programs. Attention must be

given to adequate preparation of the learners and other details associated with participation – not merely to aspects directly related to the instructional delivery.

One of the technological developments now emerging that potentially will dramatically change the landscape of online distance education curricula is the innovation of *learning objects*, the focus of Stephen Downes' article. To ensure an international perspective on the topic of this technology, we asked Muain Jamlan, one of *IRRODL*'s Consulting Editors, and two of our international professors at Athabasca University, Osama Shata and Oscar Lin to share their perspectives on the meaning of learning objects for distance educators in their respective native countries, Bahrain, Egypt and China.

In the final article of this issue, Pat Fahy, Gail Crawford, and Mohamed Ally report on their continuing progress in developing an instrument distance educators can use to measure different dimensions of online teaching-learning interactions. As this instrument becomes increasingly refined, it may become or lead to development of a reliable, valid device that will enable distance educators to test the effects of specific interventions designed to increase the effectiveness of online teaching and learning.

In the “Notes” sections that follow the refereed section of this issue appear news and announcements of distance education happenings and developments in different parts of the world. We hope that distance educators around the world will regard these sections as an international notice board to share with colleagues in different countries what is happening in their countries and regions.

Our next issue, Vol. 2, No. 2, will again highlight the fact that *IRRODL* is a journal for distance educators around the world. The theme will be the hybridization campus universities are experiencing as they become dual mode institutions, creating and expanding their distance education courses and programs. With more than 20 case studies from institutions, countries, and regions, it will be a virtual treasure trove of experiences and insights of interest not only to distance educators, but also to higher educators in general who are grappling with the worldwide phenomenon of online learning and teaching.

The following issue, Vol. 3, No. 1 will be another “open issue.” Remembering that our first priority is international diversity, we invite distance educators anywhere to submit manuscripts on any topic related to open and distance teaching theory, research and practice.

We trust you will find the articles in this issue, Vol. 2, No. 1, to be of value. As a relative newcomer in the community of distance education journals, we welcome your suggestions for improvement, as well as your manuscripts and contributions to our “Notes” sections. We look forward to hearing from you.

Peter S. Cookson, Editor

Athabasca University – Canada's Open University
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