

EDITORIAL

Distance Education Leaders Across the World: Contributions to Learning for Development

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It is a very great pleasure to introduce a new series to *JL4D* that focuses on the main leaders in distance education and online learning (ODEL) across the world. Articles will cover six areas: Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, the Pacific, and South America and the Caribbean. This issue includes the first two contributions to the series, from Europe and the Pacific.

The first distance education teaching is often ascribed to Pitman who disseminated methods of learning shorthand by post in the 1840s. More extensive distance education teaching was developed during the 19th and mid-20th centuries, notably by, for example, the University of London (1858) the University of South Africa (1946) and the Open University UK (1971) (Tait, 2008). Since these early beginnings, open and distance learning has made major contributions to the initial and continuing education of learners across the world and will make a critical contribution to meeting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the future.

However, the success of open and distance learning and practitioners' continuing engagement with the affordances of new technologies – from printed materials to podcasts, from cyclostyled notes to social media - would not have been achieved without significant international leadership, both past and present. This series aims to celebrate these leaders in our field.

The authors of these articles are themselves distinguished distance educators and draw on their own experience in policy and practice in the ODeL field to identify the significant leaders in their area.

Our first article focuses on distance education leaders from Europe and is provided by Professor Alan Tait, former, and now Emeritus, Editor of this journal. Alan is also Emeritus Professor of Distance Education and Development at the Open University UK (OU UK) where he spent most of his working life as Senior Counsellor, Dean of the Faculty of Education and Language Studies, and Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic). He has also had a major impact on European developments in ODeL, being one of the founding team that set up the European Distance and e-Learning Network (EDEN) in 1991, and as President of EDEN from 2007-2010. His international experience and consultancies are, and continue to be, extensive. In the past, these included the co-founding of the *Cambridge International Conference on Open and Distance Learning* with Roger Mills, which ran from 1983 – 2013. Alan's publications include seminal and more recent articles on learner support (for example, Tait, 2000), very early recognition and analysis of the importance of *The Convergence of Distance and Conventional Education* (1999) and more recently the application of Amartya Sen's capability approach to development and its relevance to ODeL (for example, Tait, 2014). Alan is therefore particularly well placed to discuss distance education leaders in Europe.



Our second article in this series covers the Pacific region and is authored by Dr Carina Bossu from the Tasmanian Institute of Learning and Teaching at the University of Tasmania; Carina is also Fellow of the Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education (ASCILITE). Carina's original work concerned the policy and staff development practices in place to support distance educators and she is now a leading proponent of the potential of Open Educational Resources (OERs) and Open Educational Practices (OEP) to support learning and teaching in higher and distance education. She is particularly interested in the ways in which OER and OEP can promote social inclusion (Bossu, Bull & Brown, 2012) and increase equity (Willems & Bossu, 2012). She has also contributed to discussions about the, perhaps surprising, lack of uptake of OER and OEP in Australia and how this might be resolved through a new Feasibility Protocol (Bossu, Bull & Brown, 2015). Carina has worked in collaborations with institutions in New Zealand and Fiji and so has extensive experience of the Pacific area.

Our two invited articles emphasise the importance of online and digital technologies for the future, both by empowering individuals through self-directed online learning and by contributing to the professional development of the teachers who are so critically needed in many parts of the world.

Bonk & Lee discuss learning preferences, motivations, and perceptions of life change through the findings from a survey completed by 159 participants studying a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). It is clear from the results that informal online study by self-directed learners can be very empowering, increase learning motivation and make a major contribution towards personal development.

Digital technologies have a significant role in Moon & Villet's important article on the crisis in availability of qualified teachers in Sub-Saharan Africa. This has a major impact on the learning of children: after three years of primary public schooling 70% could not read a sentence and 20% could not recognise numbers. The authors argue that further professional development of teachers is essential through a school-based, digitally supported network model of provision. They propose three phases for the adoption of digital learning, which would entail shifts in government policy and practice.

The crucial role of teachers is also highlighted in our research article by Miglani and Awadhiya in the context of mobile learning (m-learning) in five Commonwealth Asian countries. m-learning can increase access and educational opportunities (Valk, Rashid & Elder, 2010) but, as Miglani and Awadhiya argue, the adoption of m-learning will only be successful if teachers are able and willing to use the medium effectively in their teaching. Their study therefore examines the perceptions of 102 teachers towards m-learning and concludes generally that teachers have positive views on the potential for m-learning for both academic and administrative matters, although it is unlikely to replace other media entirely.

Changes are essential to meet the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Our commentary from Gokool-Ramdoo & Rumjaun argues that previous attempts to meet development goals have not been entirely successful because of the lack of integration between different isolated "dots", such as global and local contexts; present and future challenges; critical and systemic thinking. They propose a new framework to connect these isolated dots and scaffold education for SDGs in the future. This is

through a Sustainable Development-compliant National Qualifications Credit framework (SD-NQCF) informed by a systems approach.

The implications for the instructional design of MOOCs are discussed in our invited article by Bonk and Lee, with the acknowledgement that their sample was predominantly North American. Instructional design in some less well-resourced countries, with low or variable Internet connectivity, remains focussed on print-based materials, as illustrated by our case study by Simui, Mundende, Mwewa, Kakana & Namangala from the University of Zambia. They review the “user-friendliness” of four modules in their Bachelor of Teacher Education programme and discuss the 10 important basic requirements for instructional design. These include font size, interactive engagement and the inclusion of real-life situations.

This issue of *JL4D* illustrates some key themes from very different perspectives. Teacher education features prominently: this includes the critical importance of quality teacher education to meet SDGs (Moon & Villet); involves teachers’ ability and willingness to use technologies such as mobile learning (Miglani and Awadhiya); and will also depend on how easy it is for teachers to learn from any technology available, whether print-based or not (Simui et al).

New technologies are also crucial: they can make a major contribution to the professional development of teachers (Moon & Villet) and increase access in Commonwealth Asian countries (Miglani & Awadyiha). Informal online learning can also empower learners and increase their motivation to study (Bonk & Lee).

All articles contribute to the agenda for education for sustainable development, and in particular how it can effectively be implemented; and this is the special focus of our commentary by Gokool-Ramdoos and Ramjaun.

However, as several authors note, it is crucial to have the right leadership, strategies and pedagogies in place to ensure that learning for development takes place. Our articles on leaders in distance education across the world provide some examples of this leadership and we look forward to future articles in the series.

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