Journal of Learning for Development – JL4D

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Bridging Fields at a Critical Time

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Abstract

The launch of the *Journal of Learning for Development* occurs at a critical time for the education and development field. The 'massive open online course' concept currently being implemented by Western educators is considered as a potential cost-saver in developing nations also. MOOCs based on reliable pedagogical principles can be useful vehicles for education and training. Others follow less orthodox guidelines: e.g., solving the problems of teaching and grading massive student numbers by dispensing with teachers and having the students grade each others' work. Evaluation studies of MOOC impact do not confirm that these methods are universally viable, and indicate that MOOC courses and evaluations have not yet taken developing-country needs into account. In the debate about this new trend, a division has formed between the principles of online pedagogy in mainstream education and those developed over four decades in the distance education literature. Disciplinary sub-divisions are similarly noted in the learning and development literature as a whole. The new *Journal*, with its intended emphasis on the education and training needs of developing as well as developed regions, can provide assistance in the integration of knowledge about technological innovations, and advice about the educational directions that developing nations should take.

Introduction

The Learning and Development Publishing Field

The *Journal of Learning for Development* is a new arrival in the education and development literature, joining numerous existing journals with overlapping goals. A useful source of information in this respect has been the journal rankings provided by the *Excellence of Research for Australia* (ERA) project. From 2008-2010, the project rated the impact of 20,712 academic journals, including 1,371 with "education" in their titles, "educational" (105), "development" (293) and "learning" (132). After removing topics such as cognitive and child development from the list, 15 journals remain, covering: international development (7); global development (2); community development (2); educational development (1); learning and development (1); and open learning (2). The common denominatorof these fields – educational technologies and techniques – is also discussed in 150 other journals in the ERA list, with titles including "communication/ communications technology/ technologies" (67) "information technology/ technologies" (51); "instruction/ instructional" (16); "distance education/ learning" (10); and "educational technology/ media" (6). Meanwhile, the *SCImago* project (2011) has rated a similar number of journals (19,708), including 573 classified under "education". Naturally, discussion of these topics is not limited to journals in which they are specified in the title. For example, *Educational Technology Abstracts* (2011) lists 786 journals in which educational technology topics are reported. From all of these journal titles, one leaps out as expressing perfectly the current state of affairs in journal publishing: *Babel*!

How do readers cope with this overload? Solutions include focusing on journals in their own regions (e.g., the *Canadian Journal of Education & Technology,* or the *Turkish Journal of Online Distance Education*), or on journals with specific sub-interests (e.g., *Applied*

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Instructional Design, or *Information Technology and Disabilities*) or in specific disciplines (e.g., *Journal of Pharmacy Practice and Research*, or *Computers in Music Research*). Readers may also select their journals based on the impact ratings produced by projects such as *ERA* and *SCImago*, although this solution does not as yet appear too reliable. In 2010, for example, the annual ranking of journals by the ERA project was abandoned after it was noted that an individual journal had been inconsistently rated A, C, and B in successive reports, and that journals with high ratings were not necessarily those highly respected in specialised fields (Howard, 2011). The latter problem had been particularly apparent in the distance education (DE) field, whose ten listed journals received relatively low ERA ratings owing to lack of interest in or regard for DE among mainstream academics.

The inconsistent approach to evaluation issues in the education and development literature in the last three decades has been indicated by successive content analyses of conference and journal output. Latchem *et al*. (1999, 2006) showed a general neglect of instructional design and evaluation issues between 1995 and 2004. Baggaley (2012) confirmed this finding in an analysis of keywords used by journal authors from 1985 to 2009 (*Figure 1*). The Figure suggests that the number of educational technology-related articles featuring "evaluation" and "instructional effectiveness/ design" as keywords dropped steadily during this period, and that "quality" has not been a common keyword in educational technology journals for at least 25 years.
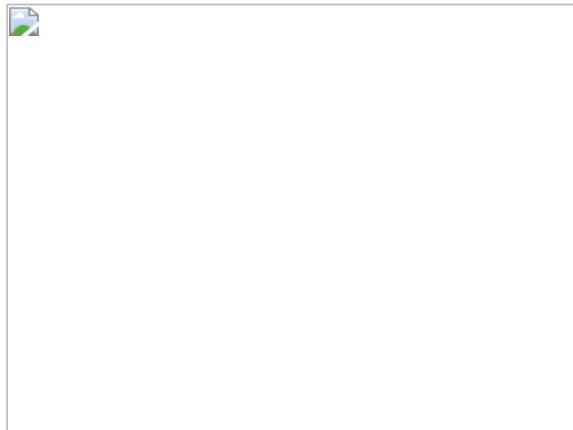

Figure 1. Declining research use of instructional design
and evaluation keywords.

Source. Baggaley, 2012 (p. 29)

On the other hand, theoretical and practical guidelines regarding instructional design and evaluation, learner support, teacher-student interaction, and global education approaches have been a common focus of educational media textbooks (e.g., Laurillard, 2002, 2012; Tait, 2003; Carr-Chellman, 2005; Koumi, 2006); and principles for using the media in each of these areas were generated in community development ninety years ago (James, 1996 a, b). So design and evaluation issues cannot be said to have been ignored in the learning and development literature. The perceived quality of that specialised literature, already challenged by the ERA rankings, is currently being called into question by influential educational leaders. Hunter R. Rawlings III, President of the Association of American Universities, states this explicitly in supporting the creation of a new Global Learning Council (GLC) to establish reliable guidelines for online education:

> (E)ven as online education expands rapidly and on an enormous scale,
> there is very little good research on the best forms of online learning, and,
> I might add, there are no good studies on what constitutes bad online
> pedagogy, of which there is a fair amount.

> (O'Neil, 2013)

The new GLC's Chair, President Subra Suresh of Carnegie Mellon University, confirms this perception in stating that the Council's role will be to rectify the educational media literature's alleged inadequacies: "(O)ur goal is to create guidelines and best practices that ensure academic rigor and successful learning for students worldwide" (Walters, 2013). It is to be hoped that the GLC will rapidly take note of the numerous 'best practices' guidelines developed for online learning by professional organisations in Asia, Australia, Europe, and the USA since the 1990s (Belawati, 2010). Otherwise, the new Global Learning Council will encourage a schism between DE specialists and mainstream educators as to future learning and development directions.

A Critical Time

The gulf in understanding between mainstream educators and DE specialists has come to the fore as a result of the emergence of the 'massive open online course' (MOOC). Since 2012, a worldwide marketing campaign has led to the development of MOOCs by many of the world's most prestigious universities and colleges, with individual courses attended online by hundreds of thousands of online students (Daniel, 2012; Baggaley, 2013). Such educational tipping-points have occurred before – in the 1960s, for example, when the problem of over-crowded lecture theatres was handled by adding closed-circuit TV so that lectures could be watched in adjoining rooms, and in the 1970s when the broadcast media were harnessed so that lectures could also be received by the general public. The profusion of design and evaluation principles emerged in part from the lessons of these initiatives; and if MOOC designers apply the lessons of earlier DE research, their massive courses may prove successful.

So far, however, this does not appear to be happening on a wide scale. Many early MOOCs have handled the inability of teachers to interact with and grade massive student numbers by dismissing the teacher from the process, and having the students teach and grade each other. A review of 45 early MOOC evaluations by Liyanagunawardena *et al.* (2013) stresses that this experience "can be challenging or even overwhelming" for the students, and that the absence of supervision by teachers can lead to problems all too common in online education: e.g., unacceptable behaviour such as "forceful intellectual debates, feelings of participation being demanded, and rude behaviour". Either the early MOOC advocates believe that instructional design, learner support, and teacher-student interaction principles are no longer relevant in the online era, or, coming primarily from academic areas other than education (e.g., electrical engineering and computing sciences), they may simply be unaware of the educational literature. In view of the separation of the specialised and mainstream literatures discussed above, the latter explanation seems reasonable.

The need for MOOC designers to take account of the previous literature is thus critical. As Holton (2012) has observed, however:

> Especially disturbing is that *none* of the major MOOC providers have hired *anyone* trained in instructional design, the learning sciences, educational technology, course design, or other educational specialties to help with the design of their courses. They are hiring a lot of programmers and recruiting a lot of faculty, who may have various motivations for participating in these open education experiments. To their credit though, edX, backed by $60 million from MIT and Harvard, is hiring one person to help with course development …

While Holton's suggestion that MOOC providers are not hiring course development specialists might clearly be disputed, the comments of influential educators such as Rawlings and Suresh (O'Neil, 2013; Walters, 2013) make it plain that previous educational media design principles are not currently held in high regard by leading mainstream educators. Bates (2013) asks: why are major educational institutions ignoring 25 years of experience and research as to how MOOCs could be designed effectively? Similarly, Daniel (2013) has stressed the disregard of MOOC designers for experience gained in the development of massive open courses over 40 years. This lack of concern for conventional DE principles is particularly critical with reference to the adoption of much-needed online learning methods in developing nations, in many of which DE already has a public image as a second-rate form of education (Laaser, 2006; Doung Vuth et al., 2007; Chen Li & Wang Nan, 2010; Wikramanayake *et al.*, 2010). This negative image and the reasons for it have been summarised with particular force by Gulati (2008):

> (A)lthough these developments aim for equitable and extended educational opportunities that extend to disadvantaged and poor populations, the lack of educational and technology infrastructures, lack of trained teachers, negative attitudes towards distance learning, social and cultural restrictions imposed on girls and women, and inappropriate policy and funding decisions, have all resulted in furthering the gap between the rich and poor, rural and urban, and between genders.

It is therefore important for educators in developing regions to take these issues into account in developing MOOCs; for the uncritical adoption of MOOCs with design problems could deepen the negative perception of DE in those countries. Liyanagunawardena *et al.* (2013), however, report that very few early MOOCs and evaluations of them have been based outside North America and Europe. Even public statements by Western providers of MOOCs are confirming their common pedagogical problems: e.g., 5-10% student interaction in online discussions, and 75% dropout rates (Norvig, 2013). Despite these problems, and the lack of evidence for the universal viability of MOOCs, developing-

nations educators may well be tempted to develop them, nonetheless, hoping that they will somehow avoid the problems of previous forms of online education in their regions. They should consider whether the negative outcomes of massive online courses being reported elsewhere are acceptable to them, and they are well advised to base MOOC developments on careful local research and evaluation.

Conclusions

In the emerging world, unquestioning adoption of novel practices lacking a reliable pedagogical basis may jeopardise DE developments achieved to date. Online practices involving massive student numbers and no teachers may not provide a solid pedagogical framework; and without careful design and evaluation the current MOOC trend is unlikely to extend educational opportunities in poor and disadvantaged societies that lack online infrastructure. Currently, however, existing design and evaluation principles are being challenged by mainstream educators, and a division is intensifying between principles promoted in the DE literature and those being applied in the development of massive student-taught courses. This schism might not have occurred if the educational literature had not become sub-divided into regional, disciplinary and interest areas, and had maintained a more constant focus on evaluation and quality issues. Even within the DE field specifically, how many of today's practitioners are aware of the continuing legacy of the community development literature, notably in Australia and Canada? How many are familiar with the identical DE approaches produced under different labels in the community development and international development fields? How many overlook the shared lessons of the (formal) education and (non-formal) training fields, in concentrating exclusively on one or the other? And how many ignore the educational needs of the developing world by focusing exclusively on developed world issues (Baggaley, 2012)? The shared legacy of educational principles in these areas is little recognised today, as research foci grow narrower.

The need for integration of the international development, community development and global DE literatures is thus critical. Despite the profusion of journals covering learning, development, and their underlying issues, there are clear niches for a new journal to fill. The distinct fields of international development, community development, and DE – discussed separately in numerous publications – need to be recognised within a single focus; and the mission statement of the new *Journal of Learning for Development* (JL4D) acknowledges this need explicitly in stating that the *Journal* will focus on socio-economic aspects of learning in diverse global forms. The attention paid to developing-nations issues in the DE literature has increased during the last ten years in journals such as *Distance Education* and the *International Review of Research in Open & Distance Learning*. Occasional theme editions, however, are insufficient to impress the educational problems of the emerging nations upon a worldwide audience, and by bridging boundaries within the 'learning for development' field, *JL4D* can draw attention to these problems.

It would be regrettable if the steady evolution of the technology-based 'mega-universities' (Daniel, 1996) and their dominance by Asian institutions (Wikipedia, 2013) were now to be reversed by the adoption of Western practices that may in time come to be described as "un-developing". The new *JL4D* can anticipate the problems of current and future educational trends via its applied focus on the access and equity problems of learning and development in the developed and developing nations – problems to which the developers of massive open online courses have evidently given little or no attention to date. The *Journal* can verify whether these problems are consistent across disciplines and cultures, and whether conditions can be designed in which students can ever learn reliably from support materials and from each other without access to a teacher. The *Journal* can apply these lessons in numerous international and community development areas, and can help to improve the intra-disciplinary integrity of the learning and development field by creating bridges between educational sub-areas that should never have grown apart.

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