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See table of contents

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Editorial

Collaborative Efforts, Quality, and Performance: Hallmarks of Successful Teaching and Learning

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In a confused and often-angry world that regularly seems on the brink of "something," it's heartening to see research that features collaboration among researchers and countries and the linkage of ideas and processes. Our first several articles that do just that, specifically attending to issues around OER, MOOCs, and, of course, learning.

Castaño-Muñoz, Colucci, and **Smidt**, responding to the increased demands on European systems given the increasing numbers of new arrivals, presents the results of a qualitative study that was carried out as part of the Moocs4Inclusion project of the Joint Research Centre (JRC) between July and December 2016. The study, which has a European focus, considers Free Digital Learning (FDL) initiatives by three most common purposes: a) language learning, b) civic integration and employment, and c) higher education. Their results show that there are overlaps between the purposes of FDL initiatives and their design principles, and makes recommendation for better design.

Affouneh, Wimpenny, Ghodieh, Alsaud, and **Obaid** trace the process of development of the first Palestinian MOOC, Discover Palestine, from its early inception as a cross institutional online course, to its current delivery and engagement with a global and diverse group of learners. The findings share not only the hurdles the Discover Palestine team had to navigate during MOOC development, but also how academic collaborations promoting open education practices offer powerful tools for the reciprocal exchange of knowledge, not least in shifting mindsets, and offering opportunities for shared fields of understanding to be realized in revealing creative, cultural practices, as well as lost histories.

Is there value to online group projects and the collaborative efforts they require? (And that many students heartily dislike?) **Donelan** and **Kear** address these challenges by exploring students' and tutors' experiences of a group project. Findings highlighted four key aspects for successful online group projects and for motivating students to participate fully. An important aspect for success is authenticity. Not surprisingly, findings also showed that tutors were unconvinced of the value and fairness of assessing students partly on a group, as opposed to an individual, basis.

Blomgren observed the commonalties in the perceptions of purpose, practical uses, and challenges in the use of Open Educational Resources (OER) in Higher Education (HE) and K-12, both sharing the need for high-quality educational resources to assist in teaching and learning, finding benefits in cost-savings for resources as well as user-generated content, instructor creativity, and contextualized and responsively timely learning opportunities. Increased OER awareness is needed at both levels to enhance and deepen good practice.

The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) has identified the development of open educational resources (OER) as a potential answer to the challenges of providing relevant access to inclusive and equitable learning. **Abeywardena, Karunanayaka, Nkwenti,** and **Tladi** describe the collaborative development of 29 provincial/regional OER policies and guidelines that were developed in Sri Lanka, Botswana, and Cameroon. Their paper discusses how they made this large collaborative project work and highlights the success factors, challenges, and follow-up activities of the project.

Zhang's article on OER also concerns connection but focuses more directly on developing language learners' meta-linguistic understanding of the interrelation among linguistic form (grammar/vocabulary), meaning, and context. By drawing written documents and student interviews conducted over an academic semester in an EFL writing course, this qualitative study shows that the systemic functional linguistics (SFL) theory-based material adoption did a good job of supporting EFL students in their internalization of language knowledge from both open educational resources and traditional textbooks, while also enabling students to use materials flexibly instead of passively following along with the content in the mandatory textbook.

We hope and optimistically expect that from collaboration and sharing comes quality. Issues of quality are high in importance for reasons of academic integrity, accountability, and the practicalities of funding, recruitment, and marketing.

From Nigeria, **Reju** and **Jita** examined students' experiences with distance and online learning of undergraduate mathematics in two major Nigerian universities. They identified problems: the results of the study suggested that the abstract nature of mathematics was not appropriately addressed in the course content and that the absence of helpful and visible tutors for the subject complicated the challenge of understanding abstract mathematics. They also identified the the need for improvement in the design, development, and provision of mathematics course materials and programmes for distance and online mathematics learning.

Staying with quality in international contexts, **Marciniak** examined quality issues in Spain. In her paper, she presented a model designed to assess the quality of online higher education online programmes that includes the assessment of the quality of the programme itself. In order to design the model, **Marciniak** conducted a bibliographical analysis of different standards, models, and guides developed in Spain and other countries to assess online education. The model guides the implementation of online programmes and allows for a more comprehensive assessment of the programme to discover opportunities for improvement.

Faulconer and **Gruss** examined the nature of non-traditional labs that are increasingly used in higher education. While their research indicates that these non-traditional approaches to lab experiences are as effective at achieving the learning outcomes as traditional labs, their research outlines further important considerations such as operating and maintenance cost, growth potential, and safety. They identify several weaknesses in the existing literature and conclude that although novel work on non-traditional labs continues to be published, investigations are still needed into cost differences, acquisition of procedural skills, preparation for advanced work, and instructor contact time.

In their article on quality of a different (and not much discussed) sort, **Poalses** and **Bezuidenhout** used a comparative mixed method design using the Job Demands-Resources tool to measure work stress on academic and administrative staff at an open and distance learning university in South Africa. Findings from 294 university staff members elucidated their experience of work stress within a university in the developing world. Mindfulness about the stressors that influence university personnel can inform strategic interventions required to alleviate distress for each employment category.

Quality and performance form another close linkage. The following four articles deal with a variety of performance issues.

Perceiving a gap in research on the importance of the relationship of goal orientation to the predictability of academic performance in adult distance education, **Neroni, Meijs, Leontjevas, Kirschner,** and **De Groot** investigated the relationship between goal orientation and academic performance in adult distance learners at an open university in the Netherlands. A mixed model regression showed performance approach goal orientation to be a positive predictor of academic performance, whereas performance avoidance and work avoidance were negative predictors of academic performance. Implications of these results are discussed.

Sun, Lin, and **Chou** were also concerned with online learners' performance. Their study classified 160 graduate students into three group types: low reading duration with low motivation, low reading duration with high motivation, and high reading duration based on a second-order cluster analysis. After performing a sequential analysis, this study reveals that highly motivated students exhibited a relatively serious reading pattern in a multi-tasking learning environment, and that online reading duration was a significant indicator of motivation in taking an online course.

Skordaki and **Bainbridge** present the results of a research study on the reliable application of scientific software training in blended learning environments. A key issue in current literature is the requirement for a theory-substantiated training framework that will support knowledge-sharing among scientific software users. Following a grounded theory research design in a qualitative methodology, researchers report that the study's findings indicate the importance of three key themes in designing training methods for successful application of scientific software: (a) responsibility in comprehension; (b) discipline; and (c) ability to adapt.

Ali and **Arshad** proposed that m-learning will continue to have a massive role in the development in teaching and learning and that learners' desire to use this technology is the main factor that will eventually lead to successful implementation of m-learning. To explore this contention, they developed a research

model that included the unified theory of acceptance and use of technology (UTAUT) as well as learners' autonomy (LA) and content quality design (CQD). Significant results and the limitations of the findings are discussed along with areas of possible future research in this area.

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On that note, we have in this issue two notes. The first is a field note from **Petrovic-Dzerdz** and **Trépanier.** With the notion of "online hunting and gathering" captured in an intriguing title, the authors suggest that the "individualization of learning," which can result in a very solitary and isolated endeavour, does not have to be the case. They provide an example of a successful online course with carefully crafted online instructional design strategies that contribute to a flexible and rich experiential learning environment thus permitting learners and teachers to remain closely interconnected, engaged, and accountable for both individual and group success in knowledge "hunting, gathering, and sharing" activities.

Shea and **Bidjerano** present the second note, a research note that also deals with issues of learner performance. Their state-wide study was based in SUNY's 30 community colleges where they sought to find if there was a "tipping point" at which online course loads becomes problematic for community college learners seeking to attain a degree through a mix of online and face-to-face coursework. Results indicated that community college students who take more than 40% of their courses online begin to lose the benefits of enhanced degree completion conferred through a mix of online and face-to-face enrollment. Variables are discussed.

That concludes the Spring 2018 issue 19(2)! We have three more 2018 issues on-the-go! We appreciate your support and wish you pleasant and informative reading.