

Editorial for EJEL Volume 16 Issue 1

In this issue, we present six papers that from various perspectives underline the importance of exploring the development, implementation and actual unfolding of e-learning in relation to actual contexts and real people – the learners and the teaching practitioners. The papers deal with young learners as well as higher education, in different fields, pedagogic setups and geographical distribution.

In the first paper Jacek Uziak, M. Tunde Oladiran, Edmund Lorencowicz and Kurt Becker present the learnings derived from a nine-year study, that followed the same BlackBoard (BB) mediated blended learning mode delivery of a third year mechanical engineering course at the University of Botswana (UB). Each year, the students' views were covered by a questionnaire survey, while the instructor's perspective on motivation and challenges were described. The paper presents how the course developed over time as an interaction between the students' voice and the teachers increasing familiarity with BB. The study shows that the students were willing to take and use the offers given and that obstacles lie elsewhere. Apart from power and internet breakdowns, the barriers were identified as teachers' time requirement for preparation being overwhelming, lack of organizational support in terms of pedagogical and technical help, and a missing link between BB and the student record system.

In the second paper Sophie McKenzie, Aaron Spence and Maria Nicholas explore the design, development and evaluation of 'A to Z Safari' an early childhood literacy iPad application, focusing on learning the English Alphabet based on the children's knowledge of letter-sounds. The app was tried out in Australian classrooms. This research uncovered the importance of observing the use of apps in the classroom environment to determine what modes of communication (e.g. aural, visual,) are best suited to supporting learning. During the tryouts, it was found that the app conveyed the relation between letter-sound and visual representation in relation to the children's game play, and the ability of the teachers to support. The challenge appeared to be making the app suitable as a learning tool in wider contexts. Improvements are suggested, e.g.: change of content design for certain letters; use of sounds in classroom environments; ability to review letter-sound combinations outside of game play; improvements to the teacher area to provide quicker and customisable access to visualisation of data on both a macro (class) and micro (student) level, along with data capturing for learning analytics.

In contrast to the first paper of this issue, Jean Claude Byungura, Henrik Hansson, Mugabe Muparasi and Ben Ruhinda find in their contribution that the digital literacy and familiarity with digital technology among first year students at University of Rwanda (UR), the majority are not familiar with technology and never had any previous exposure to e-Learning systems. Smartphones are the most accessed, owned and used tools but they are rarely or never used for learning activities. The authors argue that this may be expected to be the case in similar contexts around the world and warn against the assumption that people born into the digital age automatically become digitally literate. This means that only a few students are capable of benefiting from the university's ongoing shift from traditional to online learning. Therefore, this study makes a contribution with pointers to improving first-year students' digital literacy, and meeting their learning preferences.

Anne-Mette Nortvig, Anne Kristine Petersen and Søren HattesenBalle present in their paper a literature review focusing on professional bachelor education and teacher training, and on factors - apart from the teaching format itself - that influence learning experiences in e-learning, online learning and blended learning. The authors ask the question: which factors are found to influence e-learning and blended learning in relation to learning outcome, student satisfaction and engagement in collaboration in higher education, and particularly in professional education? The extensive review reveals factors that are found to have significant influence on student learning. These relate to the teacher's role in establishing a strong educator presence in online settings, and in building online learning communities that foster positive relations among the participants. For the students, the presence of appropriate teaching and learning spaces online as well as off-line, and the presence of engaging and meaningful learning communities that support the students' social relations are also of importance. Additionally, the presence of designed coherence between online and offline activities as well as between campus-related and practice-related activities are important.. The authors conclude that further research is needed, the better to understand what influences students' learning experiences in the online formats of professional bachelor programs.

In the fifth paper Paula Charbonneau-Gowdy builds on an extensive and longitudinal data collection of qualitative and quantitative data regarding the uncovering of challenges in Virtual Learning Environments (VLE's); in particular those related to participatory issues that are being recognized in educational scholarship from a sociocultural perspective as the essence of successful learning, regardless of the field. Thus, learners' proactive and critical participation in knowledge building through social interaction online, as opposed to passive assimilation, are closely connected to effective learning programs and their desired outcomes. The findings, however, are that this desired student participation is not present in most of the studied programs; and therefore, these programs are at serious risk of failing. The author points out that the technological implementation moves towards increased and large-scale use of digital learning environments, a scenario that also increases the risk of failing in relation to both learning outcome and economic loss. This message, the author claims, has difficulties being heard among decision makers. Charbonneau-Gowdy argues that understanding the barriers that prevent these participatory practices involves a multifaceted perspective, including the voices of learners, and importantly, teaching practitioners. In the paper Charbonneau-Gowdy demonstrates a framework for evaluation of learning programmes that invites the involved actors to reflect, negotiate and have dialogues at all levels of the organisation for arriving at concrete solutions to the identified challenge.

The paper by Janine Knight and Elena Barbera explores the role of navigation as the learner agency in Integrative Computer Assisted Language Learning (a type of CALL that encompasses networked learning and multimedia, including hypermedia). Navigation has been a focus of attention in more established CALL scenarios but much less in emerging CALL scenarios such as, for example, augmented reality. The paper explores learners' navigational acts and their relationship with talk, thus contributing to help designers and teachers to foster learner agency in future tasks; gives insight into task based learning that requires movement for navigation; and considers its impact on language learning. The results suggest that directional agency is present across other CALL scenarios and task types, and that directional agency can be shared across learners and technological features. Also multiple forms of navigation including embodied navigation and whole or partial human body navigation can occur in the same task. The navigational acts can accompany learner-learner talk and they can also form part of learner-computer 'talk' resembling sequential turn-taking of talk so that both learners and digital technologies can be understood as potential actors in the task discourse.

Journal Editors

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