

Editorial: Well Balanced with an International Focus

Terry Anderson

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November – 2005

Editorial – Well Balanced with an International Focus

Volume 6, Number 3 of IRRODL presents a well-balanced international focus with submissions from Sweden, Canada, USA, Oman, and Mauritius, and China. The issue promises an interesting read and hopefully serious study as we present nine main articles, two book reviews, three technical reviews, and two archived audio-graphic CIDER Sessions from IRRODL's publisher, the *Canadian Institute of Distance Education Research* (<http://cider.athabascau.ca>).

Main Section

The issue leads off with an excellent paper and call to action for researchers and theorist relating to systems theory in distance education. Steven C. Shaffer in *System Dynamics in Distance Education and a Call to Develop a Standard Model*, makes a soundly reasoned call for a standard model of distance education (DE). Drawing from the discipline of systems dynamics, Shaffer tell us that, "Systems thought in an educational context is problematic; authors sometimes write about looking at an educational situation from "a systems perspective," but then do not apply the tools and techniques of systems theory or system dynamics." We are long overdue for standard models for DE research and practice. Though 'systems thinking' does not reveal all of potential interest to distance educators, the demands for quality, cost and learning effectiveness that permeate much of our thinking suggests that systems models do have much to offer to both researchers and practitioners. Clearly, it is hard work applying standard models to messy world of human systems; doing so takes tremendous insight into both the intricacies of the system (DE in our instance) and the model (System Dynamics). I believe Shaffer has done an admirable job and has pointed researchers in a workable direction. For this we applaud his effort and suggest that we heed his call.

The next two papers come to us in a 'natural pair' focused on science education at a distance. The first is a case study by James Cheaney and Thomas Ingebritsen entitled: *Problem-based Learning in an Online Course*. Cheaney and Ingebritsen start off by reminding us that Problem Based Learning (PBL) uses 'real world' problems or situations as a context for learning. For this case study, the authors analyze an online biotechnology science course wherein students grappled with real life ethical, legal, social, and human issues surrounding pre-symptomatic DNA testing for Huntington's disease. Cheaney and Ingebritsen first provide evidence that suggests that PBL can stimulate higher-order learning in students. Unlike many studies of PBL use, however, this case study show that students' actual acquisition of knowledge was slightly lower for PBL students than for students who learned the same material via a traditional lecture format. The authors go on to explore the differences between the online PBL and lecture-based PBL, and suggests that further research on this topic is warranted.

The second science paper *Remote Access to Instrumental Analysis for Distance Education in Science* is co-authored by Dietmar Kennepohl, Jit Baran, Martin Connors, Kieron Quigley, and

Ron Currie. Here the authors report on a pilot study of a chemistry course that gave students' remote access to chemical experiments. Remote access (as opposed to virtual labs) allows students (at a distance) to actually manipulate scientific instrumentation and thus retain a critical 'hands-on' laboratory component of their chemistry course. Clearly, a strong laboratory component is at the heart of many successful science courses and the use of remote control in the 'real world' is happening here and now. This pilot found that student performance to be equivalent for the remote laboratory experience and for face-to-face experiments. The authors caution us, however, that the findings from this pilot cannot be generalizable, and thus other scenarios should be researched in greater detail.

Our next paper, *Teachers' Invisible Presence in Net-based Distance Education*, co-authored by Agneta Hult, Ethel Dahlgren, David Hamilton, and Tor Söderström, reports on a study illustrating that "the fusion of liberal education and online learning is more than the application of new terms to old practices." Hult and colleagues examine CMC and conversation using the Nordic construct of *folkbildning*, which translated means that people can mediate their own learning (i.e., auto-didactics). It is within the hundred year old Swedish concept of *folkbildning* that the authors examine the invisible role 'teachers' have in guiding student dialog in CMC mediated learning environments. I've attached quotes to the word 'teacher' here, because Hult and her colleagues assert that the term 'teachers' may no longer be appropriate. They then go on to explore alternative English words, such as 'supervision' or 'guidance,' which may still not accurately capture the relationship between teachers and learners in CMC mediated environments. They ask: "Can established practices be continued? Or must new forms of participation and group management be established?" They attempt to answer these questions by analyzing data from course postings and interviews; they arrive at the conclusion that online pedagogues are always present, yet in different – often invisible – ways. Ways that might better fit the Nordic construct of *folkbildning*.

In *Distance Higher Education Experiences of Arab Gulf Students in the United States: A cultural perspective* Aisha Al-Harthi reports on a study undertaken to provide cultural understanding about the nature of distance education experiences of Arab graduate students pursuing degree programs in the United States. Employing Hofstede's international difference dimensions and Hall's concept of low and high context cultures as her theoretical framework, Al-Harthi's analysis reveals cultural aspects related to Arab students' background. To date, very little research has been done on what is arguably a very important topic, and thus Al-Harthi's phenomenological work should provide a good springboard for further research in this area.

Shushita Gokool-Ramdoo examines the participation of women in online distance education courses in Mauritius from a qualitative and feminist perspective in her paper, *The Online Learning Environment: Creating a space for Mauritian women learners*. Her analysis of interviews with both female learners and their spouses, reveals the need for congruity and support in two social 'spaces' one related to marriage/family and the second to occupation. Given successful negotiation of pressures, support, and acceptance in these areas, Gokool-Ramdoo suggests that can "online learning can enhance and democratize women's access to education for personal development."

In her paper *Tensions in Learner Support and Tutor Support in Tertiary Web-based English Language Education in China* Tong Wang from Beijing discusses the tensions involved in providing adequate support for both learners and tutors in online English languages programs delivered in China. Wang's paper provides survey data quantifying the different needs, aspirations, and practices of both tutors and learners in the relatively new milieu of online

learning. The study reveals tensions between actual and espoused use and practices, and points to practices and policies needed to resolve these tensions.

In his paper *Effects of Linguistic Qualifiers and Intensifiers on Group Interaction and Performance in Computer-Supported Collaborative Argumentation*, Alan Jeong from Florida, USA uses quantitative analysis tools to measure the effect of linguistic qualifiers on response rates and on critical analysis. The technique illustrated in the article forces students to label their messages with one of four forms of linguistic identifier and then tracks the relationship between the type of message and response rate. The paper also looks more deeply within each message to quantify the number of qualifiers and intensifiers. From these quantitative results, Jeong concludes that “that qualifiers were used to hedge argument and that they should be discouraged during initial stages of identifying arguments.” As in the previous paper, gender differences are also examined. In sum, Jeong’s paper provides interesting results, practical suggestions, and suggests directions for further research for studies of online text interaction using learning activities focused on debate and effective argumentation.

Book Notes

In this issue, we bring to you two reviews of recently published books on distance education. First, IRRODL’s Regional Editor for Africa, Professor Rashid Aderinoye reviews *Distance Education and Languages: evolution and change*, edited by Börje Holmberg, Monica Shelley, and Cynthia White. Professor Aderinoye, who works for the Departments of Languages, University of Ibadan, Nigeria, offers a unique international take on this very worthwhile book.

Next, Heather Kanuka, Canada Research Chair in e-Learning reviews the much anticipated second edition of *Technology, e-Learning and Distance Education*, edited by Tony Bates.

Technical Evaluation Reports

We bid farewell and offer sincere thanks to Professor Jonathan Baggaley for his sponsorship, editing, and academic leadership of IRRODL’s Technical Reviews over the past three years. Jon has marshaled the talents and energy of students enrolled in the Master of Distance Education program at Athabasca University to produce a series of 53 indepth, multi-faceted technical reviews. Unlike most peer-reviewed journals in the field, IRRODL’s technical reviews have named names, compared prices and products, and served ably as a consumer’s guide to quality distance education educational technologies. In a field marked by rapid change and unfolding opportunity, these detailed technical analysis have provided the very necessary, but often difficult to find reviews, evaluations, and discussions untainted by pecuniary interests and/ or overt commercial bias. Dr. Baggaley’s final set of reviews looks at three conferencing products – two that support online synchronous audio discussion and a second comparison of three asynchronous text packages. We are pleased to welcome Dr. Patrick Fahy as IRRODL’s technical editor. In this role, Pat Fahy will continue to forge ahead and build upon the excellent work and contributions made by Jon Baggaley and Athabasca University’s Masters of Distance Education students.

CIDER Notes

IRRODL’s publisher, [*The Canadian Institute of Distance Education Research*](#), has just plunged headlong into its second season of CIDER Sessions. These increasingly popular CIDER Sessions

are archived and linked to IRRODL with the idea of broader dissemination of research activities beyond the Canadian research community. We hope you will take the time to download the [free Elluminate software](#) and listen to these two archived CIDER Sessions: [e-Portfolios: Promises & Pitfalls](#), by Natasha Boskic and Gabriella Minnes Brandes, from the University of British Columbia, and [The Influence of Instructional Methods on the Quality of Online Discussion](#), by Heather Kanuka, Canada Research Chair in e-Learning and Associate Professor, Athabasca University – Canada's Open University.

