

Editorial – Volume 16, Issue Number 2

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Volume 16, numéro 2, avril 2015

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065941ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v16i2.2246>

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Éditeur(s)

Athabasca University Press (AU Press)

ISSN

1492-3831 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Conrad, D. (2015). Editorial – Volume 16, Issue Number 2. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 16(2), i–iv.
<https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v16i2.2246>

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April – 2015

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Dianne Conrad
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Happy April to all! In much of Canada, this is the early part of a long-awaited spring, so a time for celebration and getting ready for gardens.

I joined other OER aficionados recently at the Open Education Global Conference 2015, held April 22 to 24 in beautiful Banff, Alberta, where 250 delegates attended from around the world. Congratulations to my co-editor, Rory McGreal, and to Athabasca University for making this gathering a success. Having just returned from the conference, I am feeling inspired about OERs and what they can bring to our educational future. One of the questions raised there was: “Can OER help to mediate a position of improved safety and growth for displaced persons and refugees around the world?” On that note, let’s start this spring issue of IRRODL with our OER contributions and then move to their close cousin-topics, MOOCS and mobile learning.

Kim, Lee, Lee and Shon, in their article, “Influencing factors in OER usage of adult learners in Korea,” report on a survey that shows that ease of use and relation to immediate workplace needs affect the intention of adult learners in using OER. The findings of this study informs those developing and designing a learning environment that employs OER while also providing general guidance for developers and educators on how to design OER content.

From South Africa, De Hart, Chetty and Archer, in “Uptake of OER by staff in distance education in South Africa,” investigated the uptake of OER at Unisa, by staff, to examine institutional decision making and planning. Their survey examined knowledge of OER, Intellectual Property (IP) Rights and Licensing, participation in OER, and barriers to OER and they concluded that the knowledge and understanding of OER has not been converted into active participation. They also highlight the barriers that are prohibiting the operationalization of OER and they present recommendations for planning future OER activities.

One of the happy announcements at the conference concerned funding awarded to a team headed by the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta, for the development of OER projects which will find their way into MOOCs for global take-up. Writing on the subject of MOOCs, in a huge study with over 15,000 participants, Engle, Mankoff and Carbrey report on Coursera's introductory human physiology course. "Factors that characterize successful completion of a MOOC" looks at understanding MOOC students and the characteristics that lead to their success, hoping to enable modification to courses for increased student achievement.

And from Egypt, Yousef, Chatti, Schroeder and Wosnitza present the results of their research in "A usability evaluation of a blended MOOC environment: An experimental case study," in which they recognized the limitations of stand-alone MOOCs versus blended MOOCs (bMOOCs) that aim at bringing face-to-face interactions and online learning components together, suggesting that the latter has emerged as an alternative MOOC model of teaching and learning in higher education.

OER and MOOCs foster flexibility in learning. Following the theme of flexibility, writing on the topic of mobile learning, Chen gives us research using Kolb's Learning Style Model to investigate differences in student learning outcomes and satisfaction in "Linking learning styles and learning on mobile Facebook." Results showed that participants with "Assimilating" and "Diverging" learning styles performed better than those with "Accommodating" and "Converging" learning styles and had higher self-efficacy, observational modelling and habit strength toward learning in mobile Facebook.

Mobile learning is also featured in Brown and Mbat's "Mobile learning: Moving past the myths and embracing the opportunities." Using critical reflection, this paper clarifies what mLearning is by invalidating its myths and misperceptions. Acknowledging the lessons learned through past experience, the authors then explore the opportunities that mLearning provides.

One of the pleasures of editing IRRODL (in addition to determining a pleasing shape for each issue) is to be able to continually appreciate the richness and diversity of our field. The remaining pieces in this edition each bring new information to a variety of interests.

Looking broadly at patterns of student usage, Zawacki-Richter, Müskens, Krause, Alturki and Aldraiwees, in "Student media usage patterns and non-traditional learning in higher education," outline implications for media selection in the instructional design process for traditional and non-traditional students. Over 2,000 participants contributed to this study.

How do learners feel about preparing to learn online? Ilgaz and Gülbahar researched several e-learning programs at Ankara University Distance Education Center, Turkey, during the 2013-2014 academic year for their article "A snapshot of online learners: e-Readiness, e-Satisfaction

and expectations.” Their analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data provides information about online learners which should prove useful to both e-instructors and e-program administrators.

But wait! There’s more! Three articles used three different scales to evaluate various aspects of the ODL world.

Güyer, Atasoy and Somyürek, from Turkey, in another large study, measured disorientation based on the Needleman-Wunsch algorithm which allows measurement in a more precise manner. Their study offers us a new method to measure navigation disorientation in web based systems.

Horzum and Uyanik’s study examined the validity and reliability of the well-known Community of Inquiry Scale that has been commonly used in online learning by the means of item response theory analysis. Their results are reported in “An item response theory analysis of the Community of Inquiry Scale.”

Orfanou, Tselios and Katsanos used the System Usability Scale to examine its effectiveness in determining learners’ perceptions of the usefulness of learning management systems, concluding that it can indeed provide useful information. Their results are reported in “Perceived usability evaluation of learning management systems: Empirical evaluation of the System Usability Scale.”

Establishing frameworks and guidelines are often the aims of researchers attempting to bring order to our enterprise. In “A generic framework for extraction of knowledge from social web sources (social networking websites) for an online recommendation system,” Sathick and Venkat aim to design a framework for extracting knowledge from web sources for end users to make the right decision at a crucial juncture. The proposed framework implements an online recommender application for learners in an open and distance learning environment.

Mbati and Minaar, from South Africa, also present ideas for order in “Guidelines towards the facilitation of interactive online learning programmes in higher education.” Using a phenomenological approach, their research explored the lived experiences of online learning programme facilitators at their ODL institution. Their findings revealed that facilitators did not use constructivist and observational learning pedagogies to a large extent in their interaction with students.

Each issue of the journal also invariably includes research that creates its own category. Falling into this “category,” we conclude with three pieces representing work from China, Iran, and Sweden. Feng, Lu and Yao write on “Professional task-based curriculum development for distance education practitioners at master’s level: A design-based research.” Is the professional-task-based curriculum development approach suitable for open and distance education? Results of this

study discuss a professional-task based curricula for DE practitioners in China; and a curriculum development approach for open and distance education revised from professional task-based development.

Ahangar and Izadi have reported, in “Online text processing: A study of Iranian EFL learners’ vocabulary knowledge,” their findings on EFL learners’ experiences of vocabulary learning while surfing and text processing. The results of the vocabulary pre- and post-tests indicated that Internet users significantly outperformed the “non-Internet users.” Based on the findings, they conclude that the Internet creates a stimulating environment which helps learners effectively boost their vocabulary knowledge.

Our last topic-unique piece also has what I considered an intriguing title: “Remember to hand out medals”: Peer rating and expertise in a question-and-answer study group.” Ponti’s findings suggest that the peer rating system makes visible what participants find immediately valuable and allocates a form of recognition that extends the “legitimation code” – the credentials by which we declare someone competent and worthy of recognition.

Athabasca University 

