



## Reflections of the Past Decade with the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*

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### Abstract

Joint Editor Alison Fields bids farewell after over a decade in the Editorial Team. This issue shares five articles related to online and virtual education. They explore facets of learning experience, highlighting benefits and challenges, and influencing factors for both students and teachers across educational levels and geographic locations, including New Zealand, Brazil, and South Africa. Key conclusions include that, in New Zealand primary schools, blended learning was considered more important than fully online approaches. For adult disabled learners in open distance and flexible learning (ODFL) contexts, the biggest positive difference is attributed to the disability confidence of staff. Research on a systems thinking MOOC found that participants were primarily seasoned educators and mid-career professionals and, despite some AI use, their learning was very effective. When designing blended learning to foster digital information literacy, conclusions draw attention to the importance of leveraging online qualities, integrating contextualised learning, incorporating culturally responsive practices, and offering diverse options. Finally, a study on higher education facilitators during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the critical role of self-efficacy in coping with challenges, but also highlighted that emotional exhaustion was a significant factor for all participants.

**Keywords:** online learning; blended learning; learners; learning outcomes; digital literacies; self-efficacy; disability and access; AI use

### Reflections and two farewells

#### Alison Fields

The Journal is in good heart. As I step down from the Editorial Team of the *Journal of Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning*, I have been reflecting on what has been achieved and what is yet to be done. I have been involved with this Journal for what seems like both a long time and a short time. I began reading it when I started working in distance education many years ago, and I first published it as part of a team-authored article in 2011. Since then, I've taken on roles as Associate Editor, Editor-In-Chief and Joint Editor. The editorial work has been my focus for the last 11 years and, although that sounds like a long time, I have enjoyed it, and in many ways the time has just flown by.

Numerous changes have occurred in the OFDL field during this time, including huge advances in online capabilities, widespread uptake of aspects of OFDL during the recent pandemic, and the advance of AI. Changes in this field cover both cutting-edge and incremental change, with change and the pace of change being constant factors in this educational field. Many of these have been discussed in past editorials.

In terms of what has been achieved, I'll let the Journal speak for itself. It has an established publication pattern of two issues per year, a solid number of well-written articles in each issue,

an increased submission rate with a lower acceptance rate—indicating a good choice of high-quality articles for each issue. Readership statistics show a steady year-on-year increase in articles accessed, and the number of citations for published articles is also on the rise. Increased functionality means discovery is easier, with numerous access points including the JOFDL website, several journal databases, and many online services adding to the increased rate of readership.

In terms of what is yet to be done, there is always something new or something else on the horizon. This is just the nature of publishing in an increasingly online education field. Work on new journal services and functionalities continues with the editorial team.

While I have found every aspect to be fascinating, what I have loved most about being in the editorial team is the personal connection with so many interesting people linked to the Journal in different ways. This includes Editorial Team members, Editorial Advisory Board members, writers, readers, people at FLANZ and other conferences, editors of similar journals based in other countries, and those involved in related organisations in both education and publication fields. There are so many spectacular people in this field that this alone makes the work in this role completely worth it. I want to say thank you to all of these people. I cannot name you all, but those I need to acknowledge in particular are the ones I've worked most closely with on the Editorial Team, including Simon Paul Atkinson, who is continuing as Editor with the Journal, and past Editorial Team members Maggie Hartnett and Niki Davis. I would also like to acknowledge the professionalism and commitment of our copy editor, Kate Hunt, who has supported individual authors to ensure their best work has been shared.

Thank you all, and here is to a bright, ongoing future for the world of online, flexible, and distance learning—and for this Journal bearing its name!

Alison

**Kate Hunt**

After 16 years I, too, am saying farewell to the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*. In 2009, when Mark Nichols asked me to copy edit the *Journal of Distance Learning* there was one issue per year. The rapid growth in interest in all the variables of “distance learning” led quickly to a new title, a new design template, new standards for publication, an opening of the door to international submissions, and the publication of two issues per year.

My work on the journal over those years, and with the Editors and writers, has kept me in touch with national and global developments in a field that continues to evolve. The debate over the terminology and application of open, distance, flexible, blended, mixed, virtual . . . learning continues, and will continue. It has never been boring!

I want to thank the Editors I have worked with, from Mark Nichols to the current team of Alison and Simon. They have always been responsive to my questions, and we have solved many challenges together. Copy editing adds (often invisible) value, but the road has felt smooth, and I've always felt welcome.

I also have huge admiration for the researchers and writers who have contributed their work, and have taken my changes, suggestions, and queries with good grace. You make the world feel smaller, and many of your names are now familiar to me.

Goodbye, and I wish you all further success in this ever-changing field.

Kate

## **In this issue**

This issue presents a diverse selection of articles exploring facets of online, distance, and “virtual” learning in educational contexts, highlighting benefits, challenges, and key factors influencing the experience for both learners and educators.

“Virtual Learning in New Zealand Schools: Current Practice and Future Possibilities” delves into the evolution and current state of virtual learning in small rural New Zealand primary schools, based on a study conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on the experiences of teaching principals who are active in the Virtual Learning Network Primary School (VLN Primary) programmes, the study used a qualitative case study approach with semi-structured interviews and grounded theory analysis. The research highlighted a range of benefits for students and teachers, including access to a wider curriculum, enhanced digital fluency, reduced professional isolation, and alleviated workload. Principals believed virtual learning could extend children’s learning and prepare them for secondary school by fostering skills such as self-management and independent study. However, they viewed online learning as just one part of a child’s education and felt that blended learning was more important. The study concluded that virtual learning should not replace traditional schooling but will become an accepted part of education in the future. It also identified areas for future research, such as exploring virtual learning in different school settings and developing online/blended teaching strategies that focus on social engagement and interactivity.

“What Would Make the Biggest Difference? Enhancing Disability and Access Services in ODFL” reflects on efforts to improve Disability and Access services for adult disabled learners in the open, distance, and flexible learning (ODFL) context at Open Polytechnic of New Zealand. Informed by models such as the Social Model, Ecological Model, Active Model, and Crip Theory, the study gathered insights from a year-long advisory group that comprised ākonga (disabled learners) and kaimahi (staff). The central question guiding the research was “What would make the biggest difference to disabled learners’ experience in ODFL?” A key finding was that the biggest difference is made by the disability confidence of staff across the organisation. This confidence involves staff knowledge about disability, their responsibilities for equitable services, and awareness of available support and accommodations. Although ODFL can improve access by removing physical barriers, disabled learners can also feel invisible, leading to unmet needs. Successfully supporting these learners requires embracing the complexity of varied needs, fostering an access-positive culture, ensuring safe and stigma-free disclosure processes, and cultivating a collective disability consciousness, with staff responsiveness valued highly even alongside necessary technical tools.

“Exploring the Impact of Student Backgrounds, Learning Approaches, and AI Use on Learning Outcomes in a Systems Thinking MOOC” presents findings from a free massive open online course (MOOC) on systems thinking, which is offered in Brazil. The study employed a mixed-method approach, using questionnaires, AI detection software, and a rubric to analyse how student backgrounds, learning methods, and the use of AI tools affected learning outcomes. The course was designed and delivered by a single professor using free online tools, and learning was assessed through open-ended exam questions where students were asked to not use AI. The research found that most participants were seasoned educators and mid-career professionals whose backgrounds positively influenced their learning as they sought to improve skills and employability. Most students learned effectively by watching video lectures and completing modelling exercises—there was less engagement in peer interaction. Although almost all students used AI on the exam to some extent, the majority did so in limited ways, and their learning was still very effective. The study used AI detection software as a preliminary assessment tool but relied more heavily on a rubric for in-depth analysis due to the known limitations of AI detectors.

“Supporting Their Feeling That They can Actually Achieve Things’: A Design to Develop the Digital Literacies of First-Year Students” reports on qualitative research focusing on the design of blended learning to promote digital information literacy (DIL) in a first-year undergraduate teaching course in New Zealand. Using an educational design research (EDR) approach involving multiple iterations, the study gathered data through questionnaires, focus groups with students, and interviews/reflections with teachers. It addresses the gap in research on how teachers can design blended learning to bridge student DIL skills and academic demands, particularly for assessment tasks such as ePortfolios. The study concluded that, to support DIL development, a blended learning design should leverage online qualities (such as interaction, feedback, and reflection), integrate contextualised learning relevant to assessment demands, incorporate culturally responsive practices, and offer diverse learning options. The research developed online resources providing practice, reflection, and feedback opportunities based on a six-step process for using information in assessments. Teachers and students found the resources helpful for preparing assessment tasks, and teachers noted that DIL was discussed more explicitly in the classroom. The study emphasises the importance of deliberate design and adequate resources to effectively leverage the potential of online learning.

Finally, “Self-efficacy and Burnout: Higher Education Facilitators Share Their Stories of Shifting Practice During a Time of Crisis” is a qualitative case study exploring the experiences of higher education facilitators in South Africa who transitioned rapidly to fully online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study investigated the connection between self-efficacy and burnout, examining why some facilitators coped better than others. Based on interviews with selected facilitators from a private higher education institution, the findings confirmed the critical role of self-efficacy—facilitators with higher self-efficacy were more resilient and less susceptible to burnout. Four themes emerged: the importance of balance between work and family; technology as help or hindrance; the need for adaptation rather than replication of teaching practices online; and the effect of a loss of agency. Notably, emotional exhaustion was a significant factor across all participants, regardless of their self-efficacy levels. Facilitators with lower self-efficacy struggled more with technology and adapting their teaching, experiencing a “crisis in efficacy”. Loss of agency, often stemming from top-down institutional decisions, also contributed to emotional exhaustion and diminished personal achievement. The study concludes that building facilitators’ self-efficacy and resilience is crucial for effective and sustainable higher education, particularly in an increasingly digital environment, and highlights the importance of institutional support and training.

Tēnā koe, tēnā koe.

Simon Paul Atkinson

## **Biographical notes**

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Alison is an information scientist and Director of Research at InfoSolutions. She conducts research in information sciences and health information, and contracts in the education sector. She is a fellow of the Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa (LIANZA) and has a Doctorate in Education. Her research areas encompass elearning, online learner support, health information, library services, and continuing professional development. Alison is also joint Editor of the Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning.

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Simon is a higher education strategist with over 30 years' experience as an academic developer, educational technologist, teacher, and researcher. He has held senior leadership roles in both the United Kingdom and Aotearoa New Zealand and has lectured and presented in over 15 countries, as well as online to global audiences. He has a Doctorate in Museum Studies (Adult Education) and is a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. He is also joint Editor of the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*.

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