Editorial: Back to the Future—Predicting Possibilities in Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning

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Abstract

In 2010 Ako Aotearoa, the national centre for tertiary teaching excellence, prompted DEANZ, our national association for open, flexible, and distance learning, to look towards the future in 2016. Reminiscent of the 1985 movie *Back to the Future*, the scenario set produced foresaw a range of practices in Aotearoa New Zealand. Papers in this issue describe and illustrate the scenario set and related trends. These include our increasing cultural diversity and adoption of social media to offer more learner-centred education that also increases engagement with employers, professions, and iwi. A review of Dron and Anderson's (2014) book supports our view of the trends and is recommended to readers.

Keywords: futures; scenarios; initial teacher education; cultural dimensions; professional inquiry; social media; blended learning; online learning

Introduction

In this editorial we look to the future of open, flexible, and distance learning—particularly in relation to the tertiary education sector in Aotearoa New Zealand. Given how quickly digital technologies are changing, it is not surprising that many people are interested in the next "new thing". This is particularly true of educators and we, as editors of the *Journal of Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning (JOFDL)*, are no different in wanting to gain some perspective of where we might be heading. The New Zealand Government is also interested. Following the Innovations in Tertiary Education Delivery Summit in 2014, the Government requested that the Productivity Commission investigate how trends in technology, among other factors, could drive future changes in tertiary education provision, and the extent to which these changes could improve the quality of that provision. An issues paper outlining the proposed approach for the inquiry is expected to be available in February 2016 and submissions will be sought from interested parties. The final report to Government is due in February 2017 (New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2015).

The reports published by the New Media Consortium (NMC) are a growing resource that proves useful when trying to get some sense of what is to come. The NMC is an international community of researchers, educators, and digital technology experts who pool their expertise and combine their understanding and evidence of the ways in which digital technologies are influencing education. The community produces the yearly *Horizon Report* series (including the Higher Education edition) and, led by Larry Johnson, has done so for over a decade. The

experts who contribute to these reports come from a diverse range of backgrounds, sectors, countries, and regions.

However, reflections on past predictions can also reveal unexpected aspects that enable us to identify other possibilities. In this issue, the article by Davis and Higgins reports on the DEANZ2016 scenario set project. One critique of that research was that it did not predict the extent of the disruptive force of massive open online courses (MOOCs). This omission occurred even though Davis and Higgins' project capitalised on "two Horizon report workshops that led to the publication of a regional New Zealand Horizon Report in 2011" (Davis & Higgins, this issue, p. 16).The publication of a regional report highlights the important role played by our own New Zealand leaders and experts in informing the conversation on the future of open, flexible, and distance learning—many of these people are members of DEANZ and support *JOFDL*. Indeed, given the increasingly rapid evolution of education and digital technologies, everyone influences the local and global future (Cline, 2014).

The three original research articles and the book review in this issue fit with this future-focused theme to enhance several strands of possibilities for using new technologies. This issue explores of some of the possible future scenarios for tertiary education in New Zealand, and the use of blended learning opportunities in tertiary education, which is a key trend identified in the most recent *NMC Horizon Report* for higher education (Johnson, Adams Becker, Estrada, & Freeman, 2015) and in our work in the school sector supporting UNESCO Institute of Statistics (e.g., Twining, Davis, Charania et al., 2015). We also recognise the increasing importance of cultural dimensions of tertiary online learning (which are aligned to future demographics) and the increasing trend of using social software in online learning, including formal tertiary learning settings.

Papers in this issue

The future-focused flavour is borne out through the three articles, and the book review, that make up this issue. The paper by Niki Davis and Andrew Higgins reports on the DEANZ2016 scenario set that was developed as a response to a challenge posed by Ako Aotearoa leader, Dr. Peter Coolbear, at the 2010 DEANZ conference. The project developed a set of four possible future scenarios (see Figure 1) that were further developed into a resource for institutional leaders and academics who recognise the need for guidance about what tertiary education might look like in future. The scenario set has also been applied by ICT leaders in the schooling sector.

The set provides an interesting opportunity to classify the other articles in this issue that describe practice in two different universities.
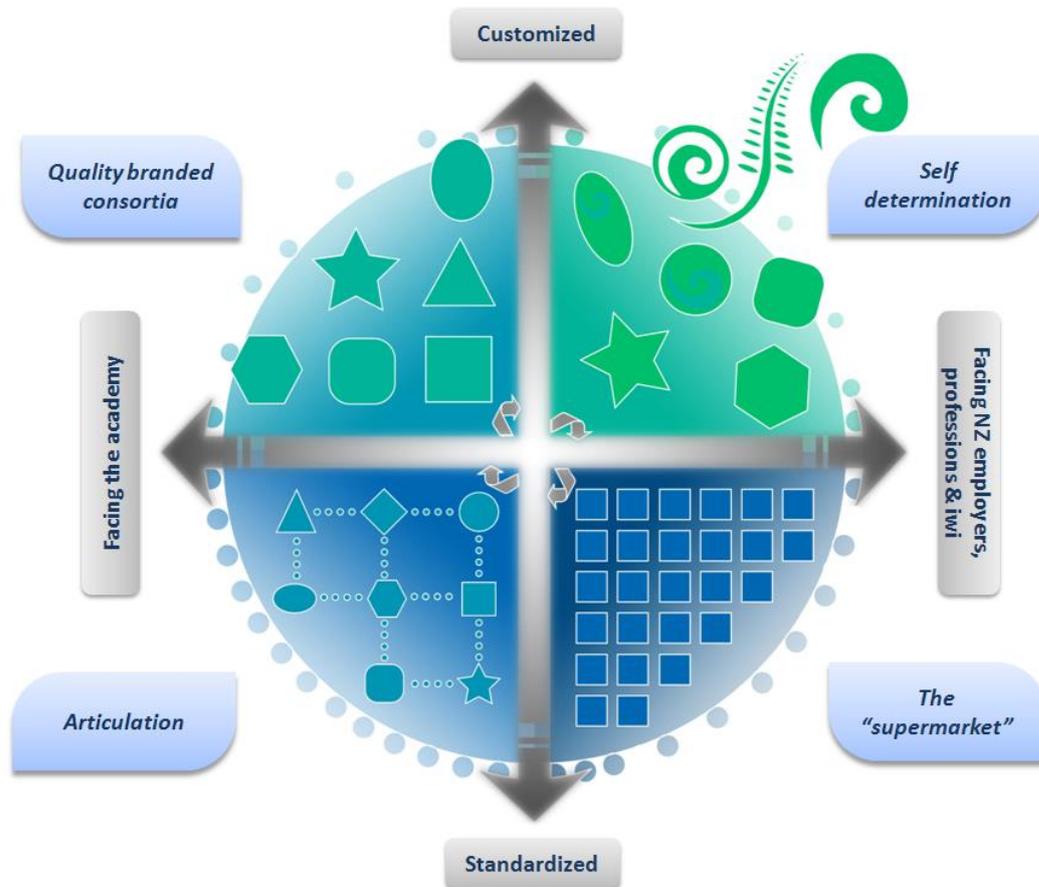
Figure 1 The DEANZ2016 scenario set graphic, created in 2011 to inform strategic planning of future tertiary education in New Zealand in 2016 (Davis & Higgins, this issue, p. 13).

The next two articles report research conducted with teacher education students in online and blended learning contexts. The first of these, by Anne-Marie Hunt, reports on a blended course for initial teacher education students undertaking their own research by inquiring into the practice of teaching in New Zealand schools and the e-tools and strategies that can support this process. Empowering teachers to research their own practice is certainly a future-focused endeavour. The third article, by Tony Hunt and Sue Tickner, also focuses on teacher education. The authors investigate cultural dimensions of online learning to gain a better understanding of the learning needs of an increasingly diverse student population. In an earlier issue (Fields, Davis, & Hartnett, 2015), the editorial team highlighted that many indigenous languages, cultures, and associated knowledge are increasingly endangered—including te reo Māori, the indigenous language of Aotearoa New Zealand. We also pointed out that, contrary to popular opinion, people from indigenous cultures are adopting flexible and distance learning with blended approaches that enable personal connections. The current article builds on this argument, indicating the growing need for intercultural awareness as ethnic, cultural, social, and linguistic diversity increases in the New Zealand population.

Evelyn Lewis's review of Jon Dron and Terry Anderson's 2014 book, *Teaching crowds: Learning and social media* rounds off this issue.

Although blended learning has been around since the turn of the 21st century (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008), it is notable that the *NMC Horizon Report* (Johnson et al., 2015) identifies the

increasing use of blended learning as a short-term trend that will drive the adoption of educational technology over the next one to two years. Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes, and Garrison (2013) offer reasons for this increasing adoption, arguing that blended learning environments create new ways for teachers and students to engage, interact, and collaborate. Anne-Marie Hunt's article presents research into the very challenging context of a professional's first inquiry for distance learning—an online blended course to support student teachers' inquiry into their teaching practice. Based at the Rotorua regional centre of the University of Canterbury, Hunt describes several successful strategies, in which a range of e-learning tools are deployed. These tools include the university's learning management system and freely available Web 2.0 tools that the emerging professionals can use in their practice in schools. The findings from this study will help to inform course and programme redesign, incorporating blended learning elements that ultimately encourage student teachers to develop their own networks of practice during their pre-service tertiary education.

The third article in this issue, led by Tony Hunt and his colleague Sue Tickner, sets out to explore the cultural dimensions of learning in online teacher education offered by the University of Auckland. The need for this research is clear, as the Royal Society of New Zealand (2013) highlighted with the term "superdiversity":

> Over the last two decades New Zealand has become one of a small number of culturally and linguistically superdiverse countries (Spoonley & Bedford 2012). Superdiversity indicates a level of cultural complexity surpassing anything previously experienced. New Zealand is now home to 160 languages, with multiethnic depth forecasted to deepen even further (Statistics New Zealand 2011). … This superdiversity is especially visible in urban centres such as Auckland, which is now one of the most diverse cities in the world. (pp. 1–2)

Naturally this language and cultural diversity affects tertiary institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand, which are facing increasingly diverse student populations. With this in mind, and with the trend towards increased online learning in more traditional tertiary institutions, Hunt and Tickner explore the extent of existing research on culture and ethnicity in online and flexible learning. Using the cultural dimensions of learning framework (CDLF), which was developed by Parrish and Linder-VanBerschot (2010) and builds on the seminal work of Hofstede (1980), the authors set out to determine whether the responses from students and staff participating in online courses supported the eight cultural dimensions proposed by the model. The results indicate that "there may well be differences in the way people from different cultures approach learning, but it's not a simple matter" (Hunt & Tickner, this issue, p. 39). It is clear that online lecturers and course designers need to be increasingly aware of the cultural values promoted in these environments and of the complexity of the underlying theories when interpreted in our bi-cultural nation, where indigenous perspectives and equity are better appreciated than in most other countries (as explained in our earlier editorial this year [Fields et al., 2015]).

As mentioned in the 2014 issue two editorial, book reviews, coordinated by Book Review Editor Una Cunningham, are also a regular feature in *JOFDL*. In this issue Evelyn Lewis presents a review of the 2014 book by Jon Dron and Terry Anderson, called *Teaching Crowds: Learning and Other Social Media*. Until his retirement in 2014, Terry Anderson was Editor of the well-respected open access online journal, the *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning (IRRODL)*. His keynote to the 2008 DEANZ conference was very well received, giving members of the association an historical perspective on open and distance learning, in addition to possibilities about a future that has now arrived. Anderson remains a member of the *JOFDL* Editorial Advisory Board. This book draws on Anderson and Dron's extensive years of experience as online distance educators in the tertiary sector. The authors argue that social software's ability to "aggregate the actions and behaviours of many people" (Dron & Anderson, 2014, p. 62) is changing the nature of online learning and it will therefore

become an important part of online learning. For those less familiar with the plethora of social software available, Dron and Anderson start by providing an overview of available social software and its potential educational uses. Anne-Marie Hunt's article illustrates, with practical examples, ways in which several of these social media tools can be applied in blended learning environments. Dron and Anderson also provide an overview of learning theories, pedagogies, and technologies that apply to social online learning environments. While tools and theories provide useful background information, the central focus of the book is the discussion of the conceptual model, which categorises different types of online interactions that the authors label as groups, nets, sets, and collectives. Helpfully, Dron and Anderson have provided open access to the book and individual chapters, in addition to the opportunity to purchase a printed copy. Lewis recommends the book to all *JOFDL* readers.

Conclusion

Davis and Higgins had expected that tertiary educational practice in Aotearoa New Zealand was likely to become a mix of the four scenarios by 2016—and that appears to be true already.

Anne-Marie Hunt's illustration of the University of Canterbury course, in which student teachers undertake their first inquiry into the practice of teaching, appears to fit a combination of two scenarios—*Articulation* and *Self-determination*. Her course has been articulated with an offering through online/blended learning, and the use of e-learning has increased student choice and led to more flexible use of space and staff. In addition, as in the *Self-determination* scenario, learning environments have been somewhat customised to learners' needs. Learners are provided with contextualised support by mentors (from the schools) who collaborate with tertiary education advisors and staff. Therefore, it is possible to see that:

> …e-learning has been deployed in ways that encourage self-determination by learners, who enhance their learning and develop digital portfolios to showcase their knowledge and skills. Mobile technologies are used by learners to access resources and to gather more evidence about their learning. Digital technologies are also used by learners to contribute resources that support their programme of study and/or their authentic contexts. (Davis & Higgins, this issue, p. 16)

The book review also suggests support for two scenarios. By emphasising the increasing number of social media tools for learning and the possibilities for aggregation of such interaction, Dron and Anderson (2014) indicate that learning ecologies can be usefully designed to support more learner-centred approaches. These are the *Quality branded consortia* and *Self-determination* scenarios.

Our final reflection comes from another future-focused publication that predicted what life could be like in 2016. The 1985 movie, *Back to the Future,* provided many images of life in 2016, including flying cars and hoverboards. The current discussion about the movie in the media has drawn attention to a key innovation that was omitted: namely, the internet. The internet has changed our field enormously. Today, it is scary to consider what educators may fail to foresee and influence in the near future (particularly for Niki Davis, who aims to publish a book on changing with digital technologies in education next year). Will our current view be dated in only a few years?

An early step on our journey to the future will be to help the Productivity Commission to investigate how trends in technology, among other factors, could drive future changes in education. We will also continue to support NMC and other more global reviews, and collaborate with other international journals and agencies such as UNESCO. We look forward to the next decade of open, flexible, blended, distance, and distributed learning and the ongoing changes to education in Aotearoa New Zealand and globally—whatever they bring.

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