



Connecting Past and Future Educational Practice: A Post-COVID-19 Present

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Abstract

The challenges of supporting learners at a distance are enduring. But the nature of these challenges is changing, and this change has been particularly notable since the beginning of the pandemic and the rapid worldwide move to distance and online learning. A brief look is taken at the evolving nature of the distance-student experience under the theme of “Time is the new distance”. This is complemented with four papers in this issue, each of which is concerned with an aspect of meeting the challenges of supporting distance learners. Hartline et al. draw attention to the importance of the teacher’s presence in decreasing student anxiety. Forbes explores the effectiveness of asynchronous communication as an effective learner support. Cameron et al. share a national perspective from a wider international study, concluding that clear communication by institutions and other authorities can reduce uncertainty for students and is necessary to mitigate the negative effects of future disruptions to study. And finally, Adebisi and Olatunji round off the set of articles with findings that the key psychosocial experience of students revolves around the flexibility and cost of distance learning, work–life pressures, and the availability of faculty.

Keywords: distance learning; distance communication; distance student experience; teaching presence

Time is the new distance

“Time is the new distance” said the late Professor Robin Mason in her Professorial Address at the Open University (UK) in 2001. She was referring to the evolving nature of the distance student experience, and the new challenges for course designers and teaching staff in light of increasing connectivity (Mason, 2001). Students were increasingly online at home or at their workplaces, and they were increasingly comfortable with new computer-mediated conferencing (CMC) tools which they used alongside their printed materials and audio cassettes or CDs (Mason & Kaye, 1989).

In other institutions students were encountering early virtual learning environments. Faculty were learning to structure meaningful responses to requests for feedback that students might anticipate within hours rather than days or months (Aronson, 2002). Course design teams were beginning to think about how advances in technology might affect staff time and cohort cohesion. Doubtless similar conversations were happening in institutions around the globe. In simple terms, we were concerned with how to communicate, motivate, and connect with students we often could not see.

In July 2022 we're coming to terms with the creeping sense that everything is the same as it has been, but somehow strangely different. We still have the challenges of assuming all of our students and faculty have unfettered access to appropriate technologies, and that they have the digital literacy skills to operationalise these technologies (Buchholz et al., 2020). We must remember that cultural perspectives also inform individual approaches to communication technology. The changing patterns of student demand on, and expectations of, student support and tutorial staff are evident to many practitioners and they prompt several questions. When so much support has been made available online, should we put students to the inconvenience of returning to campus at all? With faculty evidently capable of teaching online (with varying degrees of competence), could our institutions save money on office space, heating, and maintaining internet networks? Are some of our disciplines better placed to be learnt at a distance?

The global COVID-19 pandemic comes towards the end of a technological generation in distance and flexible learning. If the first generation of distance learning was largely paper based, the second broadcast media, the third digitally rich media, we may be coming to the end of the fourth generation—interactive real-time technologies. The fifth technological generation is expected to be more concerned with immersive sensory experiences, typified by notions of the metaverse. None of these generations totally supplants those that come before them. Rather, they adapt and adopt new approaches to existing challenges. Interestingly, the three generations of distance education pedagogy of cognitive behaviourist, social constructivist, and connectivist approaches examined by Anderson and Dron (2011), who concluded that high-quality distance education exploits all three, still apply.

As in 2001, course designers and faculty remain concerned with engagement and motivation, with accurately assessing students' ability to generate evidence in support of course outcomes, and with managing their time with a view to retention and progression. Some are acutely aware of the shifting technological landscape and the sometimes seismic events in their digital ecosystem that can lead an institution to adopt new solutions and present new challenges. Others are unconcerned with the technological pace of change and focus on the nature of connectedness with students—irrespective of the mode of learning or technology.

When the late Professor Robin Mason drew attention to the effect that technology was having on distance learners in 2001, she was suggesting that, while physical distances might have been overcome, time would be the next challenge. We don't think she was wrong. The next technological generation of distance learning—one in which connectivity may become synonymous with digital immersion—will present us with the same consistent challenges. We'll need to ensure that future digital solutions are equitable and socio-culturally inclusive. We'll have to navigate our way through algorithms, AI bots, and the machine learning that will probably overtake our digital learning platforms. Twenty-one years later, the ability to connect—synchronously or asynchronously—still appears to have a direct effect on the student experience, student retention, and student success.

Papers in this issue

In this issue we benefit from the work of colleagues who are paying attention to the changes in practice, and we reaffirm some basic principles from a variety of perspectives in four research-based articles.

Alexandra Hartline, Sheri Conklin, and Amy Garrett Dickers draw attention to the importance of the teacher's presence in decreasing student anxiety. They illustrate that, despite the challenges of maintaining connectivity in an online and distance context, this fundamental principle holds true. Their research examined the perceptions of higher education students enrolled in several

modalities (e.g., hybrid, online asynchronous, synchronous) during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States of America. They found that students perceived significant connectedness between students and instructors in asynchronous spaces and that this resulted in lower levels of anxiety. They conclude that there were four emergent themes from their research: the importance of instructor empathy; the ability to create spaces to facilitate sociability; the critical nature of feedback; and the structural elements of course organisation. Together, these themes supported students' connections with their instructors, leading to a reduction in their anxiety.

Dianne Forbes also explores the effectiveness of asynchronous communication as an effective learner support. She points out that asynchronous online discussion has become a core tool for interaction and collaboration between students and tutors. The wealth of literature that identifies the roles performed by online discussion moderators, and student expectations, shows a consensus that such teaching instruments have value. Forbes digs deeper into the nature of student-to-student interaction which, although seen as advantageous for learning, raises issues about students' expectations of each other. This insightful case study with second-year undergraduate students studying primary teaching in Aotearoa New Zealand, suggests students expect active participation from their peers. Forbes argues that managing the expectations of, and between, students is critical to ensure mutual accountability is understood ahead of asynchronous online discussion.

Michael P. Cameron, Barbara Fogarty-Perry, and Gemma Piercy report on the Aotearoa New Zealand results as part of a wider international research study: "Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Life of Higher Education Students" (Aristovnik et al., 2020b). Using both quantitative and qualitative data from the survey, Cameron et al. found that students in their study had coped well with disruption. Respondents were broadly satisfied with the way their institutions and faculty responded to unanticipated lockdowns and shifts to online learning at short notice. Students in Aotearoa New Zealand reported higher levels of satisfaction than those in the global sample, with more positive responses to recorded video lectures whereas the global sample preferred real-time teaching. Despite these potentially positive findings, Cameron and colleagues report that many students in their national sample felt that their studies had been negatively affected. This was particularly noticeable in vulnerable groups (such as students with low financial resources) and they raise concerns about the mental health effects resulting from disruption. Cameron et al. conclude that clear communication from institutions and other authorities aimed at reducing the uncertainty for students, and appropriately supporting vulnerable groups, is necessary to mitigate the negative effects of future significant disruptions to study, whatever their cause.

Tajudeen Adebisi and Taiwo Isaac Olatunji continue the theme of international experience by sharing the results of a comparative research study of students' psychosocial experience at two Nigerian institutions. Their study reports on students' perception of their social environment resulting from emotional responses to events. They sought to understand whether there were differences between cohorts in a dual-mode university (in-person and distance learning) and a single-mode institution (distance learning). They concluded that students at both institutions had broadly similar psychosocial experience that focused on flexibility and the cost of distance learning, work-life pressures, and the availability of faculty. This finding aligns with Hartline and colleagues.

New joint editor

Dr Simon Paul Atkinson has joined Dr Alison Fields as part of the editorial team for this journal. Simon says "on joining a well-established scholarly journal I hope to continue the excellent work of those that have gone before. I hope my modest technical skills will serve to make the journal easier to navigate and function even better for its readers, authors, and reviewers".

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Biographical notes

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Simon is a higher education strategist with over 25 years' experience as an academic developer, educational technologist, teacher, and researcher. He has held senior 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 is a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, President of the Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand (FLANZ), and joint Editor of the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*.

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Alison is an information scientist and Director of Research at InfoSolutions. She conducts research in 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 an executive member of FLANZ and joint Editor of the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*.

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