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Guest Editor: Dianne Forbes

Editor: Noeline Wright

Editorial: An issue of terminology: What is digital learning anyway?

Dianne Forbes

University of Waikato

Although invited to guest edit a section/issue on digital technologies, I selected the term 'digital learning' to drive this special issue as I hope these two words capture the application of digital technologies to pedagogical processes and learner experiences. One of many possibilities, the choice of terminology is in reaction to my perception that terms like 'elearning' and 'technology enhanced learning' are dying a natural death. For some, elearning is associated with compliance, while any mention of 'technology' without 'digital' as a qualifier can be confusing in a context where technology is intervention by design (Ministry of Education, 2007).

Digital learning is broad enough to encompass learning about, with and through digital technologies, incorporating shifts from basic digital literacy to fluency, and on to capability. Digital learning can happen online, within a Learning Management System (LMS) as part of a formal (e.g., degree) qualification via a university or polytechnic. Online learning can also occur more informally, within an open online course or via social media networks, driven by the learner's interests. Digital learning also happens in a classroom (modern, innovative, flexible) environment, with digital tools on hand within the physical setting, and with implications for pedagogy and for learners and teachers. Realistically, the norm is increasingly 'Blended Learning' where a range of environments set the scene for learning, across the lifespan and across informal and formal opportunities.

The scope of this special issue on digital learning: In brief

This special issue illustrates a variety of approaches to digital learning, from Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) to LMS offerings at tertiary level, and in classrooms at secondary and primary levels of schooling. We open with an international offering from Parsons & Barr, followed by Vail's further consideration of the needs of international students, and Bowker's look at student responses to feedback.

Part two of the special issue turns to school-based digital learning with a research article by Calder, looking at an aspect of digital learning in a primary school, followed by Reinsfield's analysis of digital learning in the secondary school context. These two New Zealand articles are joined by a further commentary on the revised Digital Technology content in the New Zealand Curriculum, by Kellow.

This special issue concludes with a book review from Lamb, drawing to a close a small but eclectic set of research article and commentaries.

Key ideas and a closer look

A closer look at the key themes within this digital learning collection reveals a common focus on student agency, constructivism, and the associated need for interaction, dialogue and reflection. Ever-present are the human elements of digital learning, with authors celebrating the need for humour, psychological bonding and emotion. Indeed, the psychology of online learning is a prominent consideration, particularly in terms of how learners approach study via MOOCs, and how students respond to feedback on assignments when studying online. The setting for the first half of the collection, where the learning is at tertiary level, is the online space, variously characterised as a space to inspire and challenge (Parsons & Barr); a political space (Bowker); and a familiar, shared space (Vail).

From the University of York (UK), Parsons and Barr relate the challenges of designing and convening a MOOC about everyday chemistry. The authors take us through the matters of concern when developing the MOOC, designing the resources and activities, pacing the workload, catering for a wide range of learners via high interest topics, promotion of learner engagement and quality assurance.

The emphasis on learner engagement is also a central concern in Vail's discussion of culturally responsive digital learning, focusing on international students. Vail contends that online participatory structures work to engage learners, and outlines the use of case studies to generate accessibility and familiarity so that the cultures of students can lead the learning.

Staying with student experience and the task of managing emotions, Bowker discusses what happens when students receive lower results than expected in an online course. Navigating the formative/summative tensions of assessment feedback, she suggests teaching strategies for managing the emotions attached to feedback online.

This tertiary collection is likely to be of interest to tertiary educators who teach online, and who are fundamentally interested in student perspectives related to digital learning, as well as new possibilities for enhancing practice.

In part two of the special issue, the schooling sector takes centre stage with the new digital technologies content in the New Zealand curriculum. Calder shares his research using interactive software (specifically Scratch) with 10-year olds, and how the students engaged with mathematical ideas. Calder's study shows how Scratch can be applied to creative problem-solving and game design in an illustration of dynamic, interactive learning.

Reinsfield also looks at digital technology in the New Zealand curriculum and at some of the challenges for secondary teachers faced with significant curriculum change. With attention to teacher perspectives and tensions around the enactment of curriculum, Reinsfield advocates a personalised approach to teacher learning and proposes a three-stage professional learning model.

The commentary piece in this section is by Kellow, a facilitator of teacher professional learning and development, extending the consideration of New Zealand's revised Technology Curriculum for schools, looking at the process of developing the new content. The potential for cross-curricula integration is discussed, along with resources to support teacher professional learning.

This second half of the special issue is likely to be of interest to teachers, school leaders and teacher educators, grappling with changes to curriculum content and requirements, and seeking direction in terms of digital learning.

Finally, as a university librarian, Lamb closes our special issue with a review of a recently released edited text by Cope and Kalantzis, picking up on the themes of agency, feedback, reflection, and learner engagement that have permeated this special issue.

Reference

Ministry of Education (2007). *The New Zealand Curriculum*. Wellington, New Zealand: Learning Media.