Editorial

eLearning: Exploring Digital Futures in the 21st Century

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In a globalised knowledge economy, enabled by an increasingly pervasive digital, networked world, eLearning possibilities are being explored by educational institutions. Learning and teaching is now able to be designed to enable learning anywhere and at anytime. This opens up exciting possibilities as well as challenges. Consequently, this special issue aimed to provide evidence-based guidance through conceptual and research papers on eLearning and digital futures in the 21st century.

Given that this Special Issue has been published in 2014, it will be interesting to revisit this as this century progresses to reflect on the key messages and the technologies referred to in the published journal articles which collectively constitute this Special Issue. To elaborate, if a similar approach was adopted in 1914, and that issue referred to technologies for teaching and learning in the 20th Century, few could have imagined the technological changes that subsequently occurred. Similarly, we can only speculate what technologies, teaching and learning might look like towards the end of this century. However, as changes occur, there will continue to be a need for those changes in policy and practice to be informed by research. This Special Issue aimed to provide a collection of journal articles which provide insights and guidance at this point in our journey throughout the 21st Century.

Kathryn Moyle sets the context well in her article Democracy and Digital Citizenship: Examining Australian Policy Intersections and the Implications for School Leadership [1]. By examining key policy agendas in Australia, such as the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians [2], the Australian Curriculum [3], the Australian Professional Standards for Principals [4], and the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers [5], Moyle's analysis demonstrates that there is no 'joining of the dots' needed to link and align the rhetoric of democratic values and the promotion of technologies for quality teaching or school improvement. Importantly, while there are expectations of school leaders to support teaching and learning with technologies, there is little or no guidance on illuminating the types of learning develops democratic processes with technologies.

Gilly Salmon and Phemie Wright, in *Transforming Future Teaching through 'Carpe Diem' Learning Design* [6], highlight the challenge of staff development needed in Higher Education. They note that, while institutions expect their staff to design and deliver innovative approaches to online

learning, it is often the case that they themselves do not design and deliver effective professional learning. Thus, they provide an example through the Carpe Diem learning design. This highlights an approach to the significant challenge facing academics in terms of design processes and possibilities, as they put it, "from MOOCs to mobility, and blended to industry-based learning" [6]. They urge that educators need to 'seize the day' and enable fast, agile and productive learning design with technology. They draw our attention to the need for engaging, acceptable, meaningful, availability of learning design development to those in the "front line of knowledge construction and engagement" [6].

Mal Lee and Glenn Finger suggest that there is a need to rethink and redefine schooling in their journal article titled *Leadership and Reshaping Schooling in a Networked World* [7]. They highlight the need for leadership to consider key questions such as—how will a networked school become defined less by its physical space and timetabled lessons, but by being networked and that learning can take place anywhere, anytime? They refer to pathfinding schools which are leading the way to inform this shift. Those pathfinders understand the need for change, and, through their leadership, they are investigating and implementing their responses to the challenges and the opportunities to reshape schooling. Importantly, they are disrupting the more constrained industrial age models of schooling characterised by physical attendance by teachers and students at a school, with timetabled lessons. Increasingly, the pathfinders are offering effective online teaching and learning opportunities anywhere and anytime, and are using technology to enhance learning beyond physical attendance, and rethinking the purpose of that attendance.

Bronwen Cowie and Elaine Khoo report on the findings of a research project, conducted in a New Zealand University, which aimed to increase our understandings of the ways in which digital tools can develop, challenge and expand the learning of tertiary students. In *Digital Tools Disrupting Tertiary Students' Notions of Disciplinary Knowledge: Cases in History and Tourism* [8], they reported that lecturers and students were challenged in learning about the affordances of the technologies. Their prior thinking became disrupted which led to new understandings of the discipline areas studied, namely, History and Tourism, and of effective pedagogical approaches enabled by the technologies employed.

Through examining 3D printing, Jennifer Loy in *eLearning and eMaking: 3D Printing Blurring the Digital and the Physical* [9] provides a fascinating journal article which merges the physical and the virtual. She draws our attention to the way in which 3D printing, for example, enables the exploration of eLearning strategies based on eMaking. Pressing the 'print' button joins up eLearning and eMaking and the role of product designer changes. Her contribution illuminates how this supports new educational approaches for student centred design eLearning in the physical studio and as part of the broader design community. Consistent with the challenges outlined by Salmon and Wright [6], Loy provides an example of how courses might be planned and implemented in ways which differ from conventional learning to ensure that the student is at the centre of learning and co-constructing their learning in innovative ways.

It is important to step back from the current eLearning developments to understand what the historical trends have been. Pei Chen Sun, Glenn Finger and Zhen Lan Liu in *Mapping the Evolution of eLearning from 1977–2005 to Inform Understandings of eLearning Historical Trends* [10] provide an evidence-informed analysis of 2694 journal articles published between 1977 and 2005. They suggest that there have been limited studies of the educational computing literature to analyse these research trends, and that such an analysis is needed to inform our understandings of current and future

eLearning trends. Their work provides that platform and they suggest that a subsequent analysis for the period 2006–2014 could build upon this platform. They propose several major research trends identified in the literature analysis, and then suggest that it is interesting to examine the relationship between that research, and policy and practice. Their research indicated that, with each key breakthrough in technology, those breakthroughs were accompanied by increased educational research about those technologies to inform educational practice. In attempting to link this analysis with current trends, they concluded that the trends from 1977–2005 have shaped the current and continuing focus on technologies and pedagogical approaches evident in eLearning developments.

Phemie Wright in the final journal article in this Special Issue focuses on the 'how' of designing and implementing successful online learning in *E-tivities from the Front Line: A Community of Inquiry Case Study Analysis of Educators* [11]. She defines E-tivities as a specific learning design methodology, and refers to associated constructs such as e-Moderation to examine its potential as a learning design framework for Social, Teaching and Cognitive Presence factors in the Community of Inquiry design framework. This research links in with the journal article by Salmon and Wright [6], and very usefully identifies the reasons for using E-tivities, the benefits and outcomes of E-tivities, the limitations, and the challenges for designing E-tivities. Her statement that "…it is inspirational educators that produce inspirational students, who go out and be the change this world so desperately needs" reminds us of the central importance of the role of teacher presence in online learning design.

Collectively, the seven journal articles in this Special Issue provide insights into the genesis of eLearning from as far back as 1977 and trends through until 2005 [10], highlights the relationship between research, policy and practice [1,10], proposes that we need to rethink schooling in a networked world [7], and provides guidance into models for building the capabilities and capacity for designing eLearning [6,8,9,11]. As indicated in the introduction to this Editorial, we need to remember that we are in the early, formative stages of the 21st Century.

This is the most exciting time in our history to be an educator exploring, designing and implementing eLearning. My appreciation is extended to all who contributed to this Special Issue, and my hope is that readers find something of value within this Special Issue which assists them in creating improved eLearning for their students in ways which shape and influence better futures.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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