Editorial

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EDITORIAL

Following two special issues, which featured the University of Wisconsin’s Distance Education conference and the Quality Matters initiative to improve online learning, in this last issue of Volume 29 we have reverted to our usual practice of gathering a variety of topics, hoping to offer something of interest for every reader, an increasingly challenging objective it must be admitted, in our still-expanding field of distance education research and practice. For this issue we have chosen three studies of higher education and two from the K–12 arena. In the first group, we have a discussion of the still daunting goal of providing nontraditional ways of study for the Ph.D., the second article is a study of the value added by using audio in addition to written feedback online, and the third is a report on student experiences in a massive open online course. The articles that focus on learning in the high school deal, in turn, with learning in a state virtual high school as a community of practice and then a discussion of the structure of, and dialogue in, an online discussion forum. Our interview in this issue is focused on the United Tribes Technical College in Bismarck, North Dakota, the first tribal college in the nation to be accredited to offer degree-granting programs online.

Any of these articles would be a ripe topic for comment on my part, but as I considered how to kick off this issue, it was the book review that particularly caught and held my attention. Most likely this was, at first, because the next (March 2016) issue of our journal will be devoted entirely to the subject of our book review, “Learning and Social Media.” In his review, Jason Oliver sums up the theme of Dron and Anderson’s *Teaching Crowds: Learning and Social Media* as “the reciprocal relationship between teaching ‘crowds’ and how ‘crowds’ can teach in return” (302). This theme of teaching crowds returned to tease me as I reread the other articles, and it struck me as deserving a special mention in the editorial after I read Navarro’s account of a course offered to 63,521 MOOC enrollees—“teaching crowds” indeed!

Perhaps it is right that before going on, I confess to being prejudiced about crowds, especially in the educational context. My prejudice dates at least to my student days, when I remember my resentment at a system that compelled me to leave the library, where I was deeply learning, to go to class to, presumably, support a professor’s employment! More thoughtfully, indeed, the very concept of a “class” has always struck me as unsuited to the teacher’s mission, which should be assisting in the growth of persons, that is, individuals, no two of whom, let alone a class of thirty, can be at exactly the same state of readiness for the teacher’s treatment. However, for the present, setting my skepticism regarding the class, the group, the crowd to one side, I accept that the idea of teaching crowds through social media is currently a popular topic that requires attention. Indeed I can begin to share in the enthusiasm for it when it is presented as potentially replacing some of the more stultifying group teaching methods, especially the traditional lecture—to recall again the theme of Navarro’s MOOC article. Going further, if, as argued in Dron and Anderson’s...
book, central to the application of social media is the idea that learners teach learners, that is a concept I consider fundamental to all good teaching. To explore that just a little more in its historical context, readers might look back to The American Journal of Distance Education Volume 8 Number 2 where I wrote (in 1994!), “Equally exciting is the process of developing and engaging interdependence among individuals in distant groups, developing group interdependence within a total system, and developing distant-group autonomy” (Moore 1994, 2).

So, at an even earlier date, having done my bit to assert the importance of “learner–learner interaction” (Moore 1989, 1), and having pioneered more than a few of the techniques now commonplace online (before, can you believe it, the invention of the browser?), I hope I need not be apologetic if I now suggest that the proverbial pendulum has swung too far in favor of learning in the group (or crowd) as contrasted to what we used to call, a long time ago, independent study, a view of teaching that focuses on the aims and learning proclivity of the individual student. For many decades in its early history, distance education was almost entirely a process of individualized instruction, with teachers teaching students by exchanging essays through the mail. Keeping focus on the individual, independent learner only became a challenge for the distance educator, as it has been for the classroom teacher, with the development of teleconference technologies and then online delivery systems, both of which allowed universities and schools to reconceptualize distance education as a process of reproducing the traditional lecture hall or classroom.

However, thinking about this problem does bring to mind another current development in our field, one that provides a counterweight to too much advocacy of the merits of the crowd as a learning organism. This other development is what is currently being described as “personalized learning.” Personalized learning was defined in the 2015 Horizon Report from the New Media Consortium (Johnson et al. 2015) as “the range of educational programs, learning experiences, instructional approaches, and academic-support strategies intended to address the specific learning needs, interests, aspirations, or cultural backgrounds of individual students” and described by the report as one of the “Significant Challenges Impeding Technology Adoption in Higher Education” (26). The Horizon Report gives some examples of initiatives under way to systematize personalized education, much of which seems to me to be a revision of established concepts of criterion-based—also known as competency-based—learning. Nevertheless, in a higher education world so dominated by the assumptions of the sixteen-week course delivered with one-size-fits-all pedagogy to classes of ten to one thousand students, even modest steps toward greater individualization have to be greeted as achievements.

I do, of course, for the purpose of catching attention, exaggerate the dichotomy between learning in the group and learning autonomously. In my own writing about autonomous learners I have always recognized that such learners are able to benefit from experiences in a group and contribute to a group, the difference between a learner of greater and less autonomy being that the former controls the relationship with others in pursuit of his or her learning objectives as contrasted to being managed or directed either by other group members or indeed an instructor.

I do not mean to detract from the value and importance either of the research and advocacy of the use of social media or most definitely from the core idea that learners teach learners, itself a core principle of adult education for decades if not centuries, most famously articulated by Malcom Knowles (1978). In taking the opportunity of reminding ourselves that the crowd is really a gathering of individuals, and the ultimate goal is learning for each person, that is personalized learning, I do not think I am saying anything that is not to be found also in the book under review. The bottom line is well stated in Oliver’s summary of the book’s chapter 7; although
“collectives could become the organizers of learning,” this should be “while still promoting individual autonomy and control over their learning.” As we ponder this tension between collective and personalized approaches to learning, we can surely agree with the reviewer’s follow-on to that previous statement, namely, “. . . there is still much work and research to be performed before this ideal future of collective learning can become a reality” (302).

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Editor

REFERENCES