Editorial

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Editorial

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As discussed in the previous Editorial, computer-based learning (CBL) is these days neither novel nor new; it is instead standard, normal. It would be very unusual indeed if there exists a department or institution which does *not* use technology to assist its learners in their learning. How much technology, and how it is used, varies enormously but whether we are keen advocates or not, learners of today are very much part of a generation in which technology plays a key role in all areas of their lives, as evidenced by the ubiquity of mobile phones (in particular, their use for texting) amongst others. Our students expect us to use the available technology, and there is surprise, and complaint, when we do *not*.

As Neil Selwyn, author of the first article, 'An investigation of differences in undergraduates' academic use of the internet' neatly sums up for us, we:

> continue to devote substantial resources to providing students with access to internet-based information via e-journals, virtual learning environments (VLEs) and other forms of 'e-learning' provision. Most universities now boast high-spec internet connectivity in classrooms, libraries, student accommodation and other public campus areas (Selwyn, 2008: 11–12)

and we all train our students to 'effectively search and critically evaluate internet-based information' (Selwyn, 2008: 12). The term 'digital native' is used in the article, and elegantly sums up our students today, that is, those 'who grew up with the internet … and … are completely comfortable with (and perhaps sometimes overly-reliant on) using online sources to meet their information needs' (Selwyn, 2008: 12). Much literature in this area is still stuck in the past, unfortunately, and seeks to discuss whether or not the internet or any other technology is 'good' or 'bad'. The time has long passed when this was relevant, if it ever *was* (technology exists; whether it is 'good' or 'bad' depends on how it is *used*). Neil Selwyn is absolutely correct when he says that we *believe* that the use of such technology helps our learners in their learning but that what is lacking is the hard data about 'students' *actual* use of the internet in their studies, as opposed to what they could or should be doing'. Results from the study described in the article reveal a population of learners who consider themselves competent users, although a small percentage lacked the skills, the confidence or the physical access and thus did not use the internet as frequently. As the author concludes, this

minority of learners require targeted support from us, particularly if we are to rely more heavily on such technology for the delivery of material and/or support of learning. The findings shed light on gender differences; the results are not what we have long thought to be the case. Age, year of study, ethnic or educational background and discipline are other factors explored in this study, and there are useful pointers from this which tell us which of these need our further attention if we are to best assist our learners in using the internet for academic purposes.

If, as Neil Selwyn says, we are becoming more reliant on technology for the delivery of material and/or support of learning (and this is uncontested), then as with all learning environments we need to assess their impact on our learners and their learning. The use of technology is central in what is known as 'blended learning'; the topic of the second article, 'Using radar charts with qualitative evaluation: techniques to assess change in blended learning', by Dan Kaczynski, Leigh Wood and Ansie Harding from the University of West Florida, USA, Macquarie University, Australia and the University of Pretoria, South Africa. The authors define blended learning as 'a mixture of online and face-to-face content delivery using a variety of learning resources and communication options [and which] mixes e-learning with other more traditional types of learning' (Kaczynski et al., 2008: 24). Outlining its benefits, the authors rightly say that whatever the delivery, we must always be guided by how best to help our learners to meet the learning outcomes that we require of them. The authors argue, however, that our reasons for introducing blended learning are not always clear to us, but that even if they are, we need to have in place something which allows us to compare one environment with another and a means by which to evaluate them. Radar charts, say the authors, have been found to be useful in the field of organizational development in order to measure quality, and they argue that this is likely to be the case in determining quality in the learning environment too. The article describes in greater detail the variables involved in radar charts, their large number of possible uses and how, practically speaking, we might harness their benefits. The study described used a six-zone radar chart to evaluate blended learning in a particular learning environment over a lengthy period of time, and in three different countries, namely, Australia, South Africa and the USA. The authors make the very valid point that 'if we wish to convince our colleagues, students, and ourselves of the worth of [any] teaching innovation' (Kaczynski et al., 2008: 37), we are helped in this endeavour if we have the tools, and the subsequent data, to support our claims. Their study revealed the student perspective, in this case about the strength of feeling towards online resources and the perceived negative effect of this on their learning. The authors conclude that the use of radar charts is one

tool for the more effective evaluation of both qualitative and quantitative data. This, the authors argue, is even more important these days given that we are investing more and more into learning environments supported by technology. Cautioning that we might perhaps be seduced into adding more and more to the technology-assisted learning environment, the authors rightly say that not only do the 'extras' cost more in financial terms but that adding more and more in terms of content/material hinders, not helps, our students in their learning. As with all things in life, the authors rightly say that it is all a matter of balance, and that the use of radar charts can help us find the most appropriate one taking into account the varying, competing demands of all stakeholders involved in the learning environment created and used.

The role that we, as educators, play in the learning environment that we create is complex. As the authors of the third article, 'A workshop activity to demonstrate that approaches to learning are influenced by the teaching and learning environment' say, student learning is intrinsically bound up with the learning environment created; the relationship is relational. In this article, David Kember, Doris Y. P. Leung and Carmel McNaught from the Chinese University of Hong Kong provide an overview of the theories and approaches to learning and teaching, drawing heavily on the 'surface' and 'deep' notion that has for some time influenced our thinking and practices. Whilst there has been a recent shift towards viewing this more as a continuum rather than two discrete approaches, the authors argue that this is often confused with cognitive styles. In contrast to cognitive styles, the approach that a student takes to their learning may be adapted in order to take account of what they perceive is required of them, or in response to the learning environment in which they find themselves. Whether for a more experienced teacher or for someone new to teaching, the authors rightly argue that we need to understand the relationship between approaches to learning and the learning environment and how this in turn impacts on the learning approach(es) that our learners adopt. Our conceptions of teaching, which are central, are bound up with these, and the authors neatly illustrate this with a model which links the factors involved in how students approach their learning. Arguing that we need more evidence as to how the teaching approaches that we choose to use impact on the learning approaches of our learners, the study described in the article sheds light on the relational nature of these and also the role that the discipline might play. The workshop activity described is, say the authors, replicable and useful in our own teaching contexts.

How students themselves monitor/evaluate their own learning is the subject of the fourth article, by Jackie Haigh. Entitled 'Integrating progress files into the academic process: a review of case studies', the article informs us

that higher education institutions in the UK must now have in place oppor-
tunities for what is termed 'personal development planning' (PDP). Citing a
recent study, the author reports that the first element (of two) is now pretty
much standard in the sector, that is, that students are now routinely issued
with a transcript/progress report. That there were (or are) institutions which
did/do *not* do so is difficult (for me) to believe, but for those who share my
concern we should console ourselves with the fact that, at last, students in
the UK now have this most basic of written documentation given to them.
Let us hope that, with the technological advances available to us, students
in the UK do not have to queue/stand in line in order to collect these
documents! Less successful, says the author, is how 'PDP' itself has been
implemented, or not. In the early days there was much confusion about the
'progress file' element of this, and what it actually meant, in practice. For
some, it meant that students had to gather a portfolio of evidence about their
learning, and present it, perhaps to be assigned a mark. Others saw is as
personal, only for the eyes of the student, as a kind of reflective log/account.
The article updates us on how far we, in the UK, have implemented the
'progress file' element of PDP, setting this against the backdrop of the histor-
ical and political climate and examining the concept of self-regulated learn-
ing underpinning the policy. Reviewing published case studies on the issue,
it seems that three types of progress files have emerged, and that these
differences reflect the different concepts and orientations that we have. For
those who argue that such progress files have benefits for our learners, both
within and beyond the time that students are studying at the institution, the
author is right in saying that this needs to be embedded into our academic
practices, and the article describes how this has been achieved.

The earlier article, by David Kember and colleagues, discusses 'surface' and
'deep' approaches to learning, both of which help us to think about what
approaches to learning are 'good' and which, therefore, must be 'less good'.
What makes 'high-quality' learning, and thus a 'high-quality learner' is the
subject of the fifth and final article. Entitled 'Are students using the 'wrong'
style of learning? A multicultural scrutiny for helping teachers to appreciate
differences', Carolina Valiente explains that a 'high-quality learner' is nor-
mally defined as learner who has a great deal of self motivation and who uses
an analytical approach to both glean and act on knowledge. This is, however,
very much a 'Socratic' view of a learner, says the author, arguing that
approaches other than this should not be dismissed as 'inferior'. As the
author says, the learning styles and approaches taken by learners is affected
by their previous experiences and the context in which that learning took
place, and for some, that 'cultural framework' might include 'memorization,
external motivation, passiveness and collaborative learning', all of which we,
in the West, often view as 'inferior' (Valiente, 2008: 73). Memorization is,

after all, usually to be found listed in the 'surface' approach, and thus 'not good'. The article offers a measured discussion of these four traits, and how they impact on communication and learning styles. The need to look at this vital aspect is evident. For home students the transition is difficult enough but for students from other countries and cultures that adjustment is all the more challenging. The arguments put forward here echo that of the previous articles, namely, that the context in which we operate, whether at work or at home, affects how we learn. Amongst the factors that play their role are, says the author, religion, ideology and social patterns, and it is these that we need to take into account in order to understand the behaviour of both students and teachers in the learning process. In order to discuss this, the author refers to students from the Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC), as well as others.

In more elegant words than expressed here, the author says that forcing students to take part in what we think are 'good' activities, such as 'experiential learning events' may not be the kind of learning previously experienced by learners from cultural backgrounds different from ours in the West. Rather than expecting the students to change to *our* way of looking at the world (in this case, of learning), thus 'correcting others' cultures and behaviour, either by imposing or transposing on them "generally accepted" Western standards', we would do well to keep at the forefront our minds that 'the referred literature on cultural diversity suggests that there is no intrinsic "superiority" of any learning or management model or culture. Each style offers advantages and disadvantages to its users depending on the circumstances they encounter' (Valiente, 2008: 87). We, as educators, have much to learn about other cultures, and if we are teaching those from other countries and cultures, 'understanding the dynamic of cross-cultural relationships and helping international learners to design their own stages of cultural integration or acculturation' is key (2008: 87). The author says that this 'may require the education of teachers, students and institutions on a variety of cultural and internationalization issues' (2008: 87). My view is not that it 'may' but instead that it *will* require such education, as few of us are well informed, or sufficiently so, of the 'theoretical and practical implications of the internationalization of HE'. I could not agree more that any 'preparation should also recognize particular cultural commonalities, the empathy that could emerge through associations between specific groups, and the possibility of creating a culturally adjusted behaviour that matches the standards of the academic institutions in the Western system' (2008: 87). We, in the West (for we dominate the literature in the field), would do well to take on board the message of this article, namely, that 'there is not a "right", single and clear way to learn that may apply to everybody and all circumstances'.