
Editorial

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Biographical notes: Dr. Dawn Birch is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Management and Marketing of the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. She has published in the areas of educational technology, domestic barbers, international advertising, services marketing and shopping centre management. Her current research focuses on academics' adoption and integration of educational technology for developing interactive multimodal technology-mediated distance education courses. She holds a Doctorate in Education from the Queensland University of Technology and a Masters in Education and a Masters in Business from the University of Southern Queensland.

Dr. Latif Al-Hakim lectures in Management at the Faculty of Business of the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. His experience spans industry, research and development and academic institutions. He was awarded his undergraduate degree in 1968. His Masters (1978) and PhD (1983) were awarded by the University of Wales (UK). He has published extensively in information management and systems modelling. He is the author and editor of 8 books, more than 10 chapters in books and more than 75 papers in various journals and conference proceedings. He has also consulted for a number of major industrial organisations in Australia.

Advances in educational and information communications technology, particularly with the new and emerging web 2.0 and mobile technologies as a means of the global dissemination of information have created opportunities for universities to move beyond traditional face to face and correspondence modes toward a virtual or online classroom. Virtual online education provides opportunities for innovative approaches to learning and teaching and allows the dissemination and sharing of knowledge to occur independent of the constraints of time and place. University educators can now take advantage of a growing array of resources on the internet to provide a rich technology-based learning environment that fosters flexibility, connectivity, collaboration and engages students. Moreover, ready access to multimedia at the desktop and on hand-held devices has provided an opportunity for educators to develop more engaging and interactive learning resources.

These advances in education and information communications technology in conjunction with societal changes mean that traditional university models no longer meet the needs of new age students. Today's 'techno-savvy' students have grown up in a highly visual digital culture and are comfortable operating in the electronic environment of wikis, blogs, podcasts, interactive games and virtual worlds. Increasingly, mature-aged students are seeking opportunities to extend their education and develop career options by studying part-time while fully employed and, in many cases, raising a family. These 'time-poor' students require flexible study options that provide greater convenience and mobility. To meet the high global demand for higher education and remain commercially viable in an increasingly competitive global education sector, universities must cater to the needs of these new-age students through the pedagogically sound and cost-effective adoption and integration of educational and information communication technology. In this special edition, we explore the field of virtual online education in the tertiary sector and identify effective practice.

In their paper titled 'Towards the development of a model for best practice in virtual campuses', Stansfield *et al.* propose a framework for exploring key issues and critical success factors underpinning best practice for the purpose of enhancing the cost-effective and sustainable development, management and implementation of virtual campuses. The model proposes that successful initiatives and best practice in e-learning and virtual campuses rely upon careful consideration of the relevant organisational, technological, pedagogical, financial, student/user and consolidation issues. Given the significant investment involved in the development of virtual universities and e-learning initiatives, the authors emphasise the need for collaboration and the sharing of strategic experiences and best practise knowledge. In particular, they argue that it is critical to explore how new e-learning technologies can be used to provide greater opportunities for students and enhanced learning, flexibility and inclusiveness.

Given the significant investment and growth in development of virtual learning environments, such models and frameworks are critical given the costly failure of e-learning initiatives. The failure of e-learning initiatives is the focus of the paper presented by Paulsen titled 'Resting in e-learning peace'. Based on a mega-study of 36 case studies, Paulsen identifies ten e-learning initiatives that did not meet their targeted goals. He discusses factors leading to the failure of e-learning initiatives and provides recommendations for improving the success of e-learning initiatives.

Valuable insights into the use of virtual worlds such as Second Life to create a virtual learning environment are provided in the paper authored by Molka-Danielsen *et al.*, titled 'Teaching and learning affectively within a virtual campus'. Interesting examples of mainstream university courses and activities conducted in Second Life are provided. In seeking to explain the value of virtual learning environments, the authors explore three key factors that appear to impact on affective learning outcomes, *viz.* anonymity of identities, behaviour of agents through course design, and spaces and artefacts in designing immersive learning experiences.

In their paper titled 'Online learning communities in the New 'U'', Thoms *et al.* investigate the efficacy of student-driven rather than instructor-driven Online Learning Communities (OLC). These student-directed online learning communities are founded on the concepts of activity theory, constructivism and social presence. Positive impacts in terms of perceived learning, social interaction and community building were found to be associated with these user-centric online learning communities.

Finally, McDonald in her paper titled 'Designing and implementing online discussion forums: an Australian case study' explores the value of online discussions, and purposeful interaction and reflection in supporting a social constructivist approach to learning. In particular, she emphasises the important role of the teacher in structuring the learning, facilitating a learning community and promoting cognitive learning. Strategies for the effective design of online forums are presented.