
Editorial

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Biographical notes: Lap-Kei Lee is an Assistant Professor at the School of Science and Technology of Hong Kong Metropolitan University. He received his Bachelor of Engineering in Computer Engineering and Doctor of Philosophy in Computer Science from the University of Hong Kong. His research interests include the design and analysis of algorithms (especially in online job scheduling and data stream algorithms), natural language processing, algorithm engineering, and educational technology.

Shinichi Sato is a Professor at the Nihon Fukushi University, Japan. He received his PhD in Engineering from the University of Tokyo, Japan in 2008. He served as the Chief of E-Learning Department at Nihon Fukushi University and Managing Editor of the *International Journal for Educational Media and Technology*. His research interests include educational technology, virtual reality, and human-computer interface. Especially, he is interested in the use of information and communication technology in experiential learning. He received several awards including Outstanding Paper Award in ED-MEDIA2010 from the Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education.

Flexibility learning focuses on providing learners choices to flexibly control the pace, place, content, and mode of their learning. Over the past decades, the pedagogical and technological innovations in teaching and learning offer more choices of delivery mode to learners, ranging from traditional face-to-face classes to online learning, open learning, distance learning, and mobile learning, where learners have greater control and more interactions in their learning. Learners are able to learn on more interactive learning materials and interact more with their instructors and classmates through chat rooms and discussion boards. Advances in technology also enable new approaches to how learning is delivered and assessed. Education researchers and practitioners have been actively studying how increasing flexibility impacts student learning and the quality of that learning experience.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic leads to sudden campus closures worldwide. According to UNESCO statistics, the pandemic has affected more than 1.3 billion school students at all levels from 186 countries. It poses different emerging risks to regular teaching and learning, especially in the delivery mode and assessment design. Many schools and universities shifted to online teaching, but many teachers and students are not readily adapted to and engaged in the new environment. These bring out new issues in planning lessons, delivering flexible instructions, preparing materials and tools for teaching and learning, and designing class activities. All of these involve flexible learning in the pedagogical design and learning process. The call of this special issue on *Towards flexible learning to mitigate emerging risks* aims to report the latest trends and innovative practices of flexible learning to mitigate emerging risks affecting the effectiveness and efficiency of teaching and learning from both technological and pedagogical perspectives.

This special issue contains five selected papers from the 14th International Conference on Blended Learning and the 7th International Symposium on Educational Technology, both hosted at the Nihon Fukushi University, Nagoya, Japan on 10 to 13 August 2021, with substantial expansion and revision.

Technological perspectives

The first two papers focus on the benefits and challenges of using technological innovations in flexible learning.

In the first paper, Wong et al. identified the trends of research contexts, benefits, and challenges of technology-enhanced flexible learning (which is referred to as smart learning) from 115 research papers published in 2011–2020, in which the learners are supported by various technological tools (e.g., smartphones and tablets) to achieve learning goals in flexible and collaborative ways. Most relevant studies were found to be conducted in the computer science discipline at the university undergraduate level. The benefits and challenges identified in this survey enhance the understanding of smart learning and reveal potential future research directions that are worth pursuing further. It also serves as a guide for the design and implementation of smart learning practices to mitigate emerging risks in teaching and learning.

In the second paper, Yang et al. investigated the effect of tablet-based classroom instruction on students' self-regulated learning and learning achievements in four junior high schools in China. It was found that the 101 students who received tablet-based instruction had significantly higher learning achievement and self-regulated abilities than the other 97 students in the control group who received traditional lecture-based instruction. The study also found that the use of tablets in classroom instruction has the potential to meet the needs of students with different learning styles to achieve their learning goals.

Pedagogical perspectives

The next three papers report case studies, which identified good pedagogies and challenges in flexible learning.

In the third paper, Simonova et al. conducted a study of 500 students' perceptions of the development of online distance instruction in senior secondary and higher education in the Czech Republic during the pandemic. The study covers four criteria, namely:

- 1 the first contact and communication with students
- 2 learning content acquisition
- 3 learning content delivery and assessment
- 4 students' feedback on online distance instruction.

Positive aspects of the instruction development were identified, and negative aspects (the lessons learned) in the development were also highlighted with useful didactic recommendations given.

In the fourth paper, Li et al. conducted a similar yet more large-scale study on 2,752 students' experiences and perceptions of hybrid synchronous learning at a university in Hong Kong. While the students' positive feedback from a questionnaire survey and a focus group interview was summarised, the study also highlighted some important issues and challenges such as students' interactions and relationships with their fellow classmates. The results shed light on the design of effective hybrid synchronous education in a university.

In the fifth paper, Zhang et al. presented a case study of activity design for cultivating students' online inquiring minds and journalistic skills in an undergraduate journalism course in Japan. Through examining the process of how students fostered inquiring minds and improved their skills in news writing, five crucial design elements were identified. This theoretical contribution is helpful for instructors to design activities for journalism courses based on the students' characteristics and also offers insight into activity design in other courses of similar nature.

We would like to thank Prof. Kongkiti Phusavat, the Editor-in-Chief of the *International Journal of Innovation and Learning*, for his kind acceptance of publishing this special issue. We would also like to express our appreciation to Ms. Janet Clements for her efforts in assisting the publication of this special issue.

We hope that you would enjoy reading the papers.