



Editorial

Distance learning and early childhood education: Retrospectives and future directions

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New Zealand Tertiary College has in recent years re-positioned within the tertiary sector to report on its legal and statutory requirements for government. An integral part of this development has been vision of the institution to actively engage in the provision of research informed early childhood education academic credentials at local, national and international levels. *He Kupu* has emerged as a contribution to the academic research community by New Zealand Tertiary College. The value of this first publication of *He Kupu* heralds the unique nature that distance learning in its many forms has given to the field of early childhood education. The exacting nature of this initiative provides further opportunity for people to share research informed contributions in early childhood education.

Online technologies have had a widespread impact upon education, and the nature and purpose of teaching and learning. This impact has now grown to encompass the academic journal, and perhaps even questions of the nature and purpose of editing academic journals in an online environment. With this in mind this editorial provides a context through which *He Kupu* secures some space to engage in a range of key questions and concerns that will inform scholarship in and around distance learning, online learning, teacher education and early childhood education.

New technologies, Kellner (2004) notes, have long been associated with transformations in social and cultural, political and economic relationships to knowledge and information. The history of old technologies, whatever old technologies might be, gives legitimacy to such claims. Whether considering the development of the printed book, the Frobellian gift, or the Montessorian didactic apparatus, a consistency between the old and the new is the impact of technological development on education. New technologies consistently give rise to questioning what has been done in the name of education, what is being done, and what will be done. More than this, our contexts are revealed by the ways in which we interpret the space and relevance of technological change (Heidegger, 1977).

The question remains, what is meant by terms such as distance learning, distance education, online learning and e-learning? These terms entertain complex relationships, their meanings are dynamic and in constant negotiation – this is a positive aspect of engagement. That these terms are used within a range of contexts, and for different purposes, emphasises the value of exploring



the contexts through which educational programmes are designed and implemented.

In this editorial the theme of 'Distance learning and early childhood education: Retrospectives and future directions' is explored through a brief investigation of some key movements and tensions in the development of distance learning and online learning. The first key tension is the challenge to satisfying a range of assumptions regarding what constitutes an effective, meaningful, and/or quality educational experience.

New challenges in education

Critics of new and old modes of learning at a distance have variously critiqued (at best) and marginalised (at worst) distance education as unsuitable for learning due to the lack of face to face contact, the limitations of print-based discussion, limitations for constructive (or constructivist) learning, the deficit in necessary skills required to use technologies, the lack of requisite technologies, and so on. These criticisms are arguably enhanced when considering teacher education, where educators and particularly early childhood educators are often characterised as both requiring that face to face contact and being low tech.

Yet the very challenges associated with developing, implementing and evaluating online and distance learning are perhaps the very factors which contribute to the potential of distance learning for engendering meaningful educational experiences for learners. The 'tyranny of distance' is a challenge to the educator to think about not only how to get things right, but what are the right things to get. Levine (2005, p. 43) argues:

This distance creates a situation whereby the control of the teacher is reduced and the control of the learner is increased. And, of course, as the teacher's control is reduced so is the teacher's ability to completely control the design and implementation of evaluation strategies (Levine, 2005, p. 43).

Here the adversity associated with distance is seen to provide scope for enhancing the learning and teaching environment. Advocacy for online learning generally acknowledges the challenges of establishing and maintaining "purposeful, interactive student engagement" (LeBaron & Santos, 2005) online, and for this reason devotes much time and attention to developing this essential aspect of online learning, arguably more so than face-to-face programme developers and educators. Levine (2005) argues strongly for the learner's contribution to the evaluation of their learning, and evidences the value of online learning in providing a scope for such considerations. Perhaps the increased attention to barriers to evaluation in distance learning will engender distance learning evaluation as more purposeful, better designed, and with a more meaningful philosophical fit, than modes of learning where evaluation is, arguably, less of a challenge. In other words, "since distance education demands a high degree of self-direction on the part of the learner, it follows that evaluation that is intended to inform the learner should be made a significant focus for evaluation in distance education" (Levine, 2005, p. 49).



New technologies provide course designers with opportunities to promote different ways of thinking about teacher education. For instance, consistent with the opportunity to critically engage with online engagement, research in Aotearoa/New Zealand by Murphy *et al.* (2006) draws upon developments of the online medium to problematise assessment practices in early childhood teacher education.

In terms of curricula design and academic content, new information technologies provide online course designers opportunities to immerse students in the very concepts that are being taught. For example Taylor and Hsueh (2005, pp. 127-128) argue “[o]nline-video conferencing sessions promote students’ understanding of constructivism by providing opportunities for students to interact with renowned educators across the country. These sessions opened up a world of ideas and intellectual resources that are not otherwise available from one university.” While simply having access to technology does not in itself affirm a course’s qualities in meaningful and practical introductions to what it means to be a constructivist, Taylor and Hsueh (2005) suggest that early childhood student teachers have found benefits to include the very experience of working with the technology. In addition the use of the technology assists in creating personal experiences that encourage students to perceive technology as breaking down the distance in distance education.

Another common critique of information technology regards the problem of educational engagement between teacher and student, or student and student(s). That educational engagement is problematic should be taken as a given, whether lecturing to 400 students in an auditorium, tutoring 30 in a classroom, discovering the world with ten in a garden, or emailing one in an online programme.

Here then the strongest argument for encouraging scholarship in online learning is perhaps that the development of programmes necessarily troubles what it means to be engaging educationally. Programme designers and the educators and students using the platforms and the course content, are exploring the meaning and rules of education and educational engagement. In other words, the challenges associated with online and distance learning problematise any aspirations or claims regarding the universal nature and purpose of education, and reinforce the value of informed and contextual critique

New terrains for a philosophy of education

Guided by a philosophy of critique, the development of online learning has attracted scholars interested in the philosophy of education and in the use of multimedia technologies to promote social and critical constructivist philosophies in education to explore the wider contexts within which human relationships are constructed (see for instance, Angus *et al.*, 2004; LeBaron & Santos, 2005; Kellner, 2004; Peters & Lankshear, 1996).

The development of online learning traces out new terrains for considering sociocultural, political, and economic disadvantage. Different social and cultural groups have different access to technology (Angus *et al.*, 2004). More than this, relationships to technology, whether collective or individual, establish a means to measure advantage and opportunity. This is particularly evident where public



policy assesses a technological deficit and prescribes a technological solution for groups whose very classification as 'in deficit' is determined through analysis of access to and use of new technologies.

While the 'digital divide' is regarded as concomitantly a reason for and against providing online learning (see for instance, Education Commission of the States, 2002) informed and critical debate around the this divide provides an opportunity to deconstruct not only how online learning may reinforce or problematise certain power relations, it also gives cause to reflect upon the ways in which other modes of learning may or may not have satisfied assumptions of equality of opportunity and access, and of the role of varying modes of educational programme in achieving social justice.

The development of online learning has provided an important scope within which to investigate the contemporary and future roles of tertiary institutions in delimiting the production and value of knowledge and information, and importantly who has access to what information (Hedge & Hayward, 2004). In what ways will institutions collaborate in the development of online learning, and in what ways will governments impose upon these potential collaborations (see for instance Hailes & Hazemi, 2002)? Will online learning significantly transform tertiary education and its institutions? Is it another instance, following Readings, of the ruins of the university (Peters, 1996)?

Within the context of distance education, a concern for Societal Impact allows us to go beyond the mere concern for elaboration of technology or self-indulging learning and, instead, develop a sense of the value of learning at a distance within the greater context of society. It significantly strengthens our position and stretches our thinking to look past considering only the learner and his or her own immediate learning needs and creates a greater sense of community as the basis for ultimate change (Levine, 2005, p. 53).

Sociocultural and critical constructivist perspectives lend emphasis to a critique of technology and in particular assumptions regarding the constitution of human-technology and human-technology-human relationships. New (and old) technologies are cultural tools and as such engage in complex relationships with the educators and their existing 'toolkits' (Laffey, 2004). Software designs, hardware configurations, and communications packages intended to promote learning for the greater need of a community, and the progressive desires of a social network, trouble the sense in which technology might be considered a neutral tool. More than this any claims to a neutral essence to educational technologies, including the hardware, and the educational platforms, should not be regarded as indicators that the qualities of these 'things' should be free from critique. Indeed the value placed on technology in augmenting educational experiences for individuals and groups highlights the very importance of engaging in critique that explores the relationships which are embedded in and flow around each technological construct.

Hence it is important to explore the cultural specificity of what it means to be engaged in technological relationships, that plethora of cybernetic operations, inputs, outputs, and the organisation of information that affects "the lives of the learners, their community, [and] their organizations" (Levine, 2005, p. 44).



In critique of the 'neutrality thesis' the concern is not that a technology is not neutral, it is that assumptions of neutrality obscure relationships, hierarchies, and ideologies. Hence the development of online learning invigorates an increasingly complex understanding of the cultural nature of technology, and of the development of a range of relationships with information and communication through new (and old) technologies.

Relationships to information are, arguably, always complex. How then does online learning (re)constitute educational relationships? Beyond the questions of who has access to knowledge online, whose knowledge is most widely disseminated? The Education Commission of the States (2002) articulates a value of online learning as ensuring expert voices travel farther distances. How might the dissemination of the expert knowledge of a few, to a distant group of learners, impact on the nature of the learning environment, on the transmission of information, and on its interpretation in these distant contexts? An interesting tension emerges between expectations of social and cultural diversity (Levine, 2005) and learning communities/networks (Ilich, 1976), and educational quality and uniformity (Education Commission of the States, 2002).

A new paradigm for early childhood teacher education

Early childhood education provides a particular focus for *He Kupu*. In recognition of the many potential links between early childhood education and new technologies, a wide range of research interests have developed in expanding academic networks (see for instance, <http://www.techandyoungchildren.org/-research.html>). The Education Commission to the States (2002) articulates many possibilities for online learning. Online professional development offers a wider population access to, as noted above, expert knowledge (Education Commission of the States, 2002). In addition, online learning is valued as tool to breach traditional barriers for early childhood teacher education.

Many early childhood professionals are reluctant to seek higher education. They generally are non-traditional college students and may need flexibility and support in order to succeed in higher learning. Distance learning can open the door for many of these students to higher education opportunities available through community colleges (Education Commission of the States, 2002, p. 7).

The Commission challenges claims that online learning cannot provide a teacher education that is practical, interactive, and co-constructive. Online technologies are believed to provide a means for essential areas of professional development in early childhood education (Education Commission of the States, 2002).

Arguably the most important questions when considering the development of online technologies in early childhood teacher education are associated with assumptions regarding the technological skills and dispositions of early childhood educators (Bolstad, 2004; Gibbons, 2006). Bolstad (2004) notes that while early childhood educators are often characterised as reluctant users of information technologies, reluctance should be regarded as a careful rather than



'technophobic' disposition. Indeed it is problematic to suggest that the early childhood environment, and the early childhood educator, are in technological deficit or technologically-deprived. The argument here is that any claims regarding educators' relative technological ignorance should be carefully deconstructed in order to explore assumptions of the nature and purpose of technology as a tool for realising particular outcomes (see for instance Burbules & Callister, 2000; Dreyfus, 2002; Feenberg, 1999; Standish, 2002; Young, 2002).

Within the context of online learning, any assumptions that early childhood educators are low tech, and that this trait is a problem when considering online learning, requires problematisation in terms of how the construction of such characteristics might impact on the ways in which online technologies are valued and used in their distant contexts (Gibbons, 2006). How might assumptions of the nature of the educator impact upon platform and programme design, and how might educational designs then impact upon the recognised values of difference and distance in early childhood teacher education?

While it is problematic to assume that the lived experiences of children and adults are reduced to the rationally predetermined needs and wants of a technological society ... the spaces in which these lived experiences occur are increasingly subject to a centralised gaze that limits creative and meaningful interpretations of technology and education (Gibbons, 2006, p. 12).

Teachers are not mechanic in their implementation of their educational machines (see for instance Feenberg, 2000; Laffey, 2004). Key questions must then consider the ways in which an educator's 'micropractices' give meaning to the technologies that constitute their educational environment.

This inaugural issue reflects that early childhood education scholarship and practice has much to gain from considering, more than the role of online technology in innovative early childhood programmes, the wider issues that associate early childhood education and technology. Critical consideration of these contributes to a deeper understanding of technology, information, education, and learning.

A place for He Kupu

He Kupu provides a space to keep questions concerning technology open, and to use such questions to promote critical scholarship in education and, more specifically, both teacher education and early childhood education. It provides a forum through which to examine a wide range of issues of relevance to distance education and online learning, acknowledging that a new mode of learning should not be considered in isolation from the historical, contemporary, and imagined contexts of education (Education Commission of the States, 2002).

Technology provides a predominant focus for this journal. Technology in its widest sense is a pervasive factor in transformations of educational values and practices. What this means for *He Kupu* is the opportunity to contribute to the development of online learning, and in addition, to use debates regarding online



learning as a focal point for wider educational questions. For instance questions of the efficacy of online learning as a media for engagement open space for wide questions of the meaning and nature of educational engagement within a range of contexts.

To follow Moss (2003) and Kellner (2004) *He Kupu's* purpose is to keep spaces open for 'multiple literacies' when thinking about technology and education. Kellner (2004, p. 13) argues, "a critical theory ... sees how technology can be used, and perhaps redesigned and restructured, for positive purposes such as enhancing education, democracy and overcoming the divide between haves and have-nots, while enabling individuals to democratically and creatively participate in a new economy, society, and culture ..."

Whether or not the reader is knowledgeable about new technologies such as open source software (see for instance <http://www.innovateonline.info/index.php>) robotic baby dolls (Cordes & Miller, 2000), cybernetic theories of parallel processing, or even, like Neo from the movie *The Matrix*, whether we humans are mere organic batteries powering a technological society of digital turtles.

While designed as an online only journal, *He Kupu's* home is Aotearoa/New Zealand. For an international audience, the significance of this context, and connection, is the commitment to bicultural principles when considering relationships between technology and education. *He Kupu*, in te reo (the language) means the word. *He Kupu* then emphasises a philosophy of critique, of scholarship, and of ongoing, positive, careful, collegial, discourse.

To summarise, the journey of *He Kupu* begins with an educational interest: what are these online and distance technologies about, how are they technologies, and how do they impact upon education and wider society? Within the context of these questions, the contemporary landscape in distance learning provides many spaces to question assumptions regarding education in general, about why we do education, about the relationships around and through education. To me this is an important academic responsibility.

Article summary

Volume One Issue One of *He Kupu* features an interview with Professor James D. Marshall, whose many experiences in teacher education tertiary education more generally include the Open University in England and both the Universities of Waikato and Auckland in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Two key themes for *He Kupu* are reinforced through Professor Marshall's reflections: the educational opportunities that distance education aspires to provide, and the impact of media such as the internet on experiences of education for both the educator and the learner.

In their article Nichols and McLachlan critically investigate these issues in relation to early childhood teacher education synthesising an in-depth knowledge of developments in distance learning and of the impact of emerging internet functions on opportunities to problematise and transform learning-teaching relationships. For early childhood educators the challenges of effectively integrating the latest technologies must be fit with the realities of



existing technological relationships. The potential of online technologies in enhancing the collaborative processes of early childhood teacher education appears to provide a positive fit with contemporary philosophies in early childhood education.

Key issues and practices central to effective online learning provide the scope for Fox and Donohue's paper. They draw upon extensive practical and theoretical experience to identify aspects of early childhood teacher education that require critical consideration when developing an online learning environment.

Taylor, Sluss and Lovelace apply the issues discussed in earlier papers to the early childhood learning environment. The authors note that because "technology is constantly changing in today's society, not only have the goals of education changed, but also the notion of what it means to be educated." The paper contributes to wider debates regarding technology and play, and provides perspectives on contemporary views regarding developmentally-situated practices and assumptions of the importance of play in early learning experiences. Importantly, the complex relationship between play and technology is explored. Finally, the authors identify a range of resources to support early childhood educators in enriching the child's learning through and with new technologies such as computers, educational software, and the web.

A valued component of *He Kupu* is the opportunity to incorporate a student's voice in considering the role of new technologies in learning generally and in early childhood teacher education specifically. Parker reflects on the barriers that were overcome in succeeding in returning to tertiary education after a significant time spent in the workforce and as a mother. Importantly, the impact of English as a second language is considered in terms of learning from a distance – a key issue when considering international possibilities of online learning.

Testa's reflections upon the needs of the learner conclude the first issue. The responsibility of online learning teacher educators to establish strong relationships with students provides, for Testa, emphasis on understanding the specific needs of each learner. Testa provides critical consideration of the importance of a commitment to supporting each student's preparation and motivation for learning for both online educational designers and educators.

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