

Research in Distance Education: from present findings to future agendas



Conference report and presentations

9 February 2009

Brunei Gallery, SOAS, University of London

Centre for Distance Education

University of London External System

www.cde.london.ac.uk

Since 2005, the Centre's Teaching and Research Awards scheme has funded 36 research projects to a total of £659,000, forming one of the largest and most active cross-disciplinary programmes of research in this area today. The findings of these projects were presented at a conference held at the Brunei Centre, SOAS, University of London on 9 February 2009. The conference focused largely on moving from the presentation of current results to setting priorities for the future research agenda.

The conference began and ended with inspiring keynote presentations, by **Don Olcott** of the Observatory on Borderless Higher Education and **Martin Oliver** of the Higher Education Academic Exchange (until very recently known as the Research Observatory). The majority of the time, however, was devoted to presenting and discussing research supported through the Teaching and Research Awards scheme, and, crucially, to discussing how this research should best be taken forward. The presentations were divided into three strands: '**Design for learning**', '**Supporting teaching and learning**' and '**Evaluation and assessment**'.

Design for learning

The research presented in the Design for Learning strand covered a wide range of disciplines, from mathematics to music and from veterinary science to structural biology. Each presentation took the form of a case study, describing how innovative technology and thoughtful pedagogy has been combined to enhance students' experience of learning at a distance. The common theme that emerged from these was the importance of understanding the people we are teaching, the places where they are, and the activities we are asking them to do (or undertaking on their behalf). Today's distance learning students of all ages are living and working in an environment where communication is pervasive, immediate and electronic: where a picture taken seconds ago can be shared with a worldwide network of friends. Researchers discovered that, far from being a distraction, the purely social dimension of mobile phones and real-time communication tools could have positive educational benefit. Several of the studies were pilot or first-stage projects, designed to 'put a toe in the water' and test the utility of cutting-edge technologies including immersive virtual worlds. Discussion leader Steve Ryan from the Centre for Learning Technology at London School of Economics commented that the research agenda needs to move on from what is very valuable descriptive research to working across disciplines and engaging more deeply with recent developments in pedagogic theory as well as practice.

Supporting teaching and learning

Gwyneth Price, Collection Development Services Librarian at the Institute of Education and discussion leader in the Supporting Teaching and Learning strand, summed up the main priority set during that group's discussions as 'the need to better understand our students: their needs, their access to, and their confidence with IT'. The variety of technologies used by educators, maybe particularly to distance educators is now overwhelming, and it is far too easy to select and use

technologies 'for their own sake' rather than as an answer to a real student need. Teachers (and librarians) need to recognise that students now inhabit a completely different 'information world' from, at least, established professionals. Increasingly, students have no need to visit libraries except as study spaces, but they still need to learn how to learn and how to use the information that is so widely available in a discriminating way. Librarians can have an important role in teaching study skills and information literacy. More research is also needed into how to improve student retention; the key point to emerge from research into this was the importance of good and frequent communication between the University and individual students. Several presentations reflected the current fascination with communication via the now ubiquitous Web 2.0 based social software tools. These are bound to have real educational value, but it may be that this will not become fully evident until the initial hype is over. For now, one seemingly trivial question was occupying many educators' minds: under what circumstances should students and their tutors become Facebook friends?

Evaluation and assessment

Results of student surveys of evaluation and assessment practices almost universally reveal a student need for more and better feedback throughout their studies. This need can be particularly acute in distance education, when students, self-evidently, are not able to pop into tutors' offices to chat about their work. Research into improving feedback to students is ongoing, and some useful results were presented in the Evaluation and Assessment strand. Nevertheless, this is one area in which more research is needed, particularly in the more qualitative, arts based disciplines. It has always been far easier to design computer-based quizzes and exercises to assess students' work and provide feedback in numerical subjects where most answers are either right or wrong. And here, also, it is important to take into account the interconnected, information-rich context in which our students learn. Students who are used to sharing information constantly via social networking sites will value group work, even when groups are geographically disparate, but it may be even harder to disentangle individual contributions and assess students in a fair and consistent way. Many challenges remain to be addressed in developing computer-based and computer-mediated feedback and assessments that are pedagogically valid and encourage deep and reflective learning.

In the closing plenary, Martin Oliver emphasised the diversity of the student community involved in distance education. Students vary in their learning practices and in particular in their access to, and experience with, technology; what is appropriate in one place and context may not be so in another. Survey responses may not tell the whole story; for example, students often claim they like and need study skills materials but ignore them when they are provided. In setting the research agenda for distance education in today's wired world it is more important than ever to allow pedagogy to drive technology and to put the students first.

Dr Clare Sansom, Birkbeck College

Keynote presentations

An Emerging Agenda: Global Research in Cross Border Higher Education

Dr Don Olcott, Chief Executive, Observatory for Borderless Higher Education

[Link to presentation](#)

From present findings to future agendas: communities and the Higher Education Academy Exchange

Martin Oliver Higher Education Academy Research Observatory

[Link to presentation](#)

The Conference strands

Strand 1 Design for learning

Strand leaders: **Kim Whittlestone**, Royal Veterinary College and **Dr Steve Ryan**, LSE

Research projects

Achieving interactivity in distance learning of phonetic skills

Michael Ashby, University College

The RAMLine project

Antony Pitts Technology Department, Royal Academy of Music

Pedagogical models of synchronous audiographic conferencing

Tim Neumann London Knowledge Lab, Institute of Education

[Link to presentation](#)

CoMo: Supporting collaborative group work using mobile phones in distance education

Dr Niall Winters London Knowledge Lab, Institute of Education

[Link to presentation](#)

Use of social software for online tutorials in Structural Biology

Dr Clare Sansom School of Crystallography, Birkbeck College

[Link to presentation](#)

A move towards virtual tuition for distance learning in mathematics

Dr James Ward, Principal Researcher, Department of Mathematics, LSE

Strand 2 Supporting teaching and learning

Strand leader **Gwyneth Price**, Institute of Education

Teaching framework scheme: enhancing support for distance learning in the University of London External System with special reference to Laws

Dr Beverley Brown External Laws Programme, University of London

Improving student retention in postgraduate distance education at the University of London

Sarah Jones Centre for Financial and Management Studies, SOAS

[Link to presentation](#)

Social software and libraries

Dr Jane Secker London School of Economics and Political Science

[Link to presentation](#)

University of London External System Study Skills Project

Paul Smith, Centre for Distance Education

[Link to presentation](#)

Reading for a degree?

Sandra Tury Online Services, University of London Research Library Services

[Link to presentation](#)

Bibliospace: developing personal bibliographic landscape

Dr Steve Warburton Kings College

Strand 3 Evaluation and assessment

Strand leaders **Dr Denise Whitelock**, Open University and **Dr Hugh Starkey**, Institute of Education

Learning to assess: assessment for learning (Introduction) Denise Whitelock [Link to presentation](#)

Accelerating learning to assess: assessment for learning (Conclusion) Denise Whitelock [Link to presentation](#)

Framework for embedded evaluation for online distance learners

Dr Caroline Daly Centre for Excellence: Work-based learning for Education Professionals, Institute of Education

[Link to presentation](#)

Closing the loop: identifying effective formative assessment practices in open and distance learning

Dr Stylianos Hatzipanagos King's Institute of Learning and Teaching, King's College London

[Link to presentation](#)

Changing forms of assessment in the undergraduate Laws Programme

Dr Wayne Morrison External Laws Programme

[Link to presentation](#)

Collaboration and communications in distance supervision of MA dissertations

Dr Amos Paran Faculty of Culture and Pedagogy, Institute of Education

Benchmarking e-learning in the University of London

Dr Ayona Silva-Fletcher Royal Veterinary College

Assessment for distance learners: Challenges and issues

Tim Wade External System, University of London

Research posters

Scaling up an educational model for enhancing distance learning through use of mobile learning

Jon Gregson, University of London External System

Online self-access course teaching reading skills for Business Dutch [Link to poster](#)

Theo Hermans, Department of Dutch, University College London

A study of An Evaluative Case Study of three different methods of online communication in a distance learning postgraduate course in Dermatology [Link to poster](#)

Dr Virginia Hubbard, Centre for Cutaneous Research, Queen Mary University of London

Computer-mediated tasks and tutor inputs [Link to poster](#)

Dr Hugh Starkey, School of Arts and Humanities, Institute of Education

A study into the use of weblogs as a dialogic tool for supporting community, collaboration and reflection in distance learning environments

Dr Steve Warburton Kings College London

Wake-up calls for learning: an inclusive approach to supporting first year students [Link to poster](#)

Ursula Wingate, King's College London

Developing course team approaches to task design [Link to poster](#)

Adam Unwin, Maths, Science and Technology, Institute of Education

Research exhibition

Research in distance education [Link to exhibition](#)

Brian Sayer, University of London External System and Dr Clare Sansom, Birkbeck College