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EDITORIAL

This special issue contains the six research papers presented at the Association for Learning Technology (ALT) conference, "Building new cultures of learning", held at the University of Nottingham, England, 10–12 September 2013. This was the first time that the research papers accepted for the annual conference were to be published as a special issue. The editors decided to use a full journal review procedure and required a high standard.

Research and its use to inform practice and policy making have been at the centre of ALT's activities since the Association's inception. This conference again saw an appropriate research presence. A special strand of research for one day allowed those with a wish to concentrate on research to have a tailored programme, with supporting funds available for early career researchers to attend.

Everybody learns, but the ways in which we all learn are changing rapidly. This conference set out to explore and contribute to building new cultures of learning. From learning tailored to the requirements of one individual to courses educating tens of thousands, the conference examined a variety of evolving learning cultures.

The conference had five themes:

(1) **It's all about the learner**: the role of student pioneers, learners as change agents, partnerships with learners, learners in control, learner contracts, everybody is a learner, lifelong learning journeys.
(2) **Making technological innovations work**: pedagogic strategies for using technology effectively, the importance of technological developments for strategy, institutional practice, the importance of senior management, learning from techies.
(3) **Big data**: making sense of big data, student analytics, big research, can we predict the future?
(4) **In the Open**: Open Educational Resources, Open Access research and publishing, MOOCs.
(5) **Global learning cultures**: crowd sourcing, collaboration, global competition, educational policy and politics, new educational powers in the global market.

More than 80% of the proposals for presentations, including those for research papers, addressed the first two themes. The same was true for those we accepted.

Traditionally, the conference has attracted reports of small-scale experiments rather than of large-scale testing or deployment, and proposals for papers have concentrated on the use of qualitative rather than quantitative techniques in analysis. Accordingly, it is perhaps unsurprising that there were few proposals in general – and no research papers accepted – under the theme of "Big data".

Open resources and open access are being given prominence in institutional strategies and have become the subject of much debate. In the United Kingdom,

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government research councils have taken a strong stance on open publication. The research base in the whole area has been established for some time, however, and the issues now are often those of deployment and politics rather than interpretation of research findings or new work. Accordingly, it is also not surprising that there were few proposals overall under this theme and no research papers of a high enough standard.

Similarly, most works reported on at the conference have been fairly modest in scope (covering a single course, department or institution). However, the one paper accepted here under the ''Global learning cultures'' theme, from Cochrane et al. (2013), proposes an online open and connected framework for building global learning communities using mobile social media, rather than MOOCs. It explores an international team's experiences of building collaborative worldwide learning communities based on developing and sustaining a global community of practice (CoP) of mobile learning researchers and practitioners over a 3-year period. This work has resulted in the construction of a framework for using mobile social media to support collaborative curriculum development focused on redefining pedagogy across international boundaries. The framework is informed by a critique of the reified activity of the CoP, including the development of student-generated mobile social media projects that have been used to broker collaboration across six different educational contexts around the globe.

Putting the learner at the heart of the processes of learning was an overarching theme and the one well captured by the first theme, ''It's all about the learner''. Two research papers are included here.

Walker (2013) considers the use of mobile devices to help with learning in the 14–16 age groups. She addresses three issues: which affordances of mobile devices are most useful to pupils, learners' perceptions of the usefulness of mobile devices and views on the circumstances in which mobile devices can be used or at least tolerated in the classroom. Two academies with very different approaches are compared and contrasted, primarily from a learner viewpoint. She argues that schools should be actively encouraging pupils to make use of mobile devices, whilst giving careful consideration to concerns, particularly those relating to e-safety.

Rodriguez and Armellini (2013) address the issues of how learning, commonly conceptualised as a social, collaborative process, can so be in a corporate environment where online courses often provide limited or no opportunities for communication between people. This paper considers how learners engage with content-based courses, how they find answers to their questions and how they achieve the expected learning outcomes. There is a focus on the collection and analysis of learners' experiences in an online content-based course delivered in a large Mexican organisation with a high geographical dispersion. The authors conclude that learners engaged with a content-based course by following the guidance available and attempted to make the materials more relevant to their own context; that learners were resourceful when trying to find support; and that broadening the range of support options available to learners may trigger more meaningful, contextualised and rewarding learning experiences.

In line with submissions overall, about half of the research papers came under the theme ''Making technological innovation work''. However, they cover a wide area.

Osborne, Dunne and Farrand (2013) look at an affordances approach to integrating technologies into assessment design. They discuss the results of a project funded by the UK's Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) at the University of Exeter. The project team designed a new ''dimensions'' model that aims to embed

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employability into the curriculum through "authentic" assessments, supported by contemporary technologies. The project uses a "top trump" metaphor and identifies affordances of off-the-shelf technologies within the model to provide a way of aligning technologies with assessment design. Results suggest that the model is effective in supporting the design of an "authentic" assessment, and that a "targeted" affordances approach can support the alignment of technologies with a pedagogic design.

Mor and Mogilevsky (2013) consider the development and properties of the "Learning Design Studio", which is a collaborative, blended, project-based framework for training teachers in effective and evidence-based use of educational technology. It identifies the need to make knowledge of how to use educational technology more widely available and accessible to teaching practitioners in all disciplines. They argue that teachers operate in a complex and dynamic domain and that accordingly, within this domain, they need to habitually devise new means for achieving educational goals – engendering change in their students' knowledge, behaviours or attitudes. Their paper suggests that this is fundamentally a task of learning design, and that the appropriate epistemic practice is one of design inquiry of learning. Design, in this context, is the informed creative practice of devising "courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into desired ones" (Simon 1969, p. 129). Inquiry-based learning attempts to shape educational experiences in the model of scientific investigation. The Learning Design Studio gives a course format aimed at enculturation of educational professionals into design inquiry of learning.

Brown (2013) considers the large-scale innovations and changes that have been brought about by the unprecedented investments in UK Higher Education over a 4-year period. He discusses why universities are particularly difficult environments in which to achieve large-scale, lasting, change and why conventional top-down and bottom-up models of change management are ill suited to the particular characteristics of higher education institutions. He introduces an alternative "distributive" approach that incorporates participatory design principles, designed to ensure maximum stakeholder engagement. He discusses how this distributive stakeholder engagement approach was employed by several projects within the JISC Curriculum Design and Delivery Programmes, which represented an investment of £8m over a 4-year period (2008–2012) and was widely spread across the United Kingdom. He identifies and analyses common themes that emerged in relation to change enablers and barriers: pervasiveness, feral systems, project creep, opposition, pressure to deliver, personnel changes and technology issues. This analysis leads to a requirement for more stakeholder involvement in defining problems and solutions.

Putting the learner first has received much attention recently. Thus, the conference and the research that is reported in this special issue are timely and likely to stay so for some while. We are pleased to be able to invite readers to peruse these six papers, which amply illustrate that new cultures of learning are being built.

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