

EDITORIAL

Making connections: reflection, feedback and support

Hansell (1974) conceptualized seven different connections or attachments that we have to the world in which we live: attachments that consist of connections to other people, to a social role as well as to a system of meaning. For many, learning is at the heart of the process of making connections, particularly meaningful connections (Horton, 2000). If this is true, then it leads us to consider the extent to which educators, the systems they work in and the tools they use have a role to play in helping learners make those meaningful connections. For example, Scherer (2002, p. 5) suggests that educational systems have a responsibility to:

[...] connect individuals to other people, groups and social roles; provide the knowledge necessary to be a productive member of society; and help individuals to achieve a sense of identity, purpose and meaning.

Defining and understanding how educators do this in a technology-rich society is a challenge that some learning technology researchers and practitioners are addressing. In this issue of *ALT-J* we have six papers that focus in some way on the supportive or facilitative role that technology and teachers can play in helping learners to make connections between:

- Prior knowledge and understanding, and new conceptions and experiences (Masikunas *et al.*; Handley and Cox; Moule).
- Old and new practices or materials (Vallence; Bates *et al.*).
- Learning and teaching activities and learning outcomes (Ellis *et al.*).

Three key themes emerge from these six articles: feedback, reflection and support. Masikunas *et al.* explore the use of electronic voting systems in lectures and note that, for some students, the feedback and reinforcement provided by electronic voting systems helps students to re-think their understanding and challenge the meaning they had construed and derived. As part of their examination of learners' perceptions of model answers in online feedback, Handley and Cox conclude that students need to be supported in their efforts to build on existing knowledge and experiences and to reconsider what they perceive to be the relevant conceptual and practical issues.

Moule offers an alternative to Salmon's five-stage model of learning and teaching online that embraces both instructivist and constructivist approaches to learning. The model is based on the metaphor of a ladder, where the higher rungs of the ladder

represent the need to encourage and support learners to think creatively, problem-solve, update knowledge and skills, and develop critical thinking skills. Vallence outlines an 'ICT enabled' method for collecting evidence about teachers' pedagogical beliefs regarding the use of information and communications technology (ICT). The teachers in question were pre-service teachers who were supported through the use of synchronous networked tasks to reflect on their existing practices in relation to ICT and consider ways of integrating ICT into their practice.

Bates *et al.* explore the attitudes of academics, support staff and managers to the potential benefits of using online repositories for teaching and learning. One key benefit that was identified was that of receiving feedback from others about how their materials had been used in order to help them improve the quality of the materials.

Ellis *et al.* explore students' experience of face-to-face and online discussion and the implications this has for supporting students in making sense of and reflecting on their learning experience. They argue that, for many learners, discussion activities can be fragmented from more meaningful learning when the learners lack an awareness of the associations between discussion and the learning outcomes of the course or task.

The concept of connectivity is not a new one in the field of learning technology. It has been central to our understanding of how learning technology can promote an interaction between learners, tutors and resources (for example, Jones, 2004). Connectivity is beginning to be central to discussions regarding the need to connect the use of learning technologies to theories of how we learn and how we should design for learning (for example, Wiley, 2001). The papers in this issue of *ALT-J* challenge us to think about connectivity in a different way, where learners are not necessarily connected to other learners or other resources but are connected to other concepts and understandings that help them make sense of and extract meaning from their online learning experiences.

Jane Seale
University of Southampton, UK

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