

Innovation and best practice in open and distance education

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This last 2013 issue of *Open Praxis* brings together nine articles which were awarded an ICDE prize for Innovation and Best Practice in the field of open and distance education. They describe innovative practices or research in a wide variety of areas.

These ICDE prizes, which aimed to stimulate innovation and best practice in open, distance, flexible, online and e-learning, were awarded in the 25th ICDE International Conference, 16–18th October 2013, held in Tianjin (China).

The scientific committee of the conference pre-selected 27 papers among those submitted to the conference and proposed for the prize (169 candidates). Out of these, nine papers were selected as the winners by the Editorial Board of *Open Praxis*, on the themes of Open Educational Resources and intercultural aspects, Learning analytics, Mobile learning, Impact, Teaching quality, and Leadership. Awarded papers were selected considering both the conference and the journal's general criteria. Special consideration was given to the following selection criteria: overall clarity, innovation, good practice, transferability, impact and overall quality.

Du Ruo and Yang Xiaotang were awarded the ICDE KNOU prize on the theme of mobile learning for their paper *Build optional digital textbooks for distance learners*. The authors of this paper explore a new type of e-books, the “digital textbooks,” mainly in four areas: definition, tools, technology and functions, based on research on mobile learning and ubiquitous learning. As they contend, supporting different learners successfully in a digital age, will depend on how well those new media and new technology are used when building smarter learning materials and learning environments. It is essential to carry out research to evidence how these media are actually supporting learners, and this paper provides an example of such research.

The prize on the theme of leadership was awarded to Khar Thoe Ng, Suma Parahakaran, Rhea Febro, Egbert Weisheit and Tan Luck Lee for their paper *Promoting sustainable living in the borderless world through blended learning platforms*. The authors remind us that the definition of learning space has become broader over the past decade through blended learning platforms incorporating emerging digital and non-digital learning tools. The paper reports recent studies on the development of blended learning platforms to promote sustainable living. It focuses on in-service teachers' understanding of, as well as the attitudes towards, Education for Sustainable Development and the three essential skills that are required for sustainable living, i.e. thinking, technology and living skills. These include cooperative learning and communication skills developed by their students through sharing of resources in e-platforms with easy access information and cross-cultural learning opportunities. The concept of “borderless school” illustrates very well the current trend in lifelong learning.

On the theme of learning analytics, the prize was awarded to Dewi Juliah Ratnaningsih for her paper *Open and Distance Education Systems: Do They Enhance Graduates' Soft Skills? (The*

results from 2009 Universitas Terbuka Tracer Study). The research carried out by the author of this paper showed that open and distance education learning systems improve students' soft skills. Among others, soft skill attributes such as independence, responsibility, self-confidence, creativity, problem resolution, communication, project management and time management, were developed during their learning process. Another issue addressed referred to which soft skills acquired by graduates are required by stakeholders at work. Even though the results presented were obtained in 2009, their analysis has been framed by an extensive and updated review of literature, and interpreted in relation to more recent research studies, being meaningful for the current context.

There were three prizes awarded on the theme of OER and intercultural aspects.

William Jobe, in *A Kenyan Cloud School. Massive Open Online & Ongoing Courses for Blended and Lifelong Learning*, describes a research carried out to tackle secondary school dropout rates in Kenya, through the Kenyan Cloud School (which contains all the courses taught at the secondary level in Kenya), addressing as well the lack of research regarding MOOCs and OERs in secondary schools in developing countries. It is a powerful example of how these open access courses can help to prevent secondary school dropout. Potential successes from this project, and the lessons learned, can inspire and guide similar efforts in other developing regions to further explore the potential of educational efforts that utilize MOOCs, digital badges and Mobile Learning.

Khor Ean Teng and Chung Sheng-Hung (*A Framework for the Development of OER-based Learning Materials in the ODL Environment*) analyse the development cycle of an OER-based course, at Wawasan Open University (Malaysia), an issue that is not usually addressed in publications on OERs. The paper explores aspects such as the creation and assurance of learning content; exploring OER repositories; assessments review and establishment of collective feedback sessions, with feed-back from the tutors and students, and other stakeholders, via virtual Workshops. The initiative can lead to increasing the participation of OER learning environments in ODL.

The primary goal of the project presented by Hongxin Yan and Sandra Law (*An Interactive OER Course Development at Athabasca University Based on ODL Principles*) was to improve completion rates in first-year calculus in the distance education context. For this purpose, an OER course was initiated, with five stand-alone pre-calculus learning modules designed to increase retention and completion rates for first year calculus learners. In order to include dynamic activities that could support the display of a variety of mathematical formulas, an open source Flash-based authoring tool was developed: the Athabasca University Tutor Authoring Tool (AUTAT). It is based on the needs assessment carried out and the design principles discussed in the paper, and benefits from the open education/software movements.

Wei Xu was awarded the prize under the theme of teaching quality for her paper *A New Interactive Method to Distance English Learning in Conceptual Age*. Based on left-brain and right-brain characteristics in relation to learning, and the potential uses and application of Cloud service to education, this paper presents a method aimed at distance English learning, recommending the establishment of a cloud resource platform to share teaching resources and improve teaching quality, and encouraging learners to make full use of them. Ensuring that these resources are well balanced and selected in such a way that they activate different brain areas would help achieve coordination and cooperation between left-brain and right-brain.

Finally, two prizes were awarded for papers under the theme of impact.

The paper *In their own words: Student stories of seeking learning support* by Mark Brown, Helen Hughes, Mike Keppell, Natasha Hard and Liz Smith, shows a research study using phenomenological data, which investigated the experiences of university students during their first semester as distance learners, in order to find out about the use and effectiveness of learning support services. By exploring and understanding the participants' experiences, told in their own words, a grounded

theory approach was applied to the process of data analysis. There has been an impact on the design of learning support services at a distance learning institution, and the research has also shown that nothing creates greater impact than the students' own words (or other participants in a study).

Adrienne Isakovic and Allan McNaught (*Supporting Learning Through the Use of Self-Reflection Blogs: A study of the experience of blended learning students in the United Arab Emirates*) present a study which examines how the use of student-written blogs support student learning, through the eyes of the students themselves. The authors wanted to collect evidence, from a learners' perspective, on the potential of Web 2.0 tools, and blogs in particular, to be transformational in teaching and learning. By evaluating the use of blogs in four distinct areas: as a medium for facilitating learning; as a medium for interactivity; as a medium for metacognitive thought and reflection; and as a learning tool, the study provided evidence that Web 2.0 technology can assist in developing greater learner ownership and self-management of learning. The findings of the study, and the recommendations in this paper, can be very helpful to teachers and course managers who want to implement the use of blogs as a meaningful tool in learning reflexively.

It is our desire that the diverse ideas, findings and recommendations found throughout these papers are useful to our readers, and inspire future research studies and the implementation of innovative practices, as well as submitting their own papers to future calls for prizes and/or papers.

Thanks are extended to the members of the journal's Editorial Board, which selected the winning papers from a shortlist determined by a committee of reviewers appointed by the 25th ICDE World Conference core programme committee.

ICDE warmly thanks all sponsors, who contributed so generously to the prize scheme.

And, of course, congratulations to all awarded authors.