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Places to Go:
The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning
by Stephen Downes

At first glance this online publication looks like any academic journal, but when readers explore *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* (IRRODL), they are in for a surprise: They can read the articles!

As journal editor Terry Anderson writes, "IRRODL's position is, as expected, to be solidly behind all moves to insure Open Access publication. We are proudly listed with the 2,256 other journals in the Directory of Open Access Journals and our publisher Athabasca University is a signature to the Budapest Open Access Initiative" (2006, ¶ 2).

Accessing the IRRODL home page will feel very comfortable to an academic reader. Presented will be the current edition of the journal, arranged to look very similar to the format of a traditional print publication (even to the point of using a familiar typestyle). And though they play no role in Web navigation, the journal's sections, such as "Book Notes" and "Technical Notes," will resonate reassuringly with its audience.

Most navigation is directly to the current issue's articles from the home page. Instead of page numbers, readers will find links to article abstracts, HTML versions of the articles, and PDF versions as well. Interestingly, and well worth noting with approval, the journal also features MP3 audio recordings of its articles that are as easily accessible (simply by clicking on the link) as the text-based contents.

At the top of the home page is most of the rest of the navigation. Here the advantages of the electronic medium may be seen as the text may be searched, subscribed to (by e-mail and RSS), or browsed in the archives. Additionally, the site offers access to related distance and online learning resources as well as an external conference list associated with the Canadian Institute of Distance Education Research.

According to the "About" page, the journal "is a refereed, open access e-journal that aims to disseminate research, theory, and best practice in open and distance learning worldwide" (n.d., "Focus and Scope," ¶ 1). This means that while it satisfies the conditions required of an academic journal, in particular the establishment of an editorial board and strict peer review, it is nonetheless available free of charge to all readers. The journal is available under a Creative Commons license, and specifically, an "attribution, non-commercial, no derivatives" (by-nc-nd 2.5) license. Under this license the contents may be reprinted in any other publication provided that the publication operates noncommercially, that the contents are not altered in any way, and that attribution is given to the original author and publisher of the work.

The publication of open access journals such as IRRODL is reflective of a wider trend. As governments and public agencies are beginning to consider mandating free access to publicly funded research, librarians are struggling with the costs of commercial publications. Journal prices increased 184.3% for medical journals and 178.3% for science and technical journals between 1990 and 2000 (Ó hAnluain 2004). Additionally, respected open access journals, such as those published by the Public Library of Science, find themselves being read as alternatives to more traditional offerings from academic associations. Some writers, such as Peter Suber, director of the Open Access Project, have begun to question the opposition of these associations to open access. "They pretend to be speaking in the interests of scholarship," he says, "but they are really speaking for the interests of their publishing arms" (qtd. in Jaschik 2006, ¶ 10).

Further fueling this trend are freely available software systems that support e-journals. In its most recent

issue, IRRODL began publishing with the widely acclaimed Open Journal Systems (OJS), a journal management and publishing system developed by the Public Knowledge Project (PKP) in British Columbia, Canada. Offered as open source software, OJS is one of a range of academic products offered by PKP to support conference and journal activity.

Is there a benefit here to academics? The numbers seem to suggest there is. As Terry Anderson notes in IRRODL, "Clearly the Open Access journals have (on average) greater number of citations and impact than closed publications. The point I draw from this is that authors wishing to maximize the impact of their research in our field are advised to select Open Access outlets" (2006, ¶ 6). This is consistent with findings elsewhere; Gunther Eysenbach concludes, for example, that "OA articles are cited earlier and are, on average, cited more often than non-OA articles" (2006, "Discussion: Main Findings," ¶ 1).

Perhaps the best test of whether an open access journal can achieve academic credibility lies in whether it can attract articles and readers in the community it serves. IRRODL certainly attracts articles; despite having a policy of publishing only when sufficient numbers of works have been submitted, the journal has a steady track record over seven years and features writers from around the world.

A further criterion for academic credibility is scope, and IRRODL addresses a range of topics within its overall focus on open and distance learning. Articles published in the journal vary from a study of the detection and remediation of academic plagiarism (Jocoy and DiBiase 2006), open and distance learning in Nigeria (Ojo and Olakulehin 2006), and best practices in synchronous conferencing moderation (Anderson et al. 2006). Based on the momentum it has sustained so far, the journal promises to be an increasingly valuable resource for distance learning educators and researchers in the future.

Of all the disciplines, education is characterized as being needed the most by those with the fewest resources. It is for this reason that open access journals such as IRRODL play a particularly important role. By enabling the wider community to read the latest in educational research, the journal directly addresses the most pressing problems in the field it covers.

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