

EDITORIAL

Engagement in learning and development

After the previous special issue on immersive virtual worlds, this issue of *ALT-J* returns to more familiar territory. The opening paper from Carol Russell continues to build *ALT-J*'s corpus of knowledge around institutional embedding of technology; this time through an evaluation of the effectiveness of a staff development programme. The following four papers all explore the challenge of learner engagement from a variety of different angles: instructional design, student support and the pedagogy of innovative, technology-mediated learning environments. As a relative newcomer to *ALT-J* it seems to me that the distinctiveness of the journal lies in its ability to bring together such a broad range of work.

We start with Russell's evaluation of the impact of staff engagement in a fellowship programme. Russell recognises first that technology adoption lies with the lecturer and second that lecturers do not act alone. Individual lecturers' decisions are important but they are taken within the context of a complex system and it is the co-ordination of activities across their organisational context which is important. She finds that engagement in the fellowship programme decreases individualised and discipline-specific uses of learning technology and increases shared, collaborative, cross-disciplinary uses that relate to institutional and departmental context. There are important lessons here for those of us involved in evaluating institutional change programmes.

The paper by Cebeci et al. is the first of three papers that look for relationships between learner engagement and success. They use a combination of accessing expert knowledge and statistical modelling to identify design features in online courses that are related to a high level of student achievement in final assessments. The analysis confirms that it is particularly important for online courses to include examples and illustrations that promote engagement. In addition, this work offers practitioners and institutions a way of examining the quality of online courses before they go live.

Malcolm Rutter examines the informal use of synchronous chat in computer laboratories and looks for relationships between self-reported use of chat and assessment marks. The tentative findings are that the use of chat may be helpful, as long as it is not used excessively. We see that despite all our focus on design, illustrated in the Cebeci et al. study, here we find that it is things outside the lecturers' control that may be making the difference. Rutter's paper is a preliminary study, but considering the uptake of social networking tools by students, it would be interesting to see the nature of these relationships explored further.

Maltby and Mackie take a different approach to measuring engagement. In their study they track learner engagement through the use of the institutional virtual learning environment (VLE). Drawing on the literature of student retention and student support, they argue convincingly that we need to engage learners in university study early on, such as by involving them in a community of learners, making them feel part

of something in order to prevent students at risk from withdrawing or failing. They look for relationships between use of the VLE and academic performance for engaged and disengaged students. Unsurprisingly, they found that students with low technology use were more likely to fail, but interestingly, that this pattern of behaviour is formed early on and difficult to change. There is a real role for technology here in helping us to identify students in need of early intervention.

Finally, Matthew D. Riddle examines learner engagement through online role play. Starting with the constructivist notion that learners will be more fully engaged through practice in authentic learning environments, Riddle evaluates how students become engaged with online identities in a simulated professional environment. The paper focuses on how the online nature of the role play affects this engagement, including how students get into role and the influence of surveillance, and makes recommendations for the design of authentic learning environments.

Taken together, this group of papers illustrates the interdisciplinary nature of e-learning research. It is not just that *ALT-J* publishes work which arises from different disciplinary traditions, it encourages the synthesis of new understandings from the bringing together of different bodies of knowledge and research methodologies. So what have we found out about creating engaging learning experiences? We know already that cognitive engagement is necessary for learning and, whether in traditional or technology-mediated education, there are accepted ways to promote engagement, such as making it meaningful and making it interactive. These papers show that while we can encourage cognitive engagement through good instructional design, we need to be increasingly aware of things that are going on outside the curriculum that influence engagement in learning and development.

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