

EDITORIAL

Better late than never...

This is my last issue as editor of *ALT-J*, and it's been a hard issue to let go of. Not because of any misguided sentimentality, but simply because the UK's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) seems to have caused us serious problems. Grainne Conole, in her last editorial, reflected on some of the lessons learnt from the RAE; one thing that this issue has taught me is that the researchers affected by the exercise either rushed to say all they could before the deadline or else have worn themselves out with all their writing and don't want to do it any more. It's fortunate for us that *ALT-J* is an international journal, rather than being tied entirely to one nation's policy initiatives.

Our peer reviewers do a thankless job – asked to write considered feedback on papers without recognition or reward. As editors, we're truly grateful to them. In the time in which I've been editing the journal, they've consistently driven up the standards of the articles that we have published. We have had an active policy of trying to help authors improve their work – of providing rich feedback rather than outright rejection. The vast majority of published articles have been resubmitting; none are accepted without any changes. It's the reviewers' feedback that is the driving force behind this process of improvement.

Generally, this policy has served us well. However, this together with the shortage of submissions from the UK, has resulted in the substantial delays that have plagued this issue. We could not meet the deadline for this issue and preserve the quality of articles that we have aspired to in recent years. In consultation with the Association for Learning Technology and our publishers, we agreed that it would be better for this issue to be late than to be poor.

So whilst the issue might be late, the articles we have waited to bring together raise some important questions. Lam, McNaught, and Cheng explore the processes of knowledge building within the research community. The widespread production of case studies in e-learning can be a good way of drawing new researchers into that community, but it can broaden our understanding of issues without deepening it. This paper explores some ways in which that depth can be discovered by making connections across case research.

Another taken-for-granted issue in much research in this area is the contrast between on-campus and distance students. There is certainly evidence to demonstrate the different experiences these groups have. However, Woo et al. show how changing social practices and use of new technologies can disrupt such differences, so that students begin thinking differently about how they participate in campus-based activities. Staff were also prompted to rethink assumptions about distance students as receiving a 'second best' experience. Things are much more complicated than our convenient binaries suggest, and it is helpful to be reminded of this.

We have two articles in this issue that revisit the perennial issue of change within Higher Education Institutions. Salmon, Jones, and Armellini describe the action research work that has led to a participative workshop format for academic development being formalised and shared across the sector. Ooms et al. explore the role of e-developers, and report that things that might often be overlooked – specifically, their personalities, and their role

in sustaining communication – are important to the success of the projects with which they work. Importantly, both articles strive to make academic development more meaningful by organising their initiatives around the problems academics face in their work (rather than through decontextualised programmes of workshops, say). Student-centred learning is an extremely popular idea, but perplexingly, the notion that we should treat our colleagues in the same way when they are learning things often seems to be overlooked, so these examples of practice are helpful in redressing that balance.

Finally, Gakhal and Bull describe a case study of an intelligent tutoring system that promises to illuminate aspects of another popular term: personalisation. Such systems were always predicated on the idea that instruction and support should be tailored to the needs of individual learners; systems supporting personalisation have been around for decades. However, this one incorporates an open learner model, providing users with a degree of control over the ways in which information is managed and presented.

Between them, these articles offer a view of the field that is complex, messy and grounded in social practices. Personally, I think that's a good note on which to end my involvement as editor.

So, where does all this leave *ALT-J*? We are lucky to have Frances Bell and Rhona Sharpe taking over as editors. They will bring new ideas and new energy to the journal. For all their wisdom and expertise, though, they will face some difficult challenges. It falls to all of us who read the journal to help them – by writing, and encouraging others to write. Whether it's a colleague describing something interesting they've tried out, or a project presentation, or a coffee conversation that got you thinking, consider suggesting to people that they try and turn it into an article. Journals are, after all, about conversations within communities – if we keep talking, perhaps we can even overcome the problems that initiatives such as the RAE cause.

Martin Oliver
Institute of Education, London, UK