# Chapter 29
# Epilogue and Directions for Future Research

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## ABSTRACT

*This chapter synthesizes the content of this volume and identifies research gaps for future investigation. It is evident that there is new work to be undertaken in both building on and expanding the work of the authors within this book. There is a need for future researchers to undertake both validation work and investigate new applications of conceptual and theoretical frameworks to inform future directions.*

## INTRODUCTION

This volume has investigated the nature of teaching and learning in distance and flexible learning through the organising structure of the micro level research themes in distance education, as proposed through the Delphi study of experts in the field, conducted by Zawacki-Richter (2009). These themes are instructional design, interaction and communication, and learner characteristics in flexible and distance education. Further explored, the range of topics in this area consider the individuals who use the distance education system. This encompasses learner characteristics, the student voice, the users experience with distance learning, learning design for distance learners, and communities of practice and interaction and communication within these learning groups' (DEHub, 2010).

While the chapters contained in this volume explored the heights and breadth of these areas, they individually highlighted, and collectively indicated, current gaps within the research literature in the field and point to future research directions. This final chapter draws together these gaps and future research directions as a signpost for the further attention by practitioners and scholars in the field.

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## MICRO LEVEL RESEARCH IN FLEXIBLE AND DISTANCE EDUCATION

### Instructional Design for Flexible and Distance Education

Instructional design and curriculum, as we have seen, encompasses the technological and social media used in the construction process and the pedagogies of teaching and learning. Pedagogy is a critical aspect of instructional design. The technology behind the pedagogy of DE has been explored in the chapter by Terry Anderson and Jon Dron, and in her chapter, Leanne Cameron reminded us of the importance of contextualizing pedagogical instruction within the discipline. John Rafferty, Jenni Munday, and Janet Buchan have also written about pedagogies, challenges and changing perspectives for blended and flexible learning.

The relationship between the diverse nature of the student body and instructional design was another area flagged for exploration, especially in the era of widening participation for under-represented and disadvantaged groups of students. Jacquelyn Kenney's chapter explored the disruption of traditional pedagogies in the learning design to create more student-centric approaches to better meet the diverse needs of distance learners on their varied learning journeys, through strategies such as injecting fun into the learning design. Peer-to-peer teaching and mentoring, also known in the literature as peer-assisted learning, has been touched upon in some of the chapters in this volume as an aspect worth considering in instructional design. This strategy offers a key opportunity to build into the DE design to assist learning, to potentially help alleviate some of staff workload, provide additional means of frequent communication, develop communities of practice, and support students. In addition to referring to the students, peer-assisted learning also encompasses the teaching and mentoring of colleagues in becoming more proficient in construction of teaching and learning environments. As such, it warrants further attention as a research area in the instructional design of distance education.

Curriculum design is not simply a matter of getting learning resources "out there," as our authors reminded us. Cherry Stewart, Ashfaq Khan and John Hedberg look to curriculum design for developing capacity of teachers to deal with complex issues. Sharron Kerr and Michaela Baker have reminded us about the necessity of considering inclusive practices in curriculum design in their chapter. Lindy Klein's chapter considered Open Education Resources (OERs) in this. These arguments give us much to reflect upon.

Beyond these gaps and future research directions, a final future avenue of research in the instructional design for flexible and distance education includes a consideration of what methodologies are effective and efficient for the design, development, implementation and evaluation of effective teaching and learning for social media-enabled environments.

## INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATION IN FLEXIBLE AND DISTANCE LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Interaction and communication within the technologically-mediated arena of flexible and distance learning spans the breadth of related aspects from the media of learning, synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities, and through to specific iterations of learning by communication, such as in the online role-plays.

In this context, the integration of modern telecommunications devices such as mobile phones and iPads is explored in a number of chapters. Three have specifically explored different aspects of using mobile learning. Mohammed Ally's chapter investigates whether mobile learning is hype or evidenced impact in education; Mpine Makoe