

Editorial

Extending Realities in Open Distance e-Learning

Our society has been rapidly evolving as innovators continue to introduce various forms of emerging technologies. We also recognize that open distance e-learning (ODeL) has been enabled, benefited, and driven by rapid advancements in technology. A recent example is the multifaceted impact of artificial intelligence (AI) applications like ChatGPT and Quillbot on teacher and learner interactions in both in-person and online learning environments. Similarly, immersive technologies like virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) have been reshaping educational landscapes leading to increasing interest in what is called the metaverse. These technologies allow teachers to tap into the power of extended reality (XR) while being guided by time-tested instructional design principles resulting in immersive learning.

Immersive learning makes use of technology and interactive environments to create engaging and realistic learning environments. It is a highly effective method for promoting active learning and improving learners' understanding and retention of concepts. Immersive learning has the added benefit of providing a sense of presence and connection in a virtual learning environment, bridging the gap between distance learners and their peers and instructors in ODeL.

This special issue aims to explore what it means for educators to extend reality and expand possibilities in ODeL through immersive technologies while not neglecting general pedagogical concerns that need to be seriously considered in their application.

The concept paper of Eric Hawkinson introduces us to the various issues surrounding digital twins and their relevance to ODeL. In his paper, he comprehensively describes their key features according to the literature. He emphasizes the value of digital twins in distance education by citing cases involving virtual tours and simulations for STEM courses before enumerating their benefits and implications in the future of education. He also discusses cases in the music and movie industry as well as in higher education while unearthing ethical issues that may have significant implications for adopting digital twins in ODeL.

Adam Dabrowski's case study investigates the potential of augmented reality (AR) as a tool for deliberate vocabulary acquisition. As revealed in reflective interviews, the participant found the AR methods engaging and motivating. The study's findings have significant implications for language pedagogy, particularly in distance education. Furthermore, his article adds evidence to the claim that AR provides a novel way to make language learning more immersive and interactive, and its ability to improve vocabulary retention suggests that it could be a useful tool for second language acquisition. He adds that AR also

has the benefit of being accessible via smartphones, tablets, and head-mounted displays, making it an ideal tool for distance learning. This article concludes the section that largely tackles immersive technologies.

The last three articles cover the human dimension of teaching and learning which I strongly believe is relevant to implementing immersive learning programs in online learning environments. April Leaño investigates the behavior of faculty in the College of Education (COE) at the University of Makati in using the Technology Based Learning Hub (TBL Hub) as the official Learning Management System (LMS) during the COVID-19 pandemic in her case study. The study's goal is to assess faculty acceptance of the LMS using Fred Davis' Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). Although the study reports concerns about the LMS based on their personal experiences, the faculty's positive technology acceptance of the TBL Hub indicates that they are e-ready. The faculty made recommendations to help the LMS maintain and improve its positive technology acceptance. Leaño's case study emphasizes the importance of evaluating faculty behavior when using LMSs during the pandemic. This research adds to the ongoing debate about the challenges and opportunities of e-learning during the pandemic. It adds significant value to this issue as it echoes the importance of ensuring readiness and support among teachers in ODeL institutions when implementing innovative interventions like immersive technologies.

James Michael Pablo's article "Assessing the English Grammar Proficiency of Online Filipino English Teachers" presents a case study that investigates the English grammar proficiency of Filipino English teachers. The research was carried out in response to recent literature indicating a decline in Filipino English proficiency, even though many English language schools in other countries continue to hire Filipino teachers due to their perceived cost-effectiveness. These findings are concerning because they imply that the decline in English proficiency among Filipinos may be influencing the quality of English language education provided by Filipino teachers. According to the study, if Filipino English teachers want to remain competitive and rebrand themselves, they must conduct a self-analysis of their English skills to identify their weak points and participate in a training and development program, either on their own or with their current employers. This is an important recommendation because it serves as a reminder of the importance of continuous professional development for teachers in their field of study beyond technological competence.

Finally, Sally Gutierrez highlights the importance of teachers' epistemic understanding in supporting students' engagement in argumentation. The study found that teachers' levels of epistemic understanding were aligned with their use of dialogic scaffolding to encourage student participation in argumentation. Gutierrez's article provides valuable insights into the role of epistemic understanding in promoting argumentation and inquiry-based teaching and learning in the classroom. The findings suggest that teachers' epistemic understanding and dialogic scaffolding can play a critical role in promoting student engagement and achievement in science education. This supports the two previous articles in building a human-centric perspective on the use of tools, including immersive technologies.

I hope that the special issue provides useful insights into how immersive technologies can be used to improve student learning experiences and educational outcomes in Open and Distance e-Learning (ODEL). The articles cover a wide range of topics, from conceptual discussions of digital twins and virtual reality in education and empirical studies on the impact of augmented reality-based interventions on learning to studies related to the human dimension of teaching and learning. I am one with the authors of this issue in hoping that these articles would be useful in providing guidance in effectively implementing innovative interventions like immersive technologies in teaching and learning contexts, especially in ODeL.

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