Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning

Post-pandemic Trends: Readership and Research After COVID-19

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Abstract

Post-pandemic trends can be seen in journals in two ways: readership and research. This editorial looks at both, beginning with a report on the readership statistics of the Journal over the past 12 months, followed by identification of readership preference, with a list of the most frequently accessed items in the Journal in 2022. A steadily higher journal readership has continued after the sudden growth in demand for information in open, flexible, and distance learning during the pandemic. This is followed with a list of papers in this fulsome issue, showing movement away from experiences in the sudden and enforced shift to online and distance learning, to the emerging era of changing perspectives and broader reflections.

Keywords: distance learning; online learning; educational theory; distance communication; distance student experience; teaching presence

A look at our annual readership

"Pausing to take stock of progress on a journey can achieve many things, including identifying how far you've come, which way you've come, and which way you want to go" (Fields & Hartnett, 2019, p. 1). That's what we said three and a half years ago, in the editorial of 23(1) which was published in the first half of 2019. That editorial included a statement of impact for the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning* (JOFDL), identifying the Journal's impact in terms of reach, use, and contribution to global academic research and publishing. The world has changed hugely in the intervening time, with the full force of the COVID-19 pandemic felt across the globe. The world of flexible, online, and distance learning has changed irrevocably. Remote teaching in all its forms quickly became a necessity during lockdowns, and recent technological advancements have radically increased the range of options available for delivery and interaction for both teachers and learners. So once again we pause—but this time, instead of providing a statement of impact, we report on the growth and use of this Journal in the past year.

The reach and readership of the Journal has increased since the onset of COVID-19. Issue 24(1), "JOFDL Special Issue: Best of Online Teaching and Learning: COVID-19", was released in April 2020, during the world's most extensive lockdown. The issue comprised a short editorial stating the extent of disruption to teaching and learning worldwide, and offered open access to the ten most pertinent articles on online teaching and learning in a single issue. It was our gift to the world in need of quality information on online, distance, and flexible learning, packaged for easy consumption and delivered speedily with fully open access. The issue has had a record number of views, with the editorial being the third most viewed item from the Journal since viewing and readership records began in 2016. It has been our pleasure to provide any assistance we can to the online teaching and learning community and, during the pandemic, to the education

world at large. Being small, light, and agile means the Journal can provide open and free access to all quickly and to a maximum audience.

Articles published in the journal are available directly through the website at https://www.jofdl.nz/, and can also be accessed and encountered through several other avenues including Google Scholar, ERIC, InformIT, Ebsco Essentials, DOAJ, and LearnTechLib. This scattering of access avenues means that our content will be encountered by more readers in more places, which increases both the readership and reach of the Journal. But it also means we can't collect data showing the full extent of access to our journal articles because we can't collect accurate statistics from every avenue.

Figure 1 shows the readership statistics from 2022 for the JOFDL website. The extent of direct access to the journal website provides a useful picture of the size of the audience and the reach of the journal's contributors. These statistics indicate wider access levels, patterns, and trends.
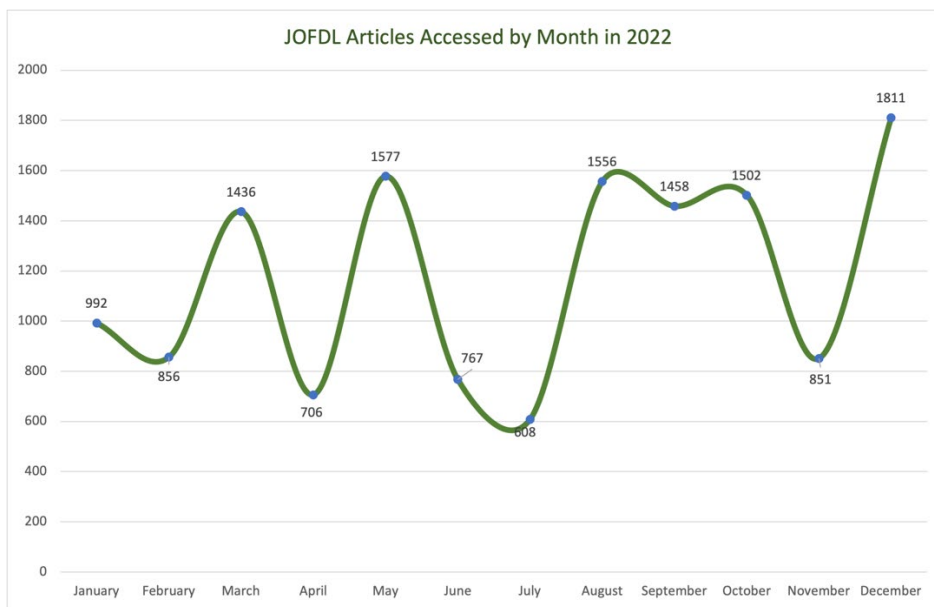
Figure 1 Total articles accessed by month in 2022

The data points in this graph show the monthly totals of access to JOFDL articles via its website in 2022. The minimum monthly number of articles accessed was 608 in July and the maximum was 1811 in December. The total number of articles accessed in 2022 through the JOFDL website was 14,120. The monthly average was 1177 articles. A similar pattern of readership of article abstracts was also recorded, ranging from a low of 609 abstracts accessed in July to highs of 2370 in October and 2405 in December.

There were 235 articles accessed from the Journal's current and past issues via the website in 2022. Of these, the top-viewed articles are listed below, with titles showing strong representation of recent developments and experiences in online learning and post-pandemic trends in global education. These show that both current and past articles remain relevant.

Table 2 Most frequently accessed articles in 2022

Most-read JOFDL articles 2022 (17 of 235 articles)	Abstract views	Article views	Total
Cameron et al., (2022) The Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Higher Education Students in New Zealand	594	346	940
Bonk, (2016) Keynote: What is the State of E-Learning? Reflections on 30 Ways Learning is Changing	287	328	615
Campbell et al., (2004) Reviews	53	489	542
Forbes, (2022) Student Expectations of Peers in Academic Asynchronous Online Discussion	385	115	500
Fields & Hartnett, (2020) Online Teaching and Learning: COVID-19 Special Issue	277	138	415
Ehlers, (2011) Extending the Territory: From Open Educational Resources to Open Educational Practices	278	137	415
Hartnett & Fields, (2019) Digital Inclusion in New Zealand	253	147	400
Karaka-Clarke et al., (2022) Kōrero Mai: Kaiako Experiences of Synchronous Online Teaching and Learning in New Zealand	174	191	365
Hartline et al., (2022) Through their eyes: Student perspectives	170	155	325
Thach & Lai, (2021) Lecturer Attitudes and Behavioural Intentions to Use Learning Management Systems in Vietnam	162	163	325
Nkomo & Daniel, (2021) Providing Students with Flexible and Adaptive Learning Opportunities using Lecture Recordings	183	137	320
Hartnett & Fields, (2021) Improving Remote Teaching and Online Learning	164	154	318
Atkinson & Fields, (2022) Connecting Past and Future Educational Practice: A Post-COVID-19 Present	163	150	313
Brown et al., (2021) Learning Management System Adoption by Academics: A Perspective Following the Forced Lockdown of NZ Universities due to COVID-19 in 2020	156	146	302
Hartnett & Fields, (2021) Time for Change: The Journal is in Good Shape	117	157	274
Adebisi & Olatunji, (2022) Sociodemographics and Psychosocial Experiences of Distance Learners in Nigeria: A Comparison of Single-mode and Dual-mode Universities	178	80	258
Shearer, (2021) Why do our Theories Matter?	142	113	255

The most frequently accessed item in JOFDL in 2022 was "The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education students in New Zealand" by Michael P. Cameron, Barbara Fogarty-Perry, and Gemma Piercy. This is a current topic, looking at post-pandemic education in New Zealand. Cameron et al. was released in July 2022 so has had a remarkably high readership in the few months it has been available. According to Google Scholar, this article has been cited in 10 publications so far—a very high number given its recent publication.

The second most frequently accessed item in JOFDL in 2022 is "Keynote: What is the State of E-Learning? Reflections on 30 Ways Learning is Changing" by Curtis J. Bonk. This article is derived from Bonk's keynote speech at the 2016 DEANZ/FLANZ Conference. It looks at the

state of e-learning and discusses the "vast resource abundance and extensive opportunities for learner empowerment" (Bonk, 2016, p. 6). Readership records in JOFDL have been collected since 2016, and Bonk (2016) has been the most frequently accessed item for 2016–2022, with 2828 abstract views and 2975 full article views. It has been cited in eight other publications.

The statistics in this editorial are indicative, not absolute, but do clearly represent the annual readership of the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, the topics most relevant to our audience, and the reach of the Journal in the e-learning field.

Papers in this issue

This bumper issue contains an invited article and seven contributed articles. As the international educational community emerges from the huge and sudden changes required by the COVID-19 pandemic, there is now some time and space for broader reflection. A unifying theme emerges— that of shifting perspectives on theory, impact, and practice around ODFL approaches. This issue examines a selection of these changing perspectives. Dron's problematising of the concept of distance is counterbalanced with Atkinson's attempt to simplify the use of terminology. Communication approaches are in evidence with Koh and Hulbert's exploration of electronic nonverbal communication, followed by Miano's examination of the development of soft skills online. Parental challenges also feature in two very different contexts: Shahbazi examines the burden placed on parents in supporting virtual English language learning at kindergarten, and Chitanana examines broader societal and cultural pressures faced by parents who are supporting their children. Technological challenges remain an issue for many, with Watt and Andreadis examining the value of Bring Your Own Device (BYOD). Finally, Kenah and Nash advocate for consistent and high-quality support instruments to maintain motivation across a student population.

In an invited contribution, Professor Jon Dron sets out to problematise and then resolve contemporary interpretations of the notion of "distance" in education. Taking what appears to be an unconventional stance, he begins with an argument that teaching is fundamentally a technological process. He argues that an array of technology tools and engagements make up the complicated and intricate process of learning. Further, he suggests that contemporary technologies are a blend of tools, artifacts, and their use. The social nature of technology mediation, the co-creation, and the collective intelligence that results, means we are all—in practice—teachers. Dron argues that there is not one distance between learner and teacher in any act of deliberate learning—but many, including physical, temporal, structural, agency, social, emotional, cognitive, cultural, pedagogical, and technological distances. He finishes his piece with some broad suggestions as to how we can better comprehend these multiple distances and ultimately reduce them.

Atkinson's opinion piece (not written as a response to Jon Dron) argues for a much narrower definitional framework. In it he attempts to define and contextualise educational terms he believes are often misused in both contemporary academic literature and practice. He argues that the three words: "open", "flexible", and "distance", fall into the categories of policy, mode of learning, and models of delivery, and should never be used as synonyms. As the international academic world increasingly adapts to new forms of education, Atkinson argues it is essential for educators to have a shared understanding of professional language. Appropriation by specialist technical applications and vernacular use doesn't mean professionals don't need to establish consistent definitions. Words have a tendency to become symbolic representations—they are embraced by certain groups for a variety of purposes and act as markers for inclusion or exclusion in a community's culture. This introduces what Atkinson regards as unhelpful ambiguity. Atkinson's piece seeks to enable readers to decide how to best define and deploy existing terminology.

Koh and Hulbert explore the challenge faced by many teachers as they struggle to communicate and connect with students due to the COVID-19 response, which resulted in the forced transition to online learning for many. Research undertaken at Open Polytechnic of New Zealand with undergraduate Business Studies students sought to explore the differences between traditional nonverbal communication in a face-to-face environment, and of online nonverbal communication. Because digital literacy underpins the whole online learning experience, and because nonverbal communication (NVC) cues such as body language and paralanguage are not visible in asynchronous text-based online learning, this paper presents the relationship (if any) between electronic nonverbal communication (eNVC) and teaching/social presences and digital literacy. The study also seeks to explore the relationship between these communication forms and student motivation and engagement. The results, analysed using a Pearson's correlation analysis, found that there is a correlation between eNVC, teaching/social presence and digital literacy in asynchronous online discussions. Koh and Hulbert also suggest that eNVC is related to teaching/social presence, but not to digital literacy more broadly.

Miano's study, based on undergraduate business students in the Philippines, explores students' perceptions of soft skills integration while undertaking emergency remote learning (ERL) during the COVID-19 pandemic. An original questionnaire design distributed online collected responses from forty-three students, who perceived that soft skills had been moderately integrated during ERL. Interestingly, there appears to be no significant difference in students' perception of the integration of soft skills based on learning modalities.

Shahbazi shares insights derived from a case study from Ontario, Canada, exploring English language learner (ELL) parents' experiences as they supported their children's English language development in an online kindergarten programme. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews, the researcher collected data that was analysed through a thematic lens to gain insight into the lived experience of participants in this online learning. Analysis showed an increase in emotional stressors for parents of ELLs due to this new mode of teaching. It also highlighted changes in communication between parents and teachers. The research concluded that schools and boards should offer families with multilingual learners ongoing workshops so they can gain the knowledge necessary to confidently support their kids both in person and digitally. Shahbazi also recommends greater investment in translation services.

Chitanana reports on a descriptive qualitative study in Zimbabwe designed to uncover parents' experiences while their primary school children were learning remotely. The study used questionnaires and online interviews to gather data from 25 parents deemed to be invested in their children's home learning and with internet connectivity at home. The study aimed to obtain useful data and identify trends that could help further develop programmes and policies to support parental needs in future virtual schooling. Chitanana identified that parents were both overwhelmed and distressed with the abrupt nature of school closure and the disruption to their children's daily routines. Parents grappled with a range of challenges including balancing responsibilities in both work and home life, transitioning to remote learning, sustaining a child's motivation to learn without face-to-face support from teachers, inadequate access to educational resources online, and insufficient capacity for helping multiple kids at once as well as finding an appropriate environment for them to study in. Chitanana identifies policy implications and makes recommendations aimed at teachers, district authorities, and policymakers.

Watts and Andreadis have conducted a statistical survey over 3 years to explore how the initial-year students of an international secondary school in the Netherlands promoting BYOD use perceived the effects of using their own iPads on learning. The students' insights demonstrate comprehension of the advantages and obstacles related to using their iPads in school and at home. Additionally, they cite several benefits associated with having on-the-spot access to numerous educational opportunities through the internet. Despite the potential for overuse of

iPads (such as for gaming and social media) a balanced approach has been taken to minimise these risks. Although initially meant to avoid any academic detriment during the implementation of BYOD scheme, results have not only avoided harm but actually led to overall improvement in student performance.

Kenah and Nash round out this issue of the Journal with their research and experience of inspiring learners to reach their educational goals, in the belief that this is pivotal for the success of distance educators worldwide. From 2010 to 2022, the researchers have been delivering AIM newsletters based on motivational learning theory to first-year economics students at Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, to support them along their learner journey. AIM is an acronym for Academic content, Information for the course, and Motivation—three critical elements that are required to meet the challenges of effective online course facilitation. Keller's Instructional Materials Motivation Survey (IMMS) is used to analyse the learner's viewpoint of the AIM newsletter. Results demonstrate that learners regard AIM as attention-grabbing and relevant, connecting theory with real-world examples while relating to the learner's own experiences. This builds their confidence in course content and yields, overall, a satisfactory learning experience. This research advocates for the effectiveness and efficiency of their AIM as a tool for supporting and motivating learners throughout their studies.

References

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Biographical notes

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