

Editorial

Disabilities and Other Learner Characteristics

When I was reviewing submissions for our new issue I was glad to see that among the top candidates for publication were several about the characteristics of learners. (Aspiring authors might like to know that when selecting articles for publication, editors and reviewers give a specially sympathetic eye to well-grounded research about learners and learner characteristics.) There have been many calls over the years for more research on learners and learning, and although the situation may be improving as regards the quantity of submissions, the quality of many studies falls short of what is acceptable for publication—and so the call for good research in this part of the field bears repetition. On the subject of quality, the most common problems concern the representativeness of the sample of learners about whom data is gathered as well as the persistent problem (that I acknowledge I seem to mention frequently) of failure by researchers to ground their study in an adequate review of previous research.

Selecting the articles for this issue occurred, by coincidence, right after the publication of some comments I made in a previous issue on the subject of learner support. In the editorial in the *American Journal of Distance Education* 17 (3) I wrote,

In a good learner support system there should also be provision—perhaps in the person of contracted specialists—even if only on a part-time, on-call basis for support for certain “at-risk” groups. These are groups for whom identifiable conditions can be expected to cause stress beyond that experienced by the general population. Examples include students with visual, auditory, or other disabilities, inmates of correctional institutions, persons with diagnosed learning disabilities or inadequate study skills, and members of the armed forces. Other specialists might also provide advice regarding career development, particularly as it is related to the selection of courses within the educational program. (143)

Two articles in this issue take up the subject of “students with visual or auditory or other disabilities.” First, Kinash, Crichton, and Kim-Rupnow report their analysis of the literature of the past three years about online teaching for persons with disabilities. In the rationale that they present for “distance delivery” as a way to “level the playing field” for students with dis-

abilities, they point out how this approach succeeds because of “planned redundancy of modes,” a concept I have long advocated as a central principle in setting up *all* programs and designing *all* courses, not only out of consideration of students with disabilities, but for all students. It’s not only the disabled who benefit from what in the latest jargon is called “universal design.” All students have different preferences and strengths, and we all tend to become more different as we grow older and acquire more experiences. I have long thought how silly it is to put a group of individuals into a room and call them a “class.” One of the great advantages of distance education is—exactly as Kinash, Crichton, and Kim-Rupnow say—that it provides (or let me emphasize, it *ought to* provide) a range of different combinations of resources and experiences (far beyond what is possible in a classroom), to meet the different needs of a variety of learners and learning styles.

As regards the disabled, however, it is surely a matter of concern that of the (small) total of forty-three publications located on online learning and disability, most were found in the literature of disability studies, not distance education. In light of that finding, it seems that repeating once again the call for grounding more research about learners in the framework of the literature and theory of distance education does not seem misplaced.

Another article directly related to the disabled is Edmonds’s discussion of the legal obligations and issues involved in meeting the needs of this population and some of the technical standards that should be applied in meeting minimal accessibility requirements. One particularly telling observation in this article is where the author distinguishes between first and second generation accessibility and proposes that although “first generation” accessibility (such as ensuring html structure does not impede visually disabled students) is in the hands of courseware developers or Web designers, the responsibility for “second generation” accessibility is in the hands of the faculty member creating the course. Edmonds does not go far to elaborate on the implications of this, but it is a challenging point, and readers might want to follow up the article with some reflection of the status in their own particular cases. As a professor who turned out one of his courses with a substantial component of audio on CD-ROM, it certainly has given me something to consider.

Moving from the focus on the disabled to a more general discussion of student characteristics, DeTure adds to the literature in a relatively well established area of research, which is that of cognitive style. Of course the context of the investigation is new (i.e., online delivery), but the test, the Embedded Figures Test, is the oldest and best-validated measure of cognitive style. The results of this new study, as is so often the case, are not unidirectional, and there are still more questions than answers. The research

does at least add some further insights into the nature of the problem of learner \times treatment interactions. In other words, it adds to the formulation of questions, conjectures, and hypotheses regarding the characteristics of each possible (and affordable) instructional treatment, including communications technique, that best assists each different type of learner and cognitive style. A long time ago I theorized that there is a wide range of solutions to this question, with many possible degrees of teacher-learner dialogue and course structure from which the learner should be able to select a personally appropriate mixture depending on his/her degree of learner autonomy (a characteristic that even in 1972 I related to the cognitive style of field dependence/independence). Among the mix of variables that make up the “instructional treatment” are those of the instructor, including the instructor’s tolerance for the exercise of control by the learner.

Instructor characteristics are the focus of the fourth article in this issue, a study of teaching styles reported by Dupin-Bryant. Obviously we are a long way from the day that our providing agencies will allow students to choose instructional treatments depending on an analysis of their learning styles, let alone be able to choose from among different teacher styles. The ultimate goal, however, should remain in focus—and here we can return to, and express it in terms introduced by, Kinash, Crichton, and Kim-Rupnow—to find the universal design that has a redundancy of instructional responses that will allow every learner to be successful, whatever that person’s individual experience, ability, or learning style.

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