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Special Issue Editorial

Some Frontiers in Open and Distance Learning in the North

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The high North is a vast area with huge contrasts and strong seasonal variations. The situation in the North is special because the region for many years has been impressed by closed borders – a border that separated the East from the West and that represents great language, economic, technological, and social differences. However, the peoples in the high North have much in common, such as their closeness to nature and its seasons.

Some years ago the concept of the *digital divide* was used to describe the East-West situation of the North. The digital divide refers to the gap between people or nations with effective access to digital and information technology and those with very limited access (Compaine, 2001). It includes the imbalance in physical access to technology and in the resources and skills needed to effectively participate as a digital user. The term was introduced in the 1990s to describe the gap in ownership of computers between ethnic groups, but later it was also utilized to refer to differences in access between countries.

Education is one area where the digital divide makes an impact. And by bridging the digital divide, it is possible for regions to enhance communication with other countries and therefore to offer better educational and social opportunities.

The University of the Arctic (UArctic) started in 2001 as a virtual university with the mission to “Empower the residents of the Circumpolar North, by building human capital through higher education.” The realities of the Arctic region with its vast distances, great cultural diversity, and small communities and institutions called for a common effort by the involved nations and universities. UArctic is a cooperative network of universities, colleges, and other organizations committed to higher education and research in the North. UArctic has developed innovative courses offered in the classroom and in the field or delivered online, including north2north student exchange programs.

The University of the Arctic Thematic Network on Distance Education and E-learning was started in 2008 with funding received from the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research. University of Tromsø, Faculty of Education, is the lead and the host institution in the network, with participating institutions from Russia and Canada. In 2009 the thematic network arranged a conference in Murmansk in the Russian Federation on flexible learning, together with Murmansk State Pedagogical University (Levites et al., 2009).

The Arctic Frontiers conference is organized as an independent network and a leading meeting place for pan-Arctic issues. For the last five years annual conferences have been arranged in Tromsø.

On January 27-28, 2010 the UArctic Thematic Network on Distance Education and E-learning met at the University of Tromsø as part of the Arctic Frontiers conference, Part IV: Frontiers in E-learning of the High North. Here 18 papers were presented (see <http://www.arctic-frontiers.com/>).

The aim of the e-learning part of the conference was to exchange knowledge and research about e-learning and to host a discussion of the methodology of the field. It was centred on the learning processes, pedagogy, and appropriate information technologies necessary to deliver content to and support distant learners. The sessions had their main focus on education in the Arctic communities and regions. Particular emphasis was placed on technology-enhanced learning, and the pedagogic and creative use of learning management systems (LMS) were discussed, together with issues related to teacher training and digital resources from the Arctic region. Five of the presentations were from Russia, three from Canada, one from Denmark, and nine from Norway. A book of abstracts is available online for download (Arctic Frontiers, 2010).

After the conference, IRRODL made an open call for papers on Arctic issues, and we are happy to publish seven research articles and field notes in this special issue. The broad span of northern interests is evident in the collection of articles and field notes.

Alexander McAuley and Fiona Walton write under the title “Decolonizing Cyberspace: Online Support for the Nunavut MEd” and report results from a master’s of education program offered between 2006 and 2009 among Inuit peoples of northern Canada. This program made significant use of an online component, and their paper situates the online component within the program, explores the pragmatic and theoretical reasons for its inclusion and design, and summarizes its contribution to the program as a whole.

From the opposite side of the North Pole, Lena Zamorshchikova, Olga Egorova, and Marina Popova of the Faculty of Foreign Languages at Yakutsk State University in Siberian Russia write about their bachelor’s level project on foreign language called Net-Based Course Development: English through Digital Storyline.

Mariann Solberg at the University of Tromsø, Norway writes about “Educating the Citizen of Academia Online,” where experiences with the use of the tool Elluminate Live are presented, and

the extent to which this tool has turned out to be helpful in developing the quality of online courses is discussed. Elluminate Live is a real-time application that enables synchronous oral dialogue, simultaneous sharing of texts, and so on.

Ronald Macintyre and Janet R. Macdonald from the Open University in Scotland discuss in their paper perspectives of distance learning students in remote rural areas of Scotland. They show that remote students in Scotland exhibit differences from urban students in terms of gender balance, age profile, previous educational qualifications, and income.

Nancy Steel and Patrick J. Fahy address better ways of attracting, preparing, and retaining under-represented populations in northern Alberta communities for participation in adult education.

Peter Øhrstrøm at Aarhus University is leading and coordinating an EU-financed research project called HANDS, Helping Autism-Diagnosed Teenagers Navigate and Develop Socially. Ten partners from six countries are involved in this project, and the purpose is to improve the quality of life for teenage students with an autism diagnosis by providing an e-learning toolset to support the teenager's social development. The paper addresses the system design of HANDS as seen from the user's perspective and the results of the evaluation of the first prototype of the toolset.

Finally, Frank Rennie, Sigurbjörg Jóhannesdóttir, and Stefania Kristinsdottir report on "Re-Thinking Sustainable Education Systems in Iceland: The Net-University Project." This report is written in light of the recent economic crisis in Iceland, which has raised issues of the sustainability of Icelandic Higher Education, but it may be sensible for other countries to be prepared for hard times too. There is a particular focus on the practical use of open educational resources for course design and the sharing of these course modules across university partners.

In summary, the tally of research and field note topics comprises an assorted mix. What is indisputable, however, is the consistent connection to sound and locally situated learning practice. This pedagogical approach must not only be observed but also shared and discussed, and we hope that IRRODL's special issue on Frontiers in Open and Distance Learning in the North will contribute to the discussion.

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