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Yoram Eshet-Alkalai et Cengiz Hakan Aydin

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Regional Focus Issue Editorial

A Bridge over Troubled Waters: Learning Technologies in the Middle East

Yoram Eshet-Alkalai and **Cengiz Hakan Aydin**
IRRODL Regional Editors for the Middle East

The proliferation of communication technologies in the last decade has opened new horizons for learners and instructors, offering new modes for learning and communication. With modern open and distance learning technologies, instruction and learning hold new dimensions and new meanings. For the first time, education becomes independent of time and space and can be delivered anytime, anywhere, and to anyone. Nevertheless, despite their great potential, the use of learning technologies raises a wide range of questions regarding the traditional learning paradigms, and it poses challenges for learners, instructors, and policy-makers, who need to develop new teaching and learning strategies that fit the new synchronous and asynchronous ODL platforms.

Educational technologies are used today in most educational systems for a large variety of purposes, including delivering knowledge and managing the teaching/ learning process, as well as for communication between learners and instructors and between learners and their peers. Present-day studies on the use of educational technologies in educational systems indicate that they have become an inseparable part of the teaching/learning process. However, a meta-analysis of the last-decade's research on the integration of ODL technologies suggests that it suffers from a series of severe pedagogical, political, cognitive, and technological problems, which hinder their successful implementation and lead to frustration among educators, decision-makers, and learners. The major problems are outlined below:

Users face problems in reading effectively from a digital display of text and coping with graphic user interfaces.

Learners and instructors are not proficient in making effective use of ODL platforms.

Learners face problems in gaining knowledge from the hyper textual and non-linear learning environments, which are most common in ODL learning.

Most present-day ODL environments are ineffective for learning due to their design as a simplistic conversion from the "good old" traditional, face-to-face teaching & learning paradigms, and there is no educated use of the pedagogical possibilities that are offered by the ODL technologies.

Learners suffer from feelings of loneliness and non-ownership and face learning difficulties when no instructor is physically present.

Learners face problems screening the huge volumes of information available in ODL environments and constructing coherent bodies of knowledge from them.

As indicated by a great majority of recent studies, the key issues in developing effective distance learning models are the adoption of adequate pedagogical paradigms that make educated use of the special technological features of ODL technologies and the consideration of state-of-the-art knowledge about designing effective distance learning environments. These studies also indicate the pivotal role that local conditions, such as the cultural, political, economical, sociological, ethnographical and geographical circumstances, play in designing effective ODL.

In this respect, the Middle East is a unique and challenging geographical, economical, cultural, and political region, mainly because of its heterogeneous nature. It is composed of a variety of cultures, languages and religions, so there are special considerations in designing effective open and distance learning environments that are available to all. Economically, countries in the region range from very poor to extremely wealthy, requiring the adoption of special integration policies to ensure the ability of the poor countries to cope with the high cost of ODL. Technologically speaking, the region consists of very advanced countries and others that are only in the early stages of adopting ODL systematically.

The above-listed problems and considerations illustrate the challenges that educators, designers, and decision-makers face in developing policies, strategies, and models for distance and open learning, which make an educated use of the available educational technologies on the one hand and which fit the unique capabilities and needs of countries in this extremely heterogeneous region. In this respect, the major challenges are the following: (1) to develop and improve the technological infrastructures to enable using state-of-the-art educational technologies, (2) to develop adequate models for distance ODL, and (3) to develop adequate policies and strategies for a proper integration of ODL in educational systems.

This special issue of IRRODL aims to describe and analyze current trends and issues in ODL in the Middle East. It seeks to detail the actual and potential contribution of ODL to the educational, social, and economic development in the region, and it does so by discussing the challenges and obstacles to ODL's optimal utilization in various countries in the region.

Overview of this Issue's Articles

The articles included in this special issue mainly cover evaluations of ODL implementations in the region, online students' characteristics, such as gender, computer literacy and so forth, and ideas for designing ODL.

The articles involving evaluation studies provide not only details about ODL implementations in the region but also some insights about how effective and efficient these initiatives are. For instance, Muneer Mahmood Abbad, David Morris, and Carmel de Nahlik introduce ODL implementations in the Arab Open University in Jordan (AOUJ). Abbad and his colleagues investigated the factors that influence the students' adoption of e-learning and found that prior experience was an important factor among AOUJ students who prefer e-learning. Another overview of AOUJ was presented by Khalil M. Dirani and Seung Won Yoon, who focused on the quality of ODL implementations. Dirani and Yoon classified their findings in three areas: (1) the existence of adverse conditions, (2) the presence of strong instructional practices, and (3) the need to improve administrative support. Another article that concentrated on quality issues and provided insights about an ODL implementation in the region was Mehmet Gültekin's paper on the evaluation of the Preschool Teacher Training Program at Anadolu University in Turkey. Gültekin examined the students' opinions regarding the quality of the support services and the materials provided to them. His survey study has shown that students had positive attitudes regarding the support services and the materials. The last evaluation article is about campus-wide implementation of Web-supported academic instruction at Tel Aviv University (TAU) of Israel. Rafi Nachmias and Judith Ram describe the scope and outcomes of Virtual TAU, a campus-wide project that aims to integrate information and communication technologies into the academic instruction at Tel Aviv University. The authors provided data, insights, and conclusions from research and evaluation studies at the institutional and pedagogical levels as well as the costs and benefits of the integration of Web-supported academic instruction.

The articles on student characteristics may help readers understand who prefers ODL in the Middle East and what their perceptions of ODL are. Ayelet Baram-Tsabari and Alaa Kaadni Kaadni, for example, compared Arabs and Israelis' interest in science in an asynchronous learning environment. They conclude that science interests are gender and age dependent but culturally independent in an asynchronous, open, and distant science learning environment. Gila Kurtz, Yair Amichai-Hamburger, and Jeffrey Kantor studied Israeli students' attitudes toward open and distance learning (ODL) and their perceived self-esteem and loneliness at the last stage of their online learning experience. The authors found a positive correlation between self-esteem and attitudes toward e-learning in general and toward online interaction with the instructor in particular. They also uncovered no correlation between loneliness and student attitudes toward e-learning. Yasemin Gülbahar and R. Orçun Madran examined student perceptions of communication and collaboration, satisfaction, equity, and autonomy in blended learning. The study shows the significance of computer and Internet literacy on ODL students' perception of interactions. The authors concluded that technology, instructors, students, and pedagogy are the four major areas that must be considered when developing a high-quality blended learning environment. In another study conducted in Turkey, Erkan Tekinarslan observed significant differences in the Turkish undergraduate students' perceptions of the Web as a learning tool based on gender, socio-economic background, and Web experience. The male students and the

students from higher socio-economic backgrounds indicated significantly higher attitude scores on the self-efficacy subscale of the Web attitude scale.

Two articles from Israel suggest ideas for designing various types of ODL. In the first article, Elaine Hoter, Miri Shonfeld, and Asmaa Ganayim present an online inter-group contact hypothesis (OICH) model that was developed to bring secular and religious Arabs and Jews in Israel together to work and learn collaboratively online. This multicultural interactive learning model intends to reduce the bias between groups and offers a gradual progression from completely online asynchronous interaction to face-to-face interaction for learning. The second article by Karen Precel, Yoram Eshet-Alkalai, and Yael Alberton focuses on the proper implementation of blended learning and the optimal proportions between online and F2F components in various learning scenarios. After having given details about a new model for blended learning, the authors revealed the results of a study they conducted to explore students' perceptions of pedagogical and design issues related to this new model. One of the major conclusions drawn in this study was the importance of completing the pedagogical and visual design of online learning in advance.

Finally, Latchem and his colleagues summarize the ODL initiatives in Turkey beyond Anadolu University's distance programs. The literature includes thorough coverage of ODL implementations in Anadolu University but lacks coverage of other ODL initiatives. This article provides insights about the development of, and lessons to be learned from, distance education provision by three other higher education providers: Ankara University, Sakarya University, and Ahmet Yesevi University.

In conclusion, this special issue of IRRODL attempts to provide the big picture as well as some details about what is happening in the Middle East in terms of open and distance learning. The articles included in this issue cover evaluations of ODL implementations, clues about the characteristics of ODL students, and ideas for designing ODL. We as the editors of this issue of IRRODL would like to thank all the contributors (the authors) as well as the IRRODL editorial community, especially Terry Anderson and Brigette McConkey, for giving us this opportunity to present a glimpse of ODL culture in the Middle East to all. We hope IRRODL readers will benefit from the articles in this issue.