

## Editorial

To paraphrase the old adage about the relationship between the US and the UK: when the dot-com's sneeze, e-learning catches a cold. The shake out from the ICT dot-coms crashes, exacerbated by 9-11 and the US corporate governance scandals put a temporary damper on developments in the ICT and e-learning sector. But a more realistic attitude to investment in the "knowledge/networked/learning society" is surely a good thing.

This is a good time to step back and see where we are in e-learning. So in November 2002 the European Conference on e-learning was held at Brunel University in London. More than 40 academics and practitioners from the private and public sectors met to exchange ideas, from the Middle East, North America, and all parts of Europe. It was decided to launch an e-journal to continue this discussion, to publish papers from the conference as well as from other contributors. This first edition of the *Electronic Journal of e-Learning* (EJEL) includes a selection of papers presented at the conference. These papers reflect the challenging nature of designing, developing, managing and above all, evaluating e-learning.

One of the benefits of the recent shakeout in ICT is that most people are now talking of blended learning – quite simply: using the media that are available, and no longer trying to squeeze everything through a not-very-broad-band Internet, for instance. So, Web CD's are OK, paper has its role, face to face training and learning is valuable, and the trick is to get the "blend" right. And there is still plenty that digitalisation will bring – in mobile/wireless technologies and broadband particularly. All of this is most welcome, and very healthy for the IT sector as well as for learning.

Research in e-learning is now starting to provide a systematic critique of what might be called the first phase in the development of e-learning. Up to now, much of the activity has been to get it up and running, to establish the three or four VLE platforms, at least one Open Source VLE – Bodington Common – (<http://bodington.org/index.html>) and to deliver the goods. That has been done. The second phase will be to develop the next generation of platforms, and provide more user-friendly environments for learning, as opposed to just ensuring the delivery of courses.

But in order to do that, particularly in the current financial climate, we need to know what works, what fields e-learning can be applied to, what other modes of communication and learning it fits best alongside – in a blended approach, and of course what it cannot do. We also need to know what it costs. It is crucial to realise that most e-learning is just a new form of distance education, and that in all good distance education, the up-front costs are considerable – it is front-loaded as far as investment is concerned. And that investment is not just financial. The crucial element is to train and support staff and students who are making the substantial transition from face-to-face teaching and learning to e-learning. As Tracy Kent writes in her paper, quoting from the JISC guidelines:

*"the implementation of a VLE [Virtual Learning Environment] without significant investment in developing staff will almost certainly not produce good results".*

We welcome papers from anyone who has interesting empirical, theoretical or critical work that they would like to publish. We are also pleased to have case studies, reports on action research as well as reports on work-in-progress. All papers will be double blind refereed.

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