

## EDITORIAL

Write to publish and to share

In the field of software development there is a solid reason for obfuscation. In order to protect new software from commercial competitors, maintaining security and maintaining profit, we can see the point of making code complex and hard to follow and duplicate. This should be the only place for such muddying of meaning. For academics in Higher Education aiming to explain complexity to students, there is a drive to get them reading, ideally reading academic journal articles, in order to engage scholars with the disputed and developing areas of their field. The students, however, show reluctance to absorb journal articles. Why? Because they are hard to understand. Difficulty is one thing which students must be prepared to face, but unnecessary obfuscation is quite another. Many is the time when I have done a live critical analysis of a journal article in class with students and found myself seriously challenged by some of the sentences which I am required to explain.

Sadly, this can sometimes be the case for articles submitted for publication. There seems to be a sense that in order to publish academic work, it must be made as dense and unreadable as possible. Our editorial team face lengthy paragraphs of numerical or code results, which could easily be presented in chart or table form, and poorly considered phrases which must be read many times to guess the meaning. When, on top of this, the English style and grammar has not been proof-read, the temptation is to reject, even though the content of the research may be original and useful. In this editorial team, usually we do not reject on this basis, instead spending considerable time trying to tease out meaning to determine what would interest our readers. Where there are good ideas, we try to help authors to present their research in a more accessible way. But why do some authors make their research so difficult to follow? Some may believe it is important to sound obscure and to use as many long words as possible, in order to show their mastery of a subject. That is clearly untrue. The true master of their field can explain the greatest complexity to a wide audience of different backgrounds. The skill comes in interpreting what the audience needs to know in order to follow the argument, and for that, the author needs to understand the journal's audience.

In such a turbulent and fast-moving field as digital interactive learning, where technology can shift faster than research proposals can be written and accepted, we need a focus on clarity. The point of academic publication is not just to be published, even though league table and funding drivers push authors in that direction. Many universities and technical institutes now require early career researchers to publish furiously in order to gain promotion, but the result of such a race to publish is poorly informed research and articles which do not apply to anything other than the author's local context. It is not sufficient to delve deeply into a single application and see what worked with just one small group of people. Instead our readers want to see articles which may have implications for their professional scholarship and projects; ideas which translate to action, applying wider than their original context.

This argument does not, of course, apply only to this journal. In all strong research, we need evidence, and that evidence must come in a form which is digestible; which addresses issues and concerns of practitioners and decision-makers as well as contributing to theoretical debate. Those who make decisions about adopting virtual learning environments, software applications to be institutionally supported or simply must decide how to help people learn in class and online, need primary research evidence which is clearly presented and discussed. They do not have time to engage with complex research which is poorly analysed.

Professor Tony Greenfield, writing about his discipline of statistics in 1993, suggested that statisticians needed to change their own culture in order to help non-statisticians understand how this discipline could transform others. Scholarly depth is fine for heated debates in research conferences, but in order to change the world, we should be able to communicate our ideas in a way which is accessible to a wider audience. Perhaps those league tables which pervade academic rankings may bring some benefit here, as impact on non-academic beneficiaries becomes an additional goal for the researcher. But little will change without a culture shift. When we start to see how journal articles can engage scholars and practitioners, including less experienced learners, by presenting ideas graphically, using examples to which the audience can relate, and using plain language to build our arguments, we might get students reading more journal articles, and we may be able to interest readers from a range of disciplines instead of only a handful from our own. Whether or not we admire Gunning's work on the fog index (Gunning, 1952), or prefer Martin Cutts' approach in the Oxford guide to plain English (2013), we should foster language which members of PLAIN, an international association of plain-language professionals see as language in which: "wording, structure and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand it, and use it" (2016).

In this issue, we present a wide range of papers which we hope are intelligible and genuinely contribute to our understanding as well as practice. The most popular theme in this issue comprises a wide range of aids to learning, including e-books, ways to address reading anxiety, animated demonstration, podcasting, visual cues, clickers and ways to support students with special needs. There are also papers on mobile learning, gaming applications, collaborative learning and technology acceptance in the issue. Let us work towards sharing our research in the most accessible way, not just writing to publish, but writing to share.

#### References

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Greenfield, T. (1993). Communicating Statistics. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society A* 156, Part 2, 287–297

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