

Guest Editorial: Special Issue on eLearning in the Caribbean

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This special issue of IJEDICT focuses on the application of eLearning in the Caribbean and presents articles by educators in the region who were participants in *eLearning 2009*, an international conference organized by the University of the West Indies (UWI) and held in Port of Spain, Trinidad from July 8-11, 2009.

Research on eLearning in the Caribbean is of particular importance as higher education institutions in the region look toward the increasing use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to increase access to tertiary education. The diversity and the geographical separation of the countries in the region, together with a lack of resources, have made access particularly challenging. The Caribbean can be defined geographically as a chain of islands forming a broad arc or crescent, which extends from the Bahamas and Cuba in the north, to Trinidad in the South. The islands making up this chain include Cuba, Haiti/Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Jamaica, Argentina, Antigua and Barbuda, the United States Virgin Islands and the British Virgin Islands, Montserrat, Dominica, Guadeloupe, Martinique, St Lucia, St Vincent, Grenada, Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago. Many also consider Guyana and Belize part of the Caribbean, even though they are mainland States.

ELearn 2009 was intended to share experiences of those educators in the region who have been using ICTs in exemplary ways, in spite of the many challenges faced. More specifically, it was intended to provide a forum for the UWI to demonstrate the organization's progress, understanding and creativity in using technology. The institution celebrated sixty years of existence in 2009 and today has a presence in sixteen English-speaking countries in the region

The conference attracted approximately 200 attendees, and there were varied presentations, with conference participants coming from Trinidad and Tobago, Canada, the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Missouri, Virginia, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Barbados, and Guyana. The struggle to find innovative ways to apply technology to increase access and bridge the digital divide was a recurrent theme of the conference and the articles ranged in focus from pedagogical practices using eLearning, to best practices in the eLearning and the business environment, professional development, enabling environments and innovative eLearning. The articles selected for this issue all reflect work being done at the UWI but span a range of areas from pedagogy to infrastructure and software development, and all provide examples of the possibilities of eLearning in developing contexts.

In the article *MyeLearning as a Tool to Enhance the Writing Process in Spanish as a Foreign Language*, Diego Mideros describes the experience of using the open source Learning Management System Moodle, branded *MyeLearning* at UWI, St Augustine, to enhance the writing process in the Spanish as a Foreign Language programme on that campus. In this case elearning was used to enhance teaching and learning by helping students to reflect on their work, as part of the writing process that extends beyond the classroom. The author placed a lot of emphasis on feedback in all forms for students to understand that writing is a social activity and the final goal of writing is to be read by an audience.

In his article, Balraj Kistow also addresses the possibilities of eLearning for teaching and learning in tertiary level institutions, but this time from the perspective of the teacher. He examines the views and perceptions of the Faculty at the Arthur Lok Jack Graduate School of Business located in Trinidad, on the benefits of applying elearning to graduate training in Business Management and professional training and development. The results of Kistow's study indicate that while staff members at his institution generally view the application of blended learning positively, they feel that it can reduce teamwork and collaboration between students and that training and preparation will be required by all

Faculty, before they could be effective. Kistow's study highlights the skepticism faced in the region at the tertiary level with regard to the efficacy of elearning and its possibilities for professional training. At the same time it highlights the small changes being made as Faculty members try to have an open mind.

The article *myDR: Improving the Self-Care Process for Caribbean Patients with Diabetes through Mobile Learning* takes a practical look at the possibilities of every day technology for education. The authors demonstrate the application of easily accessible ICTs to non-traditional education as well as community and health education. Salys Sultan and Permanand Mohan discuss how mobile learning can be used to improve the self-care practices of patients with diabetes. They present the results of a usability study on a mobile application called myDR (short for my daily record) that is used to retrieve and store the blood sugar and blood pressure levels of a diabetic patient. The results of the user study show that the majority of participants preferred this system over their existing diabetes education programme. This article highlights the possibilities of the mobile phone and is particularly relevant in a region where mobile access is widespread.

Lisle Waldron provides another example of ways to be practical in situations where resources are limited, addressing the issue of infrastructure in this instance. In his article *Technology-Oriented Or Learning-Driven? A Case Study of Physical Learning Space Design in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago*, Lisle emphasizes the need for strategic planning in eLearning and highlights the fact that Colleges and Universities need to focus on technology as a tool and learning as the product. Lisle's argument is that in Trinidad and Tobago the tradition has been one of installing technology "imitatively, reflexively, in a vacuum – that is, without an integration of technology with the learning philosophies of higher education institutions. The result of such an incorporation of technology into the learning space is an illusion of progressiveness instead of the best possible facilitation of teaching and learning." Lisle's view is that there must be strategic planning which involves collaboration among stakeholders on space needs, issues of adaptability and flexibility and the creative incorporation of technological innovations to achieve learning.

Moving away from physical infrastructure to software, Diana Ragbir and Permanand Mohan in their article *Creating Reusable Lesson Plans for E-learning using the IMS Learning Design Specification* explain how to create reusable, interoperable lesson plans for e-learning. The authors describe the use of the specification to create three Learning Designs in various disciplines and explored the need for improvement of the specification.

Margaret Bernard and Anil Ramnanan describe the design and use of an e-learning software platform in their paper *Burrokeet, an Application for Creating and Publishing Content Packages with support for Multiple Input and Output Formats*. Burrokeet is a software platform that manages content and facilitates the creation of IMS/SCORM Content Packages. Although currently, Burrokeet has basic functionality it can accept input documents in many of the common formats and can create a Content Package that is compliant with industry standards.

The authors Wayne Sarjusingh, Fernando Castellanos and Crista Mohammed in their paper *Special Project Portal: A Case Study of a Customized Course Management System*, report on the application of **The ECNG 3020 Special Project Portal**, a custom-built, course management system. The ECNG3020 is used in the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at The University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine Campus as a central hub for information, an administrative and processes management platform and a sharing tool for course ENCG 3020. One of the unique features of The Portal is that it is informed entirely by course needs, not vice versa, as may obtain in generic course management systems. The authors assess the flexibility and utility of the customized portal and suggest the need to further investigate whether the Portal can be adapted to meet the needs of similar, terminal assessment courses like ECNG 3020.

The articles in this issue point to many of the challenges facing Caribbean educators including lack of resources, attitudes which influence some to see technology as an end in itself, and challenges of infrastructure and context. They all reflect the determination of educators in the region to be flexible

and adapt existing technology to suit our specific purposes and in some cases to create new tools, which may be more relevant and effective. The authors of the selected papers as well as all the presenters at eLearn 2009 were eager to share their unique experiences and for this we owe them a debt of gratitude as they have added to the currently small storehouse of information on eLearning developments in the Caribbean.

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