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EDITORIAL

# Editorial Special Collection on Doctoral Research: Learning in an Open World

Francisco Iniesto\*, Garron Hillaire\* and Jenna Mittelmeier†

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This editorial introduces the JIME special collection focused on “Doctoral Research: Learning in an Open World”.

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**Keywords:** Doctoral Research; Open World

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## Background

The roots of this special collection began during the early doctoral experience of the guest editors. At that time, we reflected on the student community in the Institute of Educational Technology (IET) at The Open University (OU) and the essential role a strong student community plays in doctoral students' lives, wellbeing, and learning. In particular, our feeling was (and still is) that doctoral researchers should be involved, where possible, in the wider fabric of the research community within their institutions and included in other research projects not necessarily directly linked with their doctoral topic. One mechanism for doing so can be found in the connections made between students through finding shared interests and forging new directions for joint research. Thanks to that approach and being enthusiastic about accessibility and inclusive design, two of the editors developed a joint research study over Christmas break that started as an initial presentation at the Association for the Advancement of Assistive Technology in Europe (AAATE)<sup>1</sup> 2017 congress (Hillaire, Iniesto, & Rienties, 2017), which then expanded into this very collection.

We are aware of, and appreciate that there has been, a rising focus on supporting doctoral students' wider development. For example, more and more conferences include doctoral consortiums that aim to provide feedback to doctoral students from their peers and reputed academics. Francisco, as a member of the Global OER Graduate Network (GO-GN)<sup>2</sup> and having organised the OpenTEL<sup>3</sup> doctoral consortium at the Computers and Learning Research Group (CALRG)<sup>4</sup> 2019 conference, has also been able to experience the benefits of participating in a strong doctoral student network (many of whom are represented in this special issue); which provides

platforms for students to grow in their experiences by attending conferences and developing confidence in presenting their early research publicly. Jenna's postdoctoral research has also investigated the invaluable social transition support provided by peers and staff throughout the doctoral journey (Mittelmeier, Jindal-Snape, & Rienties, 2018), both in terms of research development and through general wellbeing. Garron's postdoctoral research is exploring how teachers express emotion when practicing conversations with students in practice spaces that simulate difficult conversation around equity. All of the editors of this special collection are attuned to social issues related to learning, our common interest is in finding ways to be inclusive that support students to thrive. This collection of doctoral research reflects the desire to help students to thrive in academia.

When looking at academic journals, however, we recognised that it can be challenging for doctoral students to find publishing opportunities, particularly at earlier stages or for submitting ongoing work-in-progress (or even more mature doctoral research). Oftentimes, doctoral research remains hidden away inside university repositories or is contributed to the wider field as an afterthought, when indeed students' work provides valuable and cutting-edge perspectives that the field should learn from today. This special collection emerged as a reflection of that need to offer opportunities for doctoral students to publish their work and contribute these new insights, regardless of their current stage.

One additional benefit in having a special issue dedicated to doctoral research is that it allowed reviewers to provide feedback on academic writing and work-in-progress to those who submitted. This opportunity also extended to the number of early career researchers who were included as reviewers, as they were able to practice providing constructive feedback to doctoral students. As editors of the special issue, this was a valuable development and reflection experience for us, particularly as all three progressed during this process from being doctoral students ourselves to postdoctoral and lectureship posts in the broader open

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\* The Open University, GB

† University of Manchester, GB

Corresponding author: Francisco Iniesto  
([francisco.iniesto@open.ac.uk](mailto:francisco.iniesto@open.ac.uk))

world learning community. Taken together, we hope that similar opportunities will be considered through other outlets and by other academics as a tool for supporting, developing, and sharing doctoral research.

### The special collection

This issue of JIME publishes a collection of papers written by doctoral researchers on the subject of Learning in an Open World. In terms of authorship, the criteria for the special issue was that the first author must be a currently registered doctoral researcher or have recently been awarded their degree (within the last two years).

Our topical focus on 'Learning in an Open World' recognised that learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is undergoing both subtle and radical transformation as a result of the impact of digital, networked technologies. Examples of these changes include (among many others) the rising use of learning analytics data, increasing enrolments in online distance learning models, and new technologies for supporting and understanding students' experiences. Under these conditions, open learning (defined in this context as open access to information and education) can support learners around the world by providing unprecedented access to information and educational resources. However, it should be recognised that it is not technologies themselves that represent the most significant changes, but rather the opportunities (or barriers) brought forth through their thoughtful application across the spectrum of formal and informal learning. Yet without supporting research to drive the direction of these opportunities and overcome existing barriers to inclusive and sustainable education, issues related to exclusion, fair access, and negative student experience may adversely impact such educational changes.

With this in mind, doctoral research provides unique opportunities to explore topics impacting open learning in new and innovative ways. Indeed, we strongly believe that the in-depth research produced by doctoral students provides important insights into the field. Yet, as noted above, there is often a lack of publishing opportunities for those in the doctoral process to demonstrate their work in the area of open world learning, particularly for work still in progress.

Therefore, we present in this issue five full papers that demonstrate these overarching values of doctoral research in the field of education and education technologies. Because of the nature of this special issue topic, we have also included four papers representing work-in-progress, which are written by doctoral researchers in earlier stages of their project development. These papers collectively represent an important avenue for learning about the cutting-edge research conducted by doctoral researchers, which is not often available in such a public format.

Altogether, we argue that innovation is present in this research on a number of different levels. The most immediately obvious is the wide range of diverse topics present in this collection, from macro-level focuses on open educational resources (see: Baas, Admiraal, & van den Bert, 2019; Paskevicius & Irvine, 2019), to learning design supports at the institutional level (see: Bond & Bedenlier,

2019; Boyd, 2019; Foley & Marr, 2019; Hillaire, Iniesto, & Rienties, 2019), and students' more micro experiences with various technology-supported curriculum features (see: Conde Gafaro, 2019; Foster, 2019; Murphy, Coiro, & Kiili, 2019), among others. Similarly, a wide range of innovative research methods are demonstrated by doctoral researchers in this field, including analysis of video data (Murphy, Coiro, & Killi, 2019), affective computing approaches (Hillaire, Iniesto, & Rienties, 2019), action research (Boyd, 2019), and mixed methods approaches (Baas, Admiraal, & van den Bert, 2019; Foley & Marr, 2019). We also note the strong conceptual foundation of the works included in this special issue across a wide range of topics, (see Baas, Admiraal, & van den Bert, 2019; Conde Gafaro, 2019; Bond & Bedenlier, 2019).

Finally, we recognise the powerful research connections and collaborations established by the doctoral researchers in this special issue. For many papers, this represented opportunities for doctoral researchers to co-author with their supervisors or other staff members. Two of the papers included authors from multiple institutions or spanning several countries (Baas, Admiraal & van den Berg 2019; Murphy, Coiro, & Kiili, 2019). Work by Hillaire, Iniesto, & Rienties (2019) also depicts a research collaboration between students, enriching and extending work beyond their own doctoral projects. Together, we believe these collaborations highlight that the doctoral journey provides valuable opportunities to learn from one another through teamwork and developing sustained connections within the field.

Altogether, this special issue provides a window into the innovative work of doctoral researchers on the subject of learning in an open world. What these papers do together moves the conversation beyond an over-reliance on technological tools and, instead, pushes for more critical and contemplative considerations for the role technologies play in expanding accessible, inclusive, and sustainable approaches to learning. This special issue has been an opportunity to showcase how exciting possibilities arise at the intersection of graduate student work. We hope that you enjoy the opportunity to learn from the doctoral research presented in this issue and take the initiative to reach out to the authors with comments or questions for further developing their work.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> AAATE, <http://aaate.net/>.
- <sup>2</sup> GO-GN Network, <https://go-gn.net/>.
- <sup>3</sup> OpenTEL, <http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/opentel/>.
- <sup>4</sup> CALRG, <http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/CALRG/>.
- <sup>5</sup> Leverhulme Open World Learning, <https://iet.open.ac.uk/projects/owl>.

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### Competing Interests

All the editors declare that they have no competing interests regarding the research published in this collection. As guest editors Francisco and Garron were removed from all editorial processing for the submission of their paper: "Humanising text-to-speech through emotional expression in online courses". A double-blind peer review process was applied to this as to all papers in the collection.

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