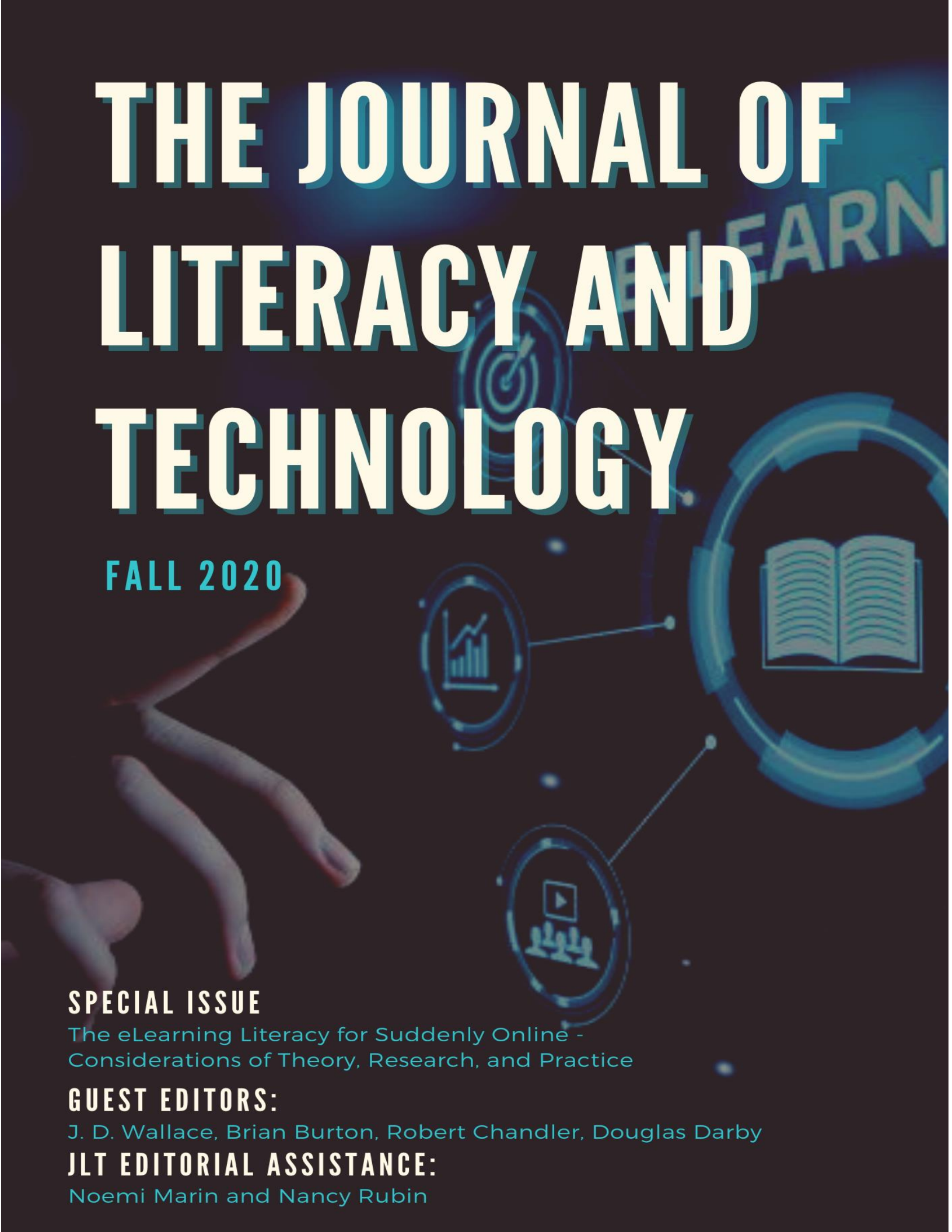


THE JOURNAL OF LITERACY AND TECHNOLOGY



FALL 2020

SPECIAL ISSUE

The eLearning Literacy for Suddenly Online -
Considerations of Theory, Research, and Practice

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J. D. Wallace, Brian Burton, Robert Chandler, Douglas Darby

JLT EDITORIAL ASSISTANCE:

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The Journal of Literacy and Technology
Special Issue for Suddenly Online – Considerations of Theory, Research, and
Practice

Fall 2020

ISSN: 1535-0975

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Volume 21(2), Special Edition, 2020

ISSN: 1535-0975

The Journal of Literacy and Technology
Special Issue for Suddenly Online – Considerations of Theory, Research, and
Practice

Fall 2020

ISSN: 1535-0975

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Providing Foundations for an Educational Revolution: Moving Towards an Integrated Perspective

Article Info	Abstract
<p>J.D. Wallace, Ph.D. Abilene Christian University</p> <p>Brian G. Burton, Ed.D. Abilene Christian University</p> <p>Robert C. Chandler, Ph.D. Lipscomb University</p> <p>Douglas G. Darby, Ph.D. Lubbock Christian University</p> <p>Keywords: COVID-19, Scholarly Communication, Suddenly Online, Rapid Response Scholarship, First Findings</p>	<p>The pandemic of Spring 2020 necessitated a rapid switch in teaching methods around the world. Most significantly was the revolutionary transition from face to face instruction to remote, distance, or virtual teaching/learning and the resultant online “new normal” that continues to ripple across the academy and society at large. This new reality has necessitated a paradigmatic shift in how scholars, teachers and administrators understand, create, employ, and assess teaching/learning. It has likewise resulted in a shift in how students, parents, families, and employers understand, value, desire, and prefer educational formats and settings. The authors point to the importance of considering aspects of theory, research, and best practices related to this transition.</p> <p>The article surveys resulting first response scholarship and forecast types of questions that loom large regarding the practice of online teaching in the new economic, academic, social framework.</p>

Wallace, J. D., Burton, B. G., Chandler, R. C., & Douglas, D. G. (2020). Providing Foundations for an Educational Revolution: Moving Towards an Integrated Perspective. *Journal of Literacy and Technology*, 21(2), 5-17.

The Journal of Literacy and Technology
Special Issue for Suddenly Online – Considerations of Theory, Research, and Practice

Fall 2020

ISSN: 1535-0975

Two thousand and twenty has been an unparalleled time in education as to what has been witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Initial forays into understanding and new knowledge about a suddenly online paradigm are presented in this timely special issue of the Journal of Literacy and Technology (JLT). These changes usually occur in slow-moving cascades and diffusion of ideas. However, COVID-19 induced a sweeping transformation in education practices and was a catalyst for a cataclysmic shift in educational paradigms. Specifically, the pandemic necessitated a rapid switch in teaching modalities most significantly the transition from face to face instruction to remote, distance, or virtual teaching/learning. Describing this hurried transition as suddenly online, rapidly remote, mobile learning and other such monikers are appropriate descriptive catchphrases signifying the revolutionary varied and changing educational landscape.

The scholarship in the special issue of The Journal of Literacy and Technology offers considerations of theory, research, and practices related to the transition. These scholars offer their insights with a sense of immediacy. The pandemic and the first semester disruptions were still occurring during creation of the observations regarding the adjustments in teaching and learning. Their description attempts to capture a relatively unseen and unexperienced context given the scale of participants and their level participation. As such, scholarship addressing concerns eLearning paradigm's reconfiguration into academic and professional terrains is in desperate need of wide distribution, substantial reconsideration, and meaningful application. Most superlatives prove insufficient to connote the need for a reexamination of eLearning literacy and

indeed, education and learning at every level. What follows is a cursory description of entropic constraints impacting burgeoning scholarly first efforts, rapid response processes used to counteract those constraints, and a description of first forays into Pandemic associated scholarship.

No Educational Modality is Immune

Some online institutions may consider themselves unscathed and feel less of a need to retool in the face of the virus. Such complacent assumptions may merely obfuscate vision to see the changed realities require reconsideration of many aspects and warrant adjustments. It would seem reasonable to presume that such a cataclysmic shift in both manifest and latent structures cannot help but create needs and opportunities for structural changes and adaptation to teaching in all modalities, including those that were by original intent and design entirely online. Many of these substantive and process changes may currently be unnoticed or unexamined but inexorably will exert themselves as issues to be faced by students, teachers, administrators, or other constituents in the education systems. Indeed, until they have sufficiently become symptomatic and reveal their ultimate disruption, all of us are facing unknown factors even those of us taking comfort in familiar routinized online territories. This transformative era challenges us to reexamine how traditional and newly found exogenous variables impact old and newly established educations' long-term trajectory. It is important to rethink and reconsider all aspects of our theory, methods, and practices from various perspectives and using a wide range of metrics. Provided are two brief examples applied to online modalities.

Students

For the students that are familiar with the online learning environment, one might expect there to be little difference. Nevertheless, with more diverse stakeholders, change of pace and experience, social and family adjustments and altered comradery of other online students and many other aspects have changed. How has those changes enhanced or diminished these students' learning experiences' or impact, credibility, and continuance outcomes? Further, some students coming to higher-ed have normed on "less than ideal" behaviors, styles, and practices for online education. How is that going to interact with the other altered factors and impact online learning enactment or delivery?

For many online courses, the quality of the educational content quality is contingent on the students' level of engagement and sophistication or maturity of their skills and abilities in terms of creating conducive participation. The ripples of these altered contexts will stretch out in many different directions, since many online academic programs use their sequence position as first or gateway experience for a critical mass of their constituency. Thus, they may thereby set expectations, norms, and habits of the students for subsequent teaching/learning. However, such pathways need to be reconsidered and screening efforts offered seeking warning signs of a forthcoming norm or habit contamination of process, given the number of previously normed students, in the changed multiple variables landscape.

Teachers

The number of teachers that now have online teaching experience has also expanded exponentially. Pre-COVID-19

teachers that were engaged in online instruction were presumably trained, nurtured, and supported in best practices for this teaching medium. However, the events of Spring 2020 necessitated a rapid transition for most teachers who were then teaching face to face to quickly adapt to teaching otherwise. With little time for nurturing, modeling, or hastily arranged training these teachers had to '*build the airplane while they were flying it.*' This new cadre of online teachers did not have the luxury of time for support and contemplation. Beyond the teachers themselves, the institutional support and training resources were also over-extended beyond all planned capacity expectations.

Almost all institutions now have an online teaching expectation supported by support structures which are strained these contingency changes in expectations (or unattended sometimes to the point of nonexistence). Even where such support is in place and with adequate resources, there is a risk of failing to recognize that the new online realities are different for both teachers and students and erroneously misstep by confusing no longer appropriate past practices with best practices.

Unfortunately, the new cadre of educators now with some emergency online teaching experience, may also be subject to retrospective sense-making bias. They only know what they have learned; some teachers may not have learned what others have learned. More ominously, they don't know what they don't know. Put another way, teachers overwhelmed by class development chores, with limited or little support, and with hurried or perhaps marginal training may defer to the stopgap measures that they used for suddenly online courses by default and assume that it is adequate for competent instruction.

have a comparative experience, and without available scholarship such as included in this special issue, this tendency could perpetuate a number of malpractices that give the illusion of adequacy while actually diminishing the quality of educational outcomes. On the flip side, since the sheer number of teachers engaged in the online environment has expanded beyond what anyone could have imagined just a few months ago, there may be a variety of new or unexamined best practices that never emerged under previous online research and pedagogy. This also points to the relevance and importance of first findings and subsequent post-pandemic scholarship investigating these practices.

Quality of Education Has Taken a Temporary Hit

The “elephant in the room” is the concern that sacrifices in educational quality have been made to ensure educational continuance and continuity of institutions. There is a widely held perception that education was conducted in a “less than ideal” manner and under impoverished circumstances for many students, especially during the spring and summer of 2020. Dissatisfaction with remote instruction, connectivity barriers, inadequate instructional materials or resources diminished educational experience as campuses and classrooms were closed while students and faculty moved into a virtual connection. While trying to be objective, recognizing both things within and beyond control, and also acknowledging the herculean efforts of teachers, students, and families, there is some evidence to suggest that thus far in the suddenly online context that the net result was “less than” compared. Since they, nor their students, perception of the quality of online supported

education itself has been somewhat diminished if for no other key reasons than the sheer level of less experienced practitioners and consumers responsible for the lion’s share of its implementation. This awkward attribution is not advantageous to the reputation or psyche of teachers, students, or educational institutions, which is presumably a motive for avoiding the topic. However, the topic is an important one and a thorough investigation and consideration of the findings of that effort are certainly warranted and beneficial to future practices.

Will the differential between face to face and online learning be a net plus or minus in outcomes for both academic programs and student learning? In the end, such questions portend to be the source of stating the ultimate impact of reconfigured variables and experiences as the “new normal” of online teaching and learning plays out. It will take complex discussions between a variety of different kinds of practitioners and scholars. They will also have to do the humbling work of sifting through previously held pre-pandemic educational assumptions and old paradigm best practices pros and cons to determine their new paradigm relevance. These discussions will ultimately view first findings from suddenly online experiences as harbingers revealing and integrating: things to come; new ideas; previously unacknowledged influences; and resilient principles that will have re-earned their place in post-pandemic education.

Suddenly Online and Emerging Research

The seismic shift of education assumptions, methods, and practices will need to rely on the best information to be offered. Thousands of manuscripts are presumably in the pipeline of virtual

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ISSN: 1535-0975

conferences waiting on reflections thereby earned, to further them on to traditional scholarly journals. Their presence may be relatively absent until traditional academic outlets can respond. Until then, what will fill the gap may be relegated to personal experience, speculation, and online punditry, perhaps tied to pre-pandemic pedagogical principles. Emerging research investigating the paradigmatic differences regarding the complexities experienced by online classes for traditional students and their facilitators will have to bear witness to what has changed, what needs to be changed, what should be kept, and what is no longer relevant. In the short term, rapid response journal issues, preprints, and educational conferences will have to fill the research, theory, and best practices vacuum created by the COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020. Indeed, early findings, emerging models, applied theories, and reports of Pandemic experiences, by definition, will be more authentic in their perception of new realities. They precede the inevitable tectonic influence pressures of consensus tendencies and confirmatory biases of an academic community in constant evolutionary flux. This process is expected, as the pre-pandemic education paradigm crumbles in the face of the shift in which we find ourselves. Half a century ago, Kuhn (1970) provided a prescient insight in this regard.

"So long as the tools a paradigm supplies continue to prove capable of solving the problems it defines, science moves fastest and penetrates most deeply through confident employment of those tools. The reason is clear. As in manufacture so in science—retooling is an extravagance to be reserved for the occasion that demands it. The significance of crises is the indication

they provide that an occasion for retooling has arrived (p. 76).

The worldwide suddenly online education experience has fundamentally changed the teaching and learning playing field and by extension the rules of the game. It would be foolish to think that the utility of all previous pedagogical principles and practices have remained static. It is time to find new footing in a reality where online experience is the norm, virtual presence is familiar, and face to face educational institutions no longer have the luxury of minimizing online options. Scholars, practitioners, and indeed all educational stakeholders, are tasked with being courageous enough to recognize and reconsider our assumptions in this changed world. Chaos and crisis necessitate motivations to engage in such an endeavor and thus clear the way for new insights.

Scholarship Integrity, Fidelity, and Lethargy

Many important questions are being asked about the success and the impact of this revolutionary moment in teaching and learning. It is often a challenge to cultivate knowledge and disseminate it in a timely manner during a period of needed immediacy. Rapid response research is not a new idea, but it is rare because of its challenges in creating and sharing content. However, the benefits of fast-tracking time-sensitive ideas warrant efforts. Rapid response research scholarship, such as the articles within this special issue of the Journal of Literacy and Technology, has an essential role in promptly informing and influencing practices. For now, innovators and early adopters of reconceptualized models of learning will be the risk-takers and beneficiaries of their adoption (Rogers, 2003). Certainly, it is appropriate for

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ISSN: 1535-0975

eLearning issues to be at the vanguard of rethinking how high-value scholarship is created. Long term, this may become the mainstay of the future scholarship. In the short term, it will be primarily used by those who can shift mental models and sacrifice a degree of prestige afforded by traditional journal outlets. The risk is not without some return as early findings may be seminal works in the making and subsequently more widely distributed.

Evolving scholarship is essential in providing even-handed takeaways that often minimizes agendas, improves future efforts, and frames both in what we know and how we think about it. With the advent of new technologies, data collection, and communication distributions systems, scholarship dispersal can embrace new dynamics. Some previous practices contributed to slow-paced review and publication cycles that diminished scholarship with urgent or time-sensitive aspects. Aside from the closer to real-time availability of such knowledge, there are longer-term benefits. Retooling scholarly publication models may also serve the academic community in a predictable increase of diverse and accessible valued thought. Overly encumbered, and less necessary, production bottlenecks of the past harm the essential value of scholarly communication that is increasingly challenged by a number of other influential sources and techniques (Whitworth, & Friedman, 2008).

To be sure, some dynamics are non-negotiable such as theoretical and methodological rigor, peer-review, and ethical integrity. Pragmatic realities can give rise to demands circumventing one or more of these critical elements in the hopes of accessing quality content without the lengthy production overhead (Sherbino,

Arora, Van Melle, Rogers, & Holmboe, 2015). Fortunately, a synergistic middle ground may be conceivable using mainstay criteria of plausible, feasible, and practical (Smith, 2013). Accelerated rapid response journals with peer-reviewed first findings for eLearning or other subject areas may be able to supplant some more encumbered outlets while maintaining the critical elements necessary for scholarly research.

eLearning as a Particular Case

eLearning is a particular case where the findings of rapid response journals are appropriate. There is a worldwide constituency that needs scholarship for the "suddenly online." This constituency would include scholars, instructors, students, instructional designers, tool vendors, institutional programs, and their affiliated leadership. Probably the most pressing benefit, which cuts across all stakeholders, is the legitimacy of the information. What has flooded the information space is a vast number of voices trying to fill the immediate and future need against a backdrop of eLearning scholarship that may or may not be applicable. Unvetted content is put on par with more seasoned findings with untested generalizability in rapidly online environments such as blogs, web pages, webinars, and the like. eLearning scholarship, instruction, theory, and decisions will be implemented but only with available content. Given the suddenly online nature of current eLearning participants necessitated by the 2020 Pandemic, many previous findings may be contextually inappropriate, inaccessible, or essential depending on the implementation. Rapid response journal findings, especially in suddenly online environments, provide authenticity of context while preserving a legitimate review process that maintains the integrity of the information produced. So, it

is both appropriate and beneficial for the Journal of Literacy and Technology to provide a special edition tackling what appears to have many of the hallmarks of a wicked problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

Within this rapid response volume, academia's educational initial scholarship can be found. Gigliotti (2020) communicates a timeline that illustrates both the speed and inescapable nature at which the Pandemic overtook all parts of society and fundamentally changed the education system as we knew it. Rapid proliferation is mapped from January 30th where the World Health Organization (WHO) declared an "emergency of international concern," followed by the declaration of a Pandemic by March 11th, through August of 2020, where there were 21 million confirmed cases worldwide (with some estimates having possibly ten times that number). That number has increased by more than 33% at the time of this publication, and it is continuing to climb (Johns Hopkins September 20th, 2020). During this time, there has been any number of fixes, workshops, webinars, reconfigurations, or implementations that have been characterized as successes in online or eLearning situations. These outlets responded to the most extreme circumstances with continuity as their primary definition of success. One would find it challenging to quibble with that characterization, but often these declarations have no indicators or benchmarks from the broader academic community. While JLT is at the vanguard of first findings, it is fully expected that, in the future, their substance will be validated, mature, or shift to accommodate discoveries. However, the need is compelling, and the time is urgent. There is no substitute for first findings generated in authentic environments to help

contextualize experiences and responses. Petroski and Rogers (2020) describe the need for guides or wayfinders when students are in an unfamiliar landscape concerning Pandemic related suddenly online experiences. This need is no less true for educators, scholars, administrators, and consultants as we necessarily navigate new and often trying pedagogical experiences.

The Search for Wayfinders

On April 29th, 2020, a proposal for a COVID-19 rapid response journal special issue was initially considered by the editorial staff of the Journal of Literacy and Technology (JLT). The "suddenly online" moniker was pervasive in the education community without a single scholarly article to its credit. The idea was to identify and claim the conceptual ground of the historic modality shift in education during spring 2020. This special edition was tasked to curate eLearning literacy research, theory, and practices as it was being recast in the immediate proximity of the COVID -19 Pandemic. One of the advantages of established online journals such as JLT is their ability to nimbly capture immediately useable: theoretical insights, research observations, and best practices. These can be evaluated against short-term needs and long-term scholarship. For these reasons, a timely special edition of JLT was proposed to contextualize eLearning literacy against the backdrop of authentic, at the moment research, observations, and recommendations.

Five phases of Rapid Response Scholarship Dissemination

While scholarship dissemination may seem like familiar ground for a journal, the rapid response nature accelerated much of the process. To accomplish this response, protocols were established with cascading

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phases, not unlike those used in many of the suddenly online courses themselves. The first phase was communicating a general framework to stakeholders to explain how new protocols would not sacrifice objectives or standards established in previous offerings. The second phase solicited immediate draft proposals/work for subsequent and more substantial work. This phase established connection, buy-in, fit, and capabilities connected to the motivation and ability of the submitters. Phase three provided feedback, directions, and instructions for mandatory, subsequently more consequential contributions. Phase four collected, evaluated, and returned manuscripts with formative evaluations accompanied by suggestions for modifications or redirection concerning projects. Phase five provided summative evaluations contributing to a final assessment and where applications could be made. Typical flexibilities narrowed as the process moved forward, making it necessary to redirect, to other venues, less developed scholarship that needed more time that simply was not available. These protocols allowed the process to move forward while not preventing promising scholarship from contributing because of the arduous and demanding circumstances.

Specifically, phase 1 solicited abstract proposals by the end of May of 2020 with a five-month turn-around to publication communicated. Abstract submissions were accepted, with the authors agreeing to produce a finished manuscript by the end of June. The culmination of Phase 2 occurred at the end of May with a recommendation for continuance/non-continuance or offer of another venue based on previously established criteria. During July, Phase 3 engaged over twenty reviewers to evaluate and pinpoint reasonable areas for

improvements for submissions that had potential. Changes were to be made by the end of August for the review. Phase 5 had final manuscripts reviewed in early September for comparison with emerging journal cohort, salience to theory, practices, and redundancy with other submissions. All the submissions that made it to this phase had value. Because of this, those that could not be included were encouraged to pursue their work and submit to the Journal of Literacy of Technology's regular volume or elsewhere for additional consideration. Some allowances are certainly made for first findings considering the nature of the problem, context, and resources they engage. These allowances are more than compensated for in the balance. The resulting journal provides a rare group of research projects created for and during the most explosive parts of the Pandemic in early 2020.

While articles are targeted at the suddenly online environment, they bring heretofore unexplored dynamics that have been inherent in all online educational contexts but have been underrepresented in the research. Taken as a collection, some understandably common factors appear worth mentioning. First, continuity and completion have again emerged as indicators of success. At this point, the survival of the first (and possibly/hopefully only) worldwide suddenly online shift in education is not to be undersold. It can and should be considered a success story by anyone who was engaged. That success should not only be extended to the purveyors but also the consumers. Hopefully, the patience, hard work, sometimes uncharacteristic encouragement that many students contributed will be catalogued as to their unique and contributory value. As it is, most of the

findings we present, rarely gauge success on indicators with footing outside of the phenomena. Instead, they have a strong affiliation with the activities, confirmatory biases of the observers, or experiences at hand.

Second, the resilience of pre-pandemic practices remained largely untested. It makes sense that some systems are more resilient than others. That resilience is rarely measured in online environments ostensibly because they rarely see themselves in crisis mode. This condition begs the question of even self-described superior online curriculum, how resilient are they when unanticipatedly stressed? The Pandemic clearly illustrated widespread instances of underprepared faculty, unmotivated students, technological deficiencies, economic inequities, and strained morale.

Third, variables such as student engagement, faculty, and class type were typically based on normative expectations and experiences of both faculty and students. Rarely are optimum levels of engagement discovered or pursued. Other novel instructional techniques, such as those suggested by the flipped classroom literature, indicate these may have varying degrees of untested moderating effects. (Strelan, Osborn, & Palmer, 2020; Tan, Yue, & Fu, 2017)

This is important as variables such as engagement suggest a Goldilocks conundrum where too high of an engagement expectation cannot be maintained or achieved. Too low of an engagement expectation breeds boredom, incessant procrastination, and even higher levels of disengagement. Both the suddenly online and online environments would benefit from finding an optimal engagement criterion. However, that would necessitate

the free exploration of high and low engagement failures. Past online research rarely focuses on classroom failures. Perhaps the suddenly online phenomena will provide appropriately received opportunity. While faculty and students experience non-optimum situations on a routine basis, their lack of proliferation in research seems abnormally rare. Not all the ways indicated in first findings will be productive, predominate, or even possible paths for future education stakeholders. However, it is that recognition and realization, provided by some of the wayfinding scholars themselves, that will help others to empirically choose more judiciously.

Authentic Suddenly Online Scholarship

What this journal provides in this regard are research findings through various lenses reflecting administrative, faculty, and student perspectives. These encompass a number of contexts including crisis management, faculty training, course delivery, and student experiences. A summary of the journal's offerings is loosely organized into reflective groups that are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive of their contents.

Organizational Perspectives

Gigliotti's (2020) "Sudden Shifts to Fully Online: Perceptions of Campus Preparedness and Implications for Leading Through Disruption" has qualitative data concerning thought leadership in the early weeks of the suddenly online shift. This article synthesizes major themes from 18 different universities through a constant comparative method establishing predominant themes and issues that comprised resonant thinking just after the Pandemic was declared. It also gives a glimpse into perceptions of leadership thinking and dialectic tensions or paradoxes

that made issues so difficult and stress-inducing.

Donnelly, Miller, and Strawser (2020) present a crisis response view of a large university that had some degree of familiarity with natural disasters requiring changing syllabi and schedules on short notice. While this may make them less typical in foundational resilience, it served them well in providing a well-structured timeline that engages the suddenly online shift. Building on the work of Bruneau et al. (2003), performance measures were established at the technical, organizational, social, and economic levels. These used the 4 R resilience typology to set criteria for resourcefulness, redundancy, robustness, and rapidity. Directly applied to the organizational structure, 16 points are discussed in their ability to stem suddenly online stressors.

Teaching Strategies and Preparation

Petroski and Rogers (2020) benefited from an ongoing research program that juxtaposed traditional and gameful instructional approaches that not only exposed differences from the previous fall semester but also were able to capture how both fared going suddenly online. This study uses an interpretive microanalytic method to focus on students' identities. It details the precipitous increase in email communication as well as thematically categorizing them in terms of identity/emotion, task, administration, and content. Similarities and differences between gameful and traditional approaches are discussed with neither providing sufficient relief to the stresses of being suddenly online.

Leasure et al. (2020) provide exemplars of faculty and student preparatory courses before and during the Pandemic in an already-online program. These connect to

several pedagogical principles, including engagement, meaning and purpose, mindset & learning skills, self-knowledge, reflection, social integration, and personal validation. Connections are made to other courses within the program. While an extensive examination is made in terms of the impact of the training, the report infers a sense of immunity from Pandemic impact factors to the point of having increased satisfaction and retention rates.

Student-Teacher Interaction

Turner, Wang, and Reinsch (2020) take a student-centered view of how the shift from formal to informal (previously presented as Goffman's front stage and back stage) environments were provoked by the shift to being suddenly online. Common collisions expose several interest issues to most online situations, including virtual windows, distractions, invisibility, technical issues, no transitions, informality, motivation, and varying degrees of social presence.

Mollenkopf and Gaskills (2020) mixed-method study uses Ecological Systems Theory to suggest multiple suddenly online disruptions on life/environmental, instructional design, and instructor interaction factors. These are contextualized with several concerns that plagued students. Some of the positive learning takeaways are uncharacteristically qualified with the rare admission that "This is not necessarily a reflection that students actually learned more, but it may have been related to the combination of supports, flexibility, and a student reaction to simply wanting to "outwit the virus", which may not hold true under future semesters impacted by "COVID-fatigue." As such, it is not only appropriate but provides well thought out

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Fall 2020

ISSN: 1535-0975

cautionary advice for any first findings research.

The special issue of The Journal of Literacy and Technology captures a “moment in time” snapshot of research that was conducted during the suddenly online phenomena precipitated by the 2019 novel corona virus. This rapid response can be considered a time-capsule of insights by scholars who are in the midst of experiencing what they are studying. But it will also serve as among the first of scholarly considerations that will make sense of the changes that have affected us all

even as the context of this pandemic fades into history. To be sure, there is a great deal more research anticipated as scholars, and the world, continue to grapple with this unique situation. Such will hopefully further explore and integrate issues such as socio-economic impacts, use of immersive environments, virtual presence, inequities, and others. The rapid response of scholars is a beneficial first step towards such further inquiries reconsidering theory, best practices as well as the paradigmatic shift that is now revolutionizing education.

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Special Issue for Suddenly Online – Considerations of Theory, Research, and
Practice

Fall 2020

ISSN: 1535-0975

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