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Introduction to the fourth regular issue of JALT

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The end of the year – and the dubitable (more on this shortly) close of the decade – invites us to be more philosophical than we usually allow ourselves to be in the hustle-and-bustle of the everyday lives of teachers. It is indeed debatable whether the end of 2019 marks the end of a decade. By the time you read these lines, the 2020s may or may not have started, even when applying the Gregorian calendar (and not another calendar, for instance, the Chinese, Islamic or Thai solar calendar, to mention but a few). The year 1 BC was followed by 1 AD (shockingly, there was no year 0 Anno Domini), and as a consequence, the third millennium and 21st century started in 2001, rather than in 2000. While mathematically, the new decade should only start in 2021, convention tells us that 1 January, 2020, marks the beginning of the new decade. And while we write these lines in the old decade, the jury is still out how to call the 2010s – the ‘tens’, ‘twenty-tens’, ‘two-thousand-tens’ or even ‘teens’, ‘teenies’, ‘teensies’, ‘tensies’, or ‘ten-sions’. Time will tell.

If a simple matter like the above calendrical confusion already seems less-than-certain, uncertainty is certainly something that engulfs more complex matters. Falsification has shattered gospel truths. Today, we know that not all swans are white, but people in the Old World certainly thought so till Australia and her black swans were discovered. Inductive reasoning and generalising have long become problematic, knowledge fragile, and Nassim Nicholas Taleb’s book *The black swan. The impact of the highly improbable* a celebrated bestseller.

Consider a farm animal like a turkey. Before the turkey eventually becomes a dish, it may well have believed that friendly humans looked after its best interests, prior to the – from the turkey’s, though not from the butcher’s, perspective – unexpected ‘black swan’ event of the day before Thanksgiving. In order to significantly differentiate ourselves from the turkey, we need to consider whether being fed proves that we are safe or confirms the danger of being turned into supper (Taleb, 2010). If you prefer a less gory illustration of the fundamental nonlinearity of life, Malcolm Gladwell (1996) offers tomato ketchup in a bottle: “None will come and the lot’ll”. The poor turkey’s demise also

teaches us to be wary of common sense (being fed connotes safety). As Einstein said, “common sense is nothing but a collection of misconceptions acquired by age eighteen” (cited in Taleb, 2007, p. 39).

Taleb (2010, p. 133) has issued the friendly advice “to shut down the television set”, “minimize time spent reading newspapers” and insulate ourselves from the toxicity of the world, with our improved well-being a welcome side benefit. Following this advice may free up some time for potentially more meaningful activities such as reading. While the collecting of books in form of a private library has occasionally been derided as commodity fetish, and book collectors are oftentimes queried as to how many of their numerous books they have actually read, it could be argued that unread books are at least as valuable as read ones. As we grow older and remain engaged in the continuous pursuit of cumulative knowledge, an ever-increasing number of unread books may stare menacingly at us.

While there is a tendency in research and teaching to devalue older literature, with ‘recent’ literature deemed more valuable and acceptable solely on the grounds of its relative novelty, academic work that has been produced in previous decades and centuries, including out-of-print books, delivers many surprises and contains innumerable treasures. It is also worth mentioning that historically, a large number of breakthroughs came from outside academia, with the names of intellectual giants such as Voltaire, Rousseau, Darwin, Freud and Mandelbrot merely representative for many others (Taleb, 2010). Consequently, we humbly propose a position of epistemic humility, where the world is opaque and appearances are deceiving, and we not only do not know the future, but also do not know much about the past. Our unread books – and also the uncounted writings that have never been published – may be considered as the important ‘unknowledge’ of an antilibrary (Taleb, 2010).

Some of our well-meaning and dear friends have suggested to measure the quality of a peer-reviewed journal by the number of rejections (as one of several measures). While we normally and truthfully hasten to assure them that we have

rejected quite a few contributions over the past two years – in as ‘developmental’ a way as possible – we may all wish to spare a thought for the ‘unknowledge’ in the antilibary. In the near future, computer-generated and ghost-written articles may be increasingly difficult to distinguish from original academic work. In the famous Turing Test, the computer is said to be intelligent if it can fool humans into believing that they are fellow humans. Reverse Turing Tests can be conducted by fooling humans to believe that texts were written by humans when in fact, they were constructed by computers. Monte Carlo generators, fed with suitable texts and using a method called recursive grammar, can randomise phrases, generating grammatically sound sentences that are utterly devoid of meaning, and entire papers can thus be generated (Taleb, 2007). On occasion, we have read student assignments that felt like Reverse Turing Tests, but were most probably produced by humans.

It is an editor’s ultimate nightmare to fall prey to an academic hoax, computer-generated or not. In a cause célèbre, Physics Professor Alan Sokal succeeded in publishing an academic parody in *Social Text*, an academic journal of postmodern cultural studies. Depending on one’s perspective, Sokal can be accused of having acted unethically by deceiving the journal’s editors (Ross & Robbins, 1996), or the journal’s quality assurance process can be focused upon and questioned: for instance, the journal editors could have avoided much public scrutiny by consulting a physicist during a peer-review process. Thus, editors of journals face the challenging, yet important, task to critically evaluate articles that – involuntarily or not; computer-generated or not – may contain “a mélange of truths, half-truths, quarter-truths, falsehoods, non sequiturs, and syntactically correct sentences that have no meaning whatsoever” (Sokal & Bricmont, 1998, pp. 268-269).

This brings us to the fourth issue of JALT of which we are – in a predictably biased fashion, like proud parents of a newborn – rather pleased with. The first two articles in the peer-reviewed section originate from EDU2019, an international educational conference that was charismatically led by our Editorial Board members Margarita Kefalaki and Fotini Diamantidaki – another outcome of this conference is JALT’s recently-published inaugural special issue (Diamantidaki & Kefalaki (Eds.), 2019).

The peer-reviewed section is opened with an outstanding contribution by Lydia Lymperis, in which she explores whether self-organised learning can empower the most marginalised schools of rural Greece, with special reference to the learning of English as a foreign language (EFL). Lydia Lymperis’s research on Self-organised Learning Environments (SOLEs) is ongoing, but early results are promising, and such a learning and teaching approach may also be applicable to other disadvantaged regions of the world. The article is of importance to those amongst us who have not given up on the potentially liberating and more equitability-creating applications of technology in conjunction with innovative learning and teaching approaches for the poor and underprivileged.

Robert J. Bonk’s eloquent contribution on technologically-enhanced pedagogies in professional writing continues the

near-inevitable ed-tech theme begun in Lydia Lymperis’s article and also emanates from the EDU2019 conference in Athens. Robert Bonk critically evaluates his vast experience as Professor of Professional Writing at Widener University (a private university with campuses in Pennsylvania and Delaware in the U.S.) and how pedagogy and technology can be change-partners for higher education.

Mark Wheaton, Brendan O’Connell and Giovanni Merola, in their contribution on the effectiveness of inter-teaching, provide international evidence from Australia and Vietnam for this innovative learning and teaching approach in the discipline of accountancy. Inter-teaching is a student-centric approach that differs from the traditional lecture-cum-tutorial model and essentially consists of conversations between two students each with the objective of enhancing students’ self-learning, listening, reflection, feedback and critical thinking skills. Wheaton and co-authors present detailed quantitative research findings which, in terms of student outcomes, compare the effects of inter-teaching versus the lecture approach. The results appear to be very much in favour of inter-teaching, and this is certainly a method worthy of further exploration.

After the previous contributions explored English as a Foreign Language, Professional Writing and Accountancy, Paola Magni, Jolene Anthony and Raja Zuha focus on yet another discipline, Forensic Science. Crime drama series such as ‘Crime Scene Investigation’ (CSI) have popularised the discipline and led to the ‘CSI-effect’ that can sway jurors). Paola Magni and co-authors explore Forensic Science and student mobility programmes within the first Forensic Science international curriculum between Australia and Malaysia and discover much potential in such international and intercultural projects in Forensic Science education.

The above-described peer-reviewed section is followed by a special section, guest-edited by Stephen Shukaitis. As a partial outcome of a symposium on Pedagogy and Play in Teaching Today (co-organised by the University of Essex and Kaplan Higher Education Singapore) that was led by our Editorial Board member Stephen Shukaitis, he curated five pieces, including his introductory piece that sets the tone. An important part of this section is a fifth peer-reviewed contribution to this issue by Bina Rai, Tan Hui Shin and Leo Chen Huei on “Bringing play back into the biology classroom with the use of gamified virtual lab simulations”. Bina Rai (an Editorial Board member of JALT) and co-authors evaluate the integration of gamified laboratory simulations and Virtual Reality (VR) technologies into the biology curriculum in order to better engage their Gen Z students. Rai et al. conducted a sophisticated experiment with three groups of students (a desktop VR, an immersive VR and a control group) at Singapore University of Technology & Design (SUTD) and it is hoped that more such exemplary research will be conducted by the authors themselves as well as other researchers.

Stephen Shukaitis led and edited two fascinating conversations – which form the first two out of a total three interviews of this JALT issue. Unusually, both conversations are *trialogues*, one together with Tan Shao Han and Allana Yeo (from gaming consultancy and design house Curious

Chimeras) about their cutting-edge work involving games and education, and another with Juliana Lim (an arts manager) and Kenny Leck (a publisher and bookshop co-founder) about strategies for artists, also in the city-state of Singapore. The guest-edited section is completed by an insightful piece by Yeo Xi-Wei, who provides some practical and thoughtful advice on how gamification can contribute to learning.

In past issues of JALT, members of the editorial team had interviewed Bror Saxberg (Saxberg, Harris & Rudolph, 2018) and John Biggs (Biggs, Harris & Rudolph, 2019). This tradition of interviewing world-renowned educational thought leaders is continued in the present issue with an extensive interview of Stephen Brookfield. Professor Brookfield was most generous with his time and apart from a 90-minute interview via Skype (the time difference was 13 hours), also answered additional questions via email. Brookfield's massive contributions to Higher Education and Adult Education include 19 books on adult learning, teaching, critical thinking, discussion methods, critical theory and teaching race. While Brookfield's work demonstrates a remarkable continuity in terms of emphasising the needs for critical thinking and democratisation, the wide-ranging interview also outlines some notable changes in Brookfield's focus through the years, such as a turn to self-directed learning (in the 1980s), a focus on power dynamics (in the 1990s), a theoretical turn (heavily influenced by Critical Theory, at the turn of the century) and a turn towards the importance of race relations (in the noughties).

The ed-tech section features two contributions by JALT Editorial Board members. Samson Tan reflects on the rise of immersive learning and sheds some much-needed light on learning across the reality-virtuality continuum and how Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR) and Mixed Reality (MR) differ from one another. Rob Burton reviews the Nearpod (a cloud-based application that lets the facilitator ensure that students' devices are in sync with each other during class and learning objectives can be achieved via co-operation) and shares his extensive experience with the software from his interactive classes.

Like the ed-tech section, the informed journalistic section contains two articles. There is Kara Jung's entertaining and light-hearted contribution on learning English as a "misspelling minefield" (that is not helped by programmes – or programs – that will further confuse learners). And Justin O'Brien (a repeat contributor to JALT) provides us with a remarkable instructional piece on giving and receiving feedback in the form of a role play exercise.

The final section contains eight book reviews. Michael D. Evans, the Chairman of our Editorial Board, reviews a third book (two previous ones were reviewed in earlier issues of JALT) in Bloombury's excellent leadership in higher education series – this time, it is an edited volume on *Exploring consensual leadership in higher education: Co-operation, collaboration and partnership*. Anna Mihaylov enthusiastically reviews Dede, Richards and Saxberg's *Learning Engineering for online education. Theoretical contexts and design-based examples*. John Hulpke delivers a refreshingly idiosyncratic review of Wlodkowski and Ginsberg's fourth edition of *Enhancing adult motivation to learn: A comprehensive guide for teaching all adults*. Roy, Baker and Hamilton's third edition of the Cambridge University Press-published *Teaching the arts: Early childhood and primary education* comes highly recommended by reviewer Arati Mhatre. Alevtina Sedochenko (another repeat contributor) has two reviews to her name – on Kapur and Ghose's edited volume *Dynamic learning spaces in education* and Dillon and co-authors' *Redesigning learning spaces* – as does Jürgen Rudolph, who reviews the second edition of Brookfield's *Becoming a critically reflective teacher* and a volume edited by Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu on *Decolonising the university*.

The year 2019 has been a busy one; it saw us co-organising five symposia on applied learning and teaching, and participating in the afore-mentioned EDU2019 conference in Athens and also the *Teaching Matters* conference organised by the University of Tasmania (and our Editorial Board members Joey Crawford and Bill Baker). The undersigned were also most fortunate to be amongst the winners of the 2019 Kaplan Way Awards.

We owe very big Thank You's to our fantastic Editorial Board that has been further strengthened and become more diverse in 2019; Associate Professor Rhys Johnson, COO and Provost for Kaplan Singapore, for his continued faith in us; our esteemed colleagues Mike Christie, John Matthew, Nelson Ang, Lilian Ng, Desmond Teo, Marty Windle, Femmy Lais and other wonderful colleagues (too many to mention) at Kaplan Singapore for their kind co-operation and support; once again, our esteemed Editorial Board member Nigel Starck for his critical proofreading of parts of the issue (all remaining errors are solely our fault!); and our academic colleagues worldwide for their continued sharing of the JALT initiative with their networks. This is also a good opportunity to thank Chris Harris for his important involvement in the founding of JALT and his contributions to the first three issues. He has since moved on to greener pastures and we wish him all the very best! Lastly, we continue to welcome all feedback and ideas, and we hope to bring JALT to greater heights in 2020 and beyond!

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