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## Editorial 26(2)

## Beauty is in the eye of the beholder

Roger Atkinson

To begin with, there is a logical explanation for the adoption of a "literary heading" for this editorial, instead of an "educational technology research" heading. During 13-14 April 2010, ODLAA's email list for members [1] distributed some messages concerning recent advice from Thomson Reuters [2] that ODLAA's journal, *Distance Education* [3], had been accepted for indexing in *Social Sciences Citation Index* [4]. The home page for *Distance Education* has a new line, "Now ISI listed!" [3], and in one email list posting the term "holy grail" appeared. I felt moved to point out to ODLAA members that:

> The Thomson Reuters (was ISI) 'Impact Factor' used to be a holy grail, getting much influence, or far too much influence according to some of us, from its claim to select only the "best" journals for its citation analyses.[5]

A brief guide to the evidence has been published [6, 7], and my posting also cited one of my favourite criticisms of the Thomson Reuters 'Impact Factor', the article *Impact factor wars: Episode V - The Empire Strikes Back* [8]. With the *Holy Grail* and *The Empire Strikes Back* in mind, the time seemed appropriate to explore some literary metaphors:

> So the goalposts have shifted. Thus IMHO we need to change focus, move away from 'holy grails' and look instead for 'ERA dragon slayers'. The ERA's 2010 iteration seems to have downgraded Australian based journals relative to the American or UK/Europe based multinationals. We need to focus attention on research questions of the form, "What is the correlation between the real merit of a research work and the tier ranking of the journal in which the work was published?"; "What is the correlation between the real merit of a research work and its citation count according to *Scopus*?"; "What is the evidence base for the ERA's application of journalmetrics to research funding matters?", i.e. the potential "ERA dragon slayer" questions.[5]

Why explore literary metaphors? Well, we seem to have made little progress in applying educational research methods [6, 7] to gain an understanding of how the 2010 version of the ARC/ERA *Tier* rankings [9, 10] was derived. Perhaps we will have better luck with literary methods? Though, upon reflection, we recognised that "ERA dragon slayers" lacked an interpretative focus, hence the adoption here of a



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very recognisable literary phrase, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" [11]. This has an interpretative focus, and as indicated by one source [11], can be linked to Shakespeare's *Love's Labours Lost* [12] (it's always safe to quote Shakespeare!). Taking some literary liberties and making a small adaptation:

> Good Lord ARC, my beauty, though but mean,
> Needs not the painted flourish of your praise:
> Beauty is bought by judgement of the eye,
> Not utter'd by base sale of bureaucratic tiers
> [after W. Shakespeare, 12]

Will "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" be a productive interpretative framework for the ARC/ERA *Tier* rankings? The answers will take some time to develop, because there are quite a large number of "beholders", even though the ranking of scholarly journals is a very specialised field with a relatively small number of researchers. Anyway, to "Begin at the beginning…" [13, 14], let us start with Elbeck and Mandernach (2009) [15]. Other "beholders" will have to wait until future editorials!

Elbeck and Mandernach (2009) [15] examined 46 scholarly journals pertaining to computer mediated learning, using metrics for popularity, importance, prestige, and overall rankings for each journal. First the good news, from AJET's perspective. Their *Table 5: Overall Ranking of Scholarly CML Journals (N = 46)* places AJET well ahead of all of the five *Tier A* educational technology journals listed in AJET Editorial 26(1), and also ahead of the *Tier B* journals therein. Proponents of the *Tiers* ranking could say that Elbeck & Mandernach's (2009) methodology is suspect, to which *Tiers* antagonists can retort that if you cannot publish your own methodology, you are not eligible to criticise a competing methodology.

Now for the "howevers". Elbeck & Mandernach's (2009) 'top five' (in Table 5) is rather perplexing, as one journal has ceased (*Innovate* [16]), one has changed recently

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from open access to closed (JALN [17]), one is closed access (AJDE [18]), and one (*eLearning Papers* [19]) was not on the AJET Editors' list of 'journals to watch' [20] (now added, though noting that *eLearning Papers* is not really international, being very 'Eurocentric'). In Elbeck and Mandernach's (2009) [15] 'top five', the highest *Tier* ranking is B for IRRODL [21], with the other four being C ranked, except that *eLearning Papers* [19] is not *Tiers* listed.

To probe a bit deeper, the poor ranking in Elbeck and Mandernach (2009) [15] for the *Tiers* 'top five' namely BJET, C&E, ALT-J, JCAL and ETR&D (all *Tier A*, see [6] for references) is also perplexing. Elbeck and Mandernach's (2009) Table 5 ranks these journals in the range 31 to 45 in a field of 46, compared with AJET ranked 10. Considering the individual metrics, BJET, ALT-J and ETR&D fared poorly in *popularity* (Elbeck & Mandernach, 2009: Table 1), whilst C&E, ALT-J and JCAL fared poorly in *prestige* (Elbeck & Mandernach, 2009: Table 4). We need to note that the *prestige* metric may suffer from low reliability owing to the relatively small sample, N=23 (useable response rate 50%). However, the most important caveat concerns the use of *Google PageRank* data (Elbeck & Mandernach, 2009: Table 1). Their "zero" values of *PageRank* for BJET, C&E and ETR&D seem rather odd.

So we need to examine *Google PageRank* [22] more closely. These days website managers and researchers into these matters obtain *PageRank* data via a third party service, for example Elbeck and Mandernach (2009) used *Top25Web* [23]. They did not report upon *PageRank* data obtained from other, similar services, for example *Page Rank Checker* [24], *CheckPageRank.Net* [25], *Free Page Rank Checker* [26], *PageRankTool.net* [27], and *Check SEO* [28]. The problem is that the services cannot be relied upon to deliver consistent results free from spurious values, such as "zero" values of *PageRank* for BJET, C&E and ETR&D. Table 1 below illustrates this lack of consistency, and also indicates that investigators may need to check a number of URLs for a journal, and not just the current home page. Also for investigators, please resist the temptation to use only the instrument that gives results closest to the "desired result"!



MoodleMoot AU 2010, Melbourne, 11-14 July. http://moodlemoot.org.au/

Table 1: *Google PageRank* values returned by six services

| Service (a) | Journal | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | BJET | C&E | ETR&D | ALT-J | AJET |
| Top25Web [23] (b) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Page Rank Checker [24] | 6 | 7 | 4(e) | 6 | 7 |
| CheckPageRank.Net [25] (c) | 8 | 8 | 7 | 8 | 6 |
| Free Page Rank Checker [26] | 6 | 7 | nr(d) | nr(d) | 7 |
| PageRankTool.net [27] | 0 | 0 | 4(e) | 6 | 7 |
| Check SEO [28] (b) | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

*Notes for Table 1:*
a. Results obtained 18 April 2010. See references [6] or [20] for journal names and URLs.
b. Top25Web [23] and Check SEO [28] appear to be non-functional (returning only "zero" values).
c. CheckPageRank.Net gives higher values because it returns a *PageRank* for the publisher's domain (i.e. it includes all of the publisher's journals rather than the nominated journal).
d. Some returns were "no rank" (nr).
e. For ETR&D these values are for the pre-2006 site (http://www.aect.org/Intranet/Publications/etrd/5302.asp) because the 2006 onwards site (http://www.springerlink.com/content/119965/) returned "zero".

Table 2 records a preliminary check on the *popularity* metric as defined by Elbeck and Mandernach (2009), using just one service, *Check SEO* [29]. In this case, as indicated in Table 2, it is possible to compare the third party service with a *Google search* command. No discrepancies were found, but of course this does not indicate anything conclusive about the utility of *Link popularity* relative to *PageRank*. Table 2 is a work in progress and to date it indicates only that there is some degree of stability in rankings over a period of 15 months. There are potentially interesting suggestions of clues to be examined further, for example is JALN going into decline as a result of its change from open access top closed access; why is *eLearning Papers* sustaining a high level; and what is the reason for JCAL's marked movement?

Table 2: Some *Link popularity* comparisons on different dates

| Journal (a) | Elbeck and Mandernach (28 Jan 2009) (b) | AJET Editorial 26(2) (18 Apr 2010) (c) |
|---|---|---|
| eLearning Papers [19] | 14.83% | 868 |
| JALN | 8.11% | 147 |
| AJET | 3.46% | 199 |
| ET&S | 2.49% | 186 |
| JCAL | 1.95% | 310 |
| C&E | 0.57% | 48 |
| BJET | 0.46% | 84 |
| ETR&D | 0.00% | 0 |
| ALT-J | 0.00% | 12 |

*Notes for Table 2:*
a. Results obtained 18 April 2010. See [6] or [20] for journal names and URLs.
b. Selected values (in %) from column "Google share", in Table 1, Elbeck and Mandernach (28 January 2009).
c. Values obtained from *Check SEO* [29] (raw numbers: "how many incoming links there are to your site"). Returns were checked for agreement with *Google search* commands of the form *link:URL* (e.g. *link:www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/*) and no discrepancies were found.

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With a little reluctance, we have to recognise that as "beholders", Elbeck and Mandernach's (2009) representation of "beauty" is perhaps a little flawed. There are problems with methodology and in the details of their methods. We are reluctant to be anything more than mildly critical, because AJET fared very well according to their metrics, and as suggested earlier, any presentation of methodologies for the ranking of scholarly journals has to be better than what amounts to apparently no presentation at all, as seems to be the case with the ARC's current *Tiers*.

In their concluding sentence, Elbeck and Mandernach (2009) seemed to look forward to:

> … a definitive list and ranking of journals that will doubtlessly help faculty and administrators judge the relative value of publications for promotion and tenure purposes. [15]

Is that dangerous territory? Given that it's not hard to demonstrate that "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder", is the idea of "a definitive list and ranking of journals" some kind of medieval *Holy Grail*? What some of us are really trying to do is educate "faculty and administrators" about the counter-productive aspects (or the risks, or even the folly) of excessive reliance on "journalmetrics".

Let's conclude with a "beautiful" view from one more "beholder", David Jones [30] from Central Queensland University. We thank David warmly for his very kind words, and hope that his recommendation, written in 2009 when AJET was a *Tier A* journal, will not change as a result of AJET's demotion to *Tier B* in the 2010 list [6]:

> For my immediate purposes, it looks like AJET is a good fit. A journal that is open access. [30]

Also looking on the bright side, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" and the ranking of journals create a very sustainable source for AJET Editorials. At a consumption rate of two "beholders" per Editorial (or three if you count ARC/ERA's *Tiers*), the supply of Editorial material in this genre is assured for many years!

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*AJET Production Editor and AJET Editor*

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