Editorial: Recent references

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In addition to editing Education & Self Development I am on the reviewer panel for other journals in the field. I never begrudge the work involved in reviewing: it gives me insights into what other researchers are thinking, long before their work reaches the stage of being published. It also gives me a way of moderating the reviewing activities of E&SD so that we are matching the standards of other journals.

This piece was prompted by a discussion between the authors and reviewers of an article submitted to one of these journals. It concerned the recency of the references and I recalled that on several occasions over the past few months, submissions to E&SD had been criticised because many of the references were ‘old’ – that is, published more than ten years ago. It is a simple matter to read through the list of references and count the number that are more than, say, ten years old, but that does not necessarily mean that they do not have value. In contrast to high energy particle physics, our field of education and psychology moves relatively slowly.

There is metric used by publishers called the ‘half-life’ of an article. This is the time taken to accumulate half of the citations that will ever be made to the article. For example, if an article receives 100 citations, then its half-life is the time to achieve 50 citations. In many branches of physics or medicine, the half-life may be as short as 6 months; in educational technology it is about 5 years. In the wider fields of education and psychology, it will be much, much longer. We can all think of educational psychologists whose work is cited decades after it was written.

We need to think carefully about why we cite the work of earlier authors. It may be because it supports the way in which we have carried out the research, or supports our fundings. It may be that our results refute earlier findings. In neither case is the age of the publication relevant. A long bibliography of recent, but largely irrelevant papers is not helpful to the argument. It only demonstrates that the authors have read widely (but not necessarily wisely)!

The question is why ‘old’ literature is not considered worthy of the attention of the current generation of researchers and why reviewers look for recent references in the bibliography. The answer, I suggest, is two-fold. In part it is a result of the cyclic nature of our research, particularly where it involves technology. As each generation of technology emerges it is accompanied by a new generation of advocates and researchers who supersede those who worked with the obsolescent technologies. As they leave the field, they too often take with them their experience and expertise. We are not very good at maintaining our community memory of what has gone before and so we are condemned to repeat history.

However, I think this is a symptom of a deeper, systemic problem. We all use the internet to help us in our literature searches we lean forward to our keyboards and call up Google Scholar or Thompson Web of Knowledge. But what if it isn’t there? It is a characteristic of these searches that they tend to list the most recent papers first. There is, of course, a major problem in that they will (usually) only discover material that is available on the web. The search engines cannot find stuff that is not there.
In 2007 a colleague and I undertook a project on behalf of the UK funding agency, to review the research they were finding in the light of work that had been carried out an published some ten years earlier (Rushby & Seabrook, 2008). The research revealed that the majority of their funding went on projects that were repeating research carried out earlier and that it was not taking us beyond what was already known and published. The underlying factor was that the work had been published prior to the widespread use of the internet, and was not visible to the search engines.

The moral of this story is that we should not be quick to dismiss older references or to judge papers by the number of recent references. Look beyond the date to the relevance of the reference and remember that, not everything that can be found on the internet is useful - and not everything that is useful can be found on the internet.

References