

REFLECTIONS ON THE TEACHING & LEARNING ONLINE APPROACH: A CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGE? OR A THREAT?

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Abstract

An academic starting work in a new environment is challenging. In addition recent technological developments and advancements mean we are all having to change our lifestyles, our habits and even our behaviour. Behaviourism where different behaviours are adopted according to the circumstances is the approach I try to adopt in my teaching which is mainly on postgraduate courses. I adopt the same approach for my everyday life. However, it is hard to say identify what types of behaviour I will develop as technological advancement influence my behaviour in both my personal and professional life. What I do know is that my behaviour will have to change and I recognise a need for equilibrium between my online and offline personality.

Keywords: Teaching and learning, online approach, challenges

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It is now acknowledged that in the future the majority of teaching and learning and indeed our personal life may be online. As a result of this change our behaviours will have to change. We will all have to adapt to this change and possibly even develop new behaviours towards our colleagues, friends and even family as we establish online relationships. It is difficult to say if our actual personalities will change but we will have to adapt our behaviour to the new environment. This process will not be easy or straightforward and how we, as academics, will have to change how we express ourselves in the online classroom. This may even mean, as a university teacher, I will have to reinvent myself and re-examine what motivate me because one of the things myself and my colleagues find most satisfying is the face to face interaction with students. It is difficult to see how this interactivity and staff/student relationship, that is developed over time in the physical classroom, will transfer to the online environment. Students will develop different learning styles online so academic staff will need to training in all aspects of media education such as training in the new pedagogy, developing online materials and using the new media. Previously digital media was only a facilitator or support for face to face teaching. Online tutors will not be able to identify individual student's learning styles easily. However, it has been recognised students have different learning styles so this may mean learning customisation may have to be considered. This customisation will require a different set of principles to those required for traditional learning and this may mean a move towards a new more equilibrated educational system which deals mainly with online personas rather than the learner or the student as traditionally is defined. Motivation will also be a consideration and, because the students will be used to the technology, the main concern will be with the actual content itself and the approach to education rather than the (online) delivery method. Basically, the motivation will be a combination of sounds, music and educational material gathering all the experiences that

the learner may have both from the online and online world. It is generally accepted education should be learner focused and this should be the case irrespective of the teaching or the learning environment. The main challenge for the teacher is to ensure the learner is at the centre of the education experience. The demographics and the diversity of the learner may however, stipulate the overall approach of the education experience. In addition the evolution and increased use of the internet has also meant learners have developed different learning styles. The age of the learner will also vary as will the different capabilities or skills he or she has. Overall, the learner is a knowledge co-producer due to the acquired knowledge he/she has from different sources academic or not reliable or unreliable. As well as having to take into account the different learner's profile the teacher must also be aware of the fact that learning devices or the media that supports learning are also changing. It still has to be established if such changes support or obstruct learning. Contemporary learners do not simply read from books they use ipads or smart phones or other 'useful' devices in everyday life. Education, for them, is an extension of their everyday life and such devices can therefore be used to support their education or learning. This should mean we can consider if there can be a change in the way education can be delivered or even is delivered. The delivery of educational content in the near future will be digital and already digital sources like eBooks are popular. Again, are we prepared as tutors to support this? Is educational research oriented towards this issues that very soon will arise? We need to consider the impact such changes in attitude and student expectations have on education and we should try to develop different approaches to delivery as soon as possible. In addition the different students learning styles will also have to be considered. An interesting issue is how we map this customization of learning styles to an online context and environment. Additionally, we have to consider the tutor training necessary to achieve the different educational goals and objectives in these new environments. What also needs to be considered are the ethical or moral considerations - is learning in such an environment socially responsible? Will such an educational system create learners who become more socially responsible through the process of education or do the learners need face to face contact to develop social responsibility? I believe that online education will be very much in vogue in the near future and I am very optimistic that the contribution to this new environment will come from the challenges we will all face. Such challenges include having to adjust to different types of learners and from a different 'classroom' environment which may include thousands of students, but the dialogue will be one to one.

The major players in this game are the institutions putting forward strategies that are meeting with educational demand. We in the UK are experiencing a universal globalisation of the education system mainly from students European universities. Basically, universities are looking to attract more and more students from all disciplines in different ways. Thus, e learning will become a pivotal tool to attract students from all over the world. The different university players will now have to consider how to market themselves to a global audience. Individual universities will now have to consider, and understand the importance of, branding and marketing to ensure they can compete in what will become a global market. The delivery of education will have to meet the student's expectations. In addition, the traditional student' profile is changing and there are now a significant number of mature students registered on online courses. This indicates that a new perspective on education is needed and even a reconstruction of education provision as a whole. New curricula will have to be developed and the existing provision will have to be redesigned according to the needs discussed above. This new digital era will mean universities will have to take a wider approach on the topic of 'how do we deliver' and 'how do we develop the existing provision?' Both the students and the educators need to do much more to develop a new online mentality. It will be necessary to revisit our attitude towards the ways and means of educational delivery. The existing provision of the educational material is assumed to be through a Virtual Learning

Environment (VLE) such as Blackboard. Such VLEs will have to be further developed in order to serve more diverse audiences who expect a more sophisticated resource. Overall, what needs to be considered is who has access to the different material and the education package that universities are offering because the development of new media will mean other education providers may enter the market.

Global changes in the technological environment will have an influence on the sector. There is a question, however, to be asked – why developing countries try to adopt or even mimic what developed countries are doing – even if it is not appropriate. There seems to be a universal trend that educational institutions are trying to be in vogue by adapting practises from the higher education castor in developed countries online learning or teaching is an example. This this phenomenon has to change and each educational provider should feel able to follow develop in its own particular direction. There is potential for all education providers to develop according to the different social needs and wants of the environment or society in which they operate. It could be argues that imitation actually kills education or at least limits it. However, no higher education providers, even world class ones, can or should resist to any of these changes. Such changes have to be adopted incrementally and it has to be understood technological advancements cannot be a panacea or a remedy for social or educational deficits. The influences that the sector may face are coming from this present and future transformational period when education will be delivered electronically. This is true for short courses or programmes as well as the traditional degree programmes. The impact will be great and the results or possible outcomes are still under discussion. The major concern here will be who (which institutions) are capable of dealing with this change in an environment which is already prepared for the transition. This transformation will have a strong impact on all aspects of our lives but the changes will be positive and can lead to us adopting new lifestyles. Our vocabulary will be different and will use technical terms and definitions. The social transformation also will also force us to redefine our everyday lives. The challenge will be keeping the same values and the students receiving online education will still uphold traditional education values. The redefinition of educational material is an issue for academia will have to consider, for example, the role of the eBook and the other additional material that students will require. As a result of online education, and the fact that students are familiar with it, academics may consider the use of social media. This is an approach that needs very careful consideration. However, there would be some cases though in which social media could be adopted for educational purposes, these cases are mentioned below:

- Social media may not be appropriate for educational purposes, unless providers develop specific social media tools for educational use.
- If delivery using social media is appropriate educationally then our educational platforms need to be redefined.
- Will the learning experience be equivalent to the face to face real life learning experience? What actually will students learn? If the platform is adopted then these questions have to be asked because the learning may be different and it may be based on the skills students may have want to acquired rather than a theoretical knowledge.
- The provision of this new social media approach will be an issue. Traditional educators or educational institutions may still wish to use a VLE platform. Will this still be possible or will this contemporary approach seem outdated.

The provision of online teaching is a current trend and a number of institutions are trying to adopt it. One of the major issues that such universities, and other education providers, have to face is the legal framework impacting on this new educational approach. One major requirement is the platform and the material's accessibility to all the students no matter where they are or who they are or what the student's needs are. The material has to be accessible. Again the tutors skills in the area of accessibility have to updated and developed as

well as the tutor skills in actually using the technology. If programmes are going to be offered globally then the development of online provision may also require people skills in languages. This is even if the course themselves are being offered in English. Tutors will need to have a more global approach to education than the one they have now, and this will make the education look very much different from what it is at the moment. This transition may be relatively straight forwards. For example, PhD students today are much different than the ones in the past. They have a better all-round education; they are more knowledgeable about international affairs. The only issue is that they tutors manage to deliver a quality educational product comparable to the product that is delivered in the physical classroom. Gamification (the use of the students drive for self-expression, competition and achievement) will also be desirable when different institutions deliver online courses or programmes. I believe this approach is interesting and should be considered. Working at a university, famous for its computer games department I have noticed that gamification may be the educational language of the future. Students are motivated to learn using computer games especially when the heroes in the games are well known to them they are or familiar with them. This new educational approach will indicate to students that knowledge acquisition is something they have experience of albeit acquired during the fun of playing a computer game. The issue here is how we separate gaming or fun concept from the educational concept when students are required to play computer games to acquire knowledge. It needs to be clear that games are used for educational purposes only. If online education and including the use of educational games is to be developed the researchers in education will have to take an interest in what we will call a digital or digitalised education. Again the legal issues have to be resolved and copyrights and IP will have to be considered. Students, at the moment, experience different challenges when going online for educational or other purposes. In addition EU regulations relating to data protection and the use of cookies may be a barrier.

Being able to track what students are viewing or visiting may be a breach of privacy and may rely basic on the power rule meaning that the one having the power can make the others obey. Privacy online is an issue for all online providers and will especially be a concern for educational institutions providing online content and they must get advice on the latest regulations. Access to research is also an issue that universities will have to consider if they are going online.

Currently, we have created an online environment where there is open access to research publications. The linkage between online education and scientific sources will be of a major importance in the future and this issue cannot be resolved by either academia itself or by the government itself. A holistic solution must be implemented but the issues must be very carefully considered as it will form the basis of the main guidelines for the new digitalised era the new educational approach.

Conclusion

Online teaching and learning is a reality which will develop in the future. The reasons for this expansion are not to be discussed at this point. This revolutionary approach for education bringing different people together will result in the near future in a different educational environment and a totally different pedagogical and educational approach. The map of this new area should and will include different options for different people. Change major and minor changes will take place in the educational field. The most important ones will be the changes that tutors will need to face such as how to develop and manage the online classroom or how to manage, motivate and support a multi-ethnic audience with different backgrounds, who have different needs and wants or even different aims and different views about education experience they want (and will be paying for). In the near future we will have to assume different learners will be more sophisticated, more knowledgeable and much more technically literate (even more so than the tutor delivering the product). Such learners will be more demanding in terms of the support material they require and the actual

educational delivery, these learners will also want more skills building rather than knowledge building. The learners of the future will be the heavy users of different social media and other online facilities that the Internet offers, such learners will be different from the students we are used to – they will be hidden behind the screen of a PC, laptop or ipad. Tutors will have to take all this into consideration and will have to develop strategies for addressing the issues.

The higher education sector is having to face such challenges and will have to be orientated towards a more business approach when trying to attract and retain students. Institutions will need to decide what type of educational strategy that wishes to follow they will be traditional or innovative. These answers will have to be answered by the senior managers who run our universities and who make decisions regarding the future of higher education. All institutions will be looking for the most efficient option while trying to be a global player. Finally, the legal framework impacting on online teaching, education and training will have to be considered. Academic and institutional traditions will change and evolve and the open source providers (such as coursera) may become important and academics could upload research or other material appropriate to academic life and standards.

The most interesting thing in this case would be then to reassure all parties involved that their work will be:

1. Respected
2. Honoured
3. Appreciated

And I am still wondering are we prepared?

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