LEARNING TO TEACH ONLINE

Why is online teaching important?

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Aims and overview

This episode provides a brief overview of how our increasingly digitally networked world is changing the way we communicate and learn. It examines the benefits and challenges of online teaching, and how higher education is responding and adapting to these changes. We hope to paint a broad picture of the shifting educational landscape and to contextualise the need for the Learning to Teach Online project to help individual teachers play their own part in this.

Written by Karin Watson

"**The way we learn in our society is based around communication, and the way society operates, is that more and more of our communication is digital.**"*(Professor Ian Mcdonald)*

"**...the Internet is changing the way knowledge work is done in society.**"*(Professor Matthew Allen)*

"**One of the most obvious benefits is the flexibility of delivery...**"*(Professor Kerri-Lee Krause)*

"**It enables students to have a more diverse learning experience...**"*(Tess Dryza)*

Why is online teaching important?

The Internet has significantly changed how we communicate with one another as well as how we access, share and facilitate information. Many of us are already familiar with Internet-based communication technologies and have comfortably integrated it into our daily life. Understanding the place of online learning in digitally facilitated social interaction, professional practice and education is becoming increasingly important.

While online education generally started with the use of technology as a support tool to conventional teaching methods – such as whiteboards, overhead projectors and word processors – it has since developed into a process or pedagogy. The issue is no longer one of how to use technology to teach, but one where teachers acknowledge the way the world is already developing, and understand the significance of online literacy and the role that collaboration and online engagement plays in student learning and their future workplace environment.

Software and technology changes very rapidly, and it can be difficult to keep up with these developments. It is important therefore to focus on understanding effective pedagogical strategies for online teaching rather than the technology itself - which can be applied, adapted and transferred between various software platforms and disciplines.

In many higher education programs the face-to-face campus environment is now accompanied by an online component. This raises new challenges and opportunities for both students and teachers, and achieving the right balance between the face-to-face and online delivery can be difficult. It is essential that these are not regarded as separate entities, but rather an all-encompassing learning environment that is carefully integrated and aligned with the learning outcomes for each class, course or program.

Key benefits of teaching online

- *Increased flexibility of time:* Learning and teaching can occur at times that are more convenient and productive for both students and teachers. Students can work at their own pace within a given framework and the online learning/teaching engagement process can be broken into smaller more frequent portions of time, with an opportunity for reflection in-between. Online education is not restricted by differing international time zones

- *Increased flexibility of location:* Learning and teaching can take place in any location (home, office, while commuting, coffee shop) and can include students and teachers from diverse geographical locations

- *Context:* Online education gives learning a new relevance to contemporary society and professional and industry practice

- *Information sharing:* Online education provides opportunities to access and share information more easily and readily. Teachers are able to join online communities of practice based on their area of interest rather than their geographic location

- *Online resources:* Online education provides access to a greater depth and breadth of resources and information

- *Diverse and enriching experience :* Online education can enhance the student learning experience by providing opportunities for cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural and/or cross-campus collaborations. This learning experience can occur at a local, national or international level, and can be enriched by increased

interaction and engagement, peer feedback, and group work skills

- *Access, equity & disability: Online delivery provides a mechanism for equal opportunity amongst students and teachers living with a disability, or who have accessibility difficulties that restrict their ability to attend a face-to-face class*

- *Digital information literacy: Online learning develops digital literacy skills that are increasingly required in contemporary society and workplace environments*

- *Administration: Online education can streamline some administrative aspects of teaching.*

Key restrictions, limitations or considerations

- *Access to technology: In some instances students and teachers may be limited in their regular access to reliable or appropriate technology. Several people may be sharing a computer or mobile learning tool within one household, or may rely on using computers on campus or in a public place (eg public library, Internet cafe, etc). Students or teachers may also only have limited access to required software*

- *Access to the Internet: Not all students and teachers have regular or reliable access to the Internet. In many cases Internet access may be limited to dial-up speed, or there may be a capped monthly usage on their Internet which can restrict their ability to access or engage with the information*

- *Ability to use technology: Some software platforms require training. Where training has been provided to teachers, it has often been done from a purely technological driven viewpoint rather than one with a pedagogical focus*

- *Isolation: Where teachers do not find peer support for their online initiatives, it can be a lonely and isolating experience*

- *Information overload: In many instances, the amount of information, 'how-to' guides, help and resources provided online can have a tendency to become overwhelming and confusing if not properly managed. It can be difficult for students and teachers to discern which is relevant or important.*

Conclusion

Reasons for moving into online education differ amongst teachers. Some regard it as a natural progression to their current teaching practice, some are reluctant to change and feel pressured into it by their institution, while others are interested in online education but don't know how to get started. For change to occur, teachers need to first see the benefits of online education and the reasons for change. Higher education institutions need to show leadership and have an integrated, aligned approach to their strategies, policies and expectations of teachers, while also providing support in terms of additional time, training and resources to allow teachers to develop their skills in the online teaching environment.

Additional reading*

Anderson, T. (2008). The Theory and Practice of Online Learning, second edition (2 ed.). Edmonton: Athabasca University Press.

Bonk, C. J. (2009). The world is open: How web technology is revolutionising education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

McQuiggan, C. A. (2007). The role of faculty development in online teaching's potential to question teaching beliefs and assumptions. Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, 10(3).

Note: Some readings are held in subscription only databases. In most cases accessing the link from your institution's network will enable access

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For more Learning to Teach Online, visit the COFA Online Gateway

To find out more about the Learning to Teach Online project, or to view the video component of this episode, please visit the COFA Online Gateway.

www.online.cofa.unsw.edu.au

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About the project

The Learning to Teach Online project is a free professional development resource designed to help teachers from any discipline, whether experienced in online teaching or not, to gain a working understanding of successful online teaching pedagogies that they can apply in their own unique teaching situations. It hopes to encourage dialogue, discussion and the sharing of ideas about online learning and teaching across disciplines and between institutions around the world.

About COFA Online

COFA Online is an academic unit at the College of Fine Arts (COFA), The University of New South Wales (UNSW), Sydney, Australia. It has been innovating online pedagogy, academic professional development and effective online learning strategies since 2003.

About The University of New South Wales

UNSW has an enrolment of approximately 40,000 students, and is the leading international university in Australia with over 10,000 international enrolments from over 130 nations. UNSW was also ranked as the top university in 2009 in the Australian Government Learning and Teaching Performance Fund for the quality of its teaching.

Australian Learning and Teaching Council

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