

THE FUTURE HAS ALREADY HAPPENED:  
DISPELLING SOME MYTHS OF ONLINE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

As funding for higher education continues to shrink, student numbers steadily increase and international alliances become significantly important, online delivery is often heralded as the 'direction of the future' for learning and teaching. However, deep rooted and negative opinions regarding the online learning experience and concerns that technology will replace the teacher accompany the new pedagogical setting.

By paying careful attention to the alignment of course content, learning activities, assessment and learning outcomes, online education experiences *can* be engaging and rewarding for both student and teacher. However, perceptions often remain negative towards online education, viewing it as simply a cost-saving measure leading to student isolation, inactive participation and absent teachers. This paper aims to outline some myths regarding online education and dispel them as misconceived.

SETTING THE CURRENT AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT FOR ONLINE EDUCATION IN ART AND DESIGN

For more than a decade, universities in Australia have been subjected to cutbacks in federal government funding for education at the tertiary level. Education in art and design has been particularly affected. As funding for higher education continues to shrink, faculties look at strategies to overcome this shortfall by increasing student numbers and extending international alliances and networks. Typical scenarios experienced in art and design studio education include the implementation of increased staff-student ratios, the reduction of practical or 'studio' hours and the substitution of group studio sessions with mass lectures. It is not unimaginable for art and design schools to consider alternative modes of delivery that are at odds with conventional teaching methods, thus incurring concern and suspicion towards learning and teaching based on information and communication technologies.

GENERATION Y (THE FUTURE HAS ALREADY HAPPENED)

If, twenty years ago, someone had told us that we would have to use an 'arcane command line system' to send and collect our letters, memos and documents the idea would not only have been incredulous, but also foreboding. Although accessing e-mail via a text terminal is sometimes tedious, graphic interfaces and convenience have made e-mail central to the way we communicate, particularly in academe. Technology is most often successful when it acts as an *enabler* of person-to-person communication rather than a *replacement* for it. When this happens, assimilation of new technology is often very quick, giving us new modes of communication in addition to existing methods. It is true, however, that rates of development in technology have long outstripped our social ability to assimilate them all and the past is littered with potentially great technologies that failed to take root in popular culture. Sometimes the response to these failings is look to latest technologies as a fix for the old, when actually looking at new generations of people can be a more useful approach to understanding the way they relate to technology.

According to theorist and design practitioner, John Warwicker, we now exist in a time where 'change is the only constant'. There is a changed 'sense of the individual', an increased ease in interaction – 'the value of individuality is now seen within a collaborative context' (Warwicker 1999). Described by Jerzy Wojtowicz (1995) as a 'retribalizing of the world', increased access to different ideas and abilities characterises the way we now live our lives. This is particularly pertinent to educational technology because education has a constant influx of new generations, often with a very different understanding of the world to their teachers.

Through ever-evolving technological communication networks; the development of increasingly globalised economies; and a worldwide growth in multicultural societies; access has been granted to a

diversity of choices in the way we go about living our lives. 'Knowledge is less defined. Existence is less objective. Answers aren't always right or wrong: they are more or less appropriate' (Bassett 1996). Value is now placed on the 'importance of multiple perspectives, pluralism and indeterminacy' (Danvers 2003). We are continually developing new interconnections of actions, information and beliefs, adding to the complexity of our world.

However, people do not change as quickly as technology and understanding not just *what* our students learn but *how* they learn and how they live their lives is fundamental to teaching (Brookfield, 1995). Technologies that many teaching in higher education may still find novel are as everyday to our students as the telephone or television. The Internet has been part of mainstream culture for at least ten years (Johnson, 1997). This means that current seventeen year-old school leavers may well have experienced interaction with computers for their entire lives. Certainly, most schools have a considerable component of computer-based work in their curriculum. School children will regularly mine the Web to research their homework as well as using it to communicate with each other outside of school hours (Tapscott, 1998).

Our students not only have an ever increasing understanding of how to interact, work and collaborate online, but also an expectation that this should form part of their learning experience. This should come as no surprise to many of us who have been doing the very same for the past few years over e-mail, message boards and forums. These modes of communication are simply more aligned with our workday experience and have become less visible. Alignment is, of course, a key feature to teaching and learning (Biggs, 1999) and the question being increasingly asked by our students is not 'why are our courses online?', but more often 'why are our courses not online?'.

#### IDENTIFYING AND DISPELLING MYTHS SURROUNDING ONLINE LEARNING AND TEACHING

An initial and simplistic response to online learning and teaching, after considerable resistance within many institutions, was to embrace and implement the technology with less thought about why to use it in the first place or what it might mean to work in this way. This was perhaps a response with plenty of clear reasoning and incentives: spending (x) amount of money on technology could allow (y) amount of students and their associated dollars to be taught. In the process, staff would be able to teach more students by providing a better service in terms of online notes and resources, in a shorter amount of time.

The above scenario sounds wonderful in theory, but it has rarely been our experience that new technology, and in particular software, actually gives us more time to pursue other activities. Many of us spend hours a week responding to e-mail, editing documents or fielding work calls on mobile phones outside traditional working hours. In terms of time and cost savings, the benefits of new technologies are somewhat questionable. What does change is the way we do things.

If we consider that we have recently experienced the first decade of online education, we can now reflect where it has left us. Unfortunately, the online education produced in many instances by institutions worldwide, has generated a poor opinion towards the so-called 'direction of the future'. Myths and suspicions about online learning and teaching have arisen and include perceptions that students are left to their own devices without any guidance and therefore 'teach themselves'. Fear of inactive student participation in online courses and increased isolation for students has led to anxiety about how the technology will replace the teacher. Online delivery is commonly viewed cynically as a cost-cutting measure without any proper justification on pedagogical ground.

Such existence of deep-rooted and negative opinions, regarding the quality of online learning experiences and concerns that technology will replace the teacher need to be proved as misconceived. Perhaps it may be pertinent to identify specific issues that appear to generate such concern amongst many within educational settings toward the idea of online education.

##### *1. Isolated learning*

In cyberspace nobody can hear you scream, or at least see you put your hand up. The Internet arguably does offer a narrow bandwidth of social interaction being mainly text-based. Does this lead to an isolated learning experience?

It is tempting to believe that online teaching and learning can be an isolated experience because, usually, the student is physically on their own when accessing their online course. With well thought through activities, such as group collaboration, this need not be the case. Our experience has been that students

often engage in *more* participation and discussion than they would in face-to-face classes. The narrow bandwidth of communication coupled with a certain amount of anonymity can have a positive effect.

Message boards allow a form of communication that does not respond to the loudest voice or the most outgoing character. Any student can make their voice known and timid students can take the time to consider what they want to say before posting it without missing out on the moment as they might do in class. The fact that the messages remain permanent is also a consideration for this gives rise to more thoughtful discussion and postings.

We are used to considering real-time communication as the most sociable form of interaction. Communicating asynchronously, however, can be equally rewarding. Many of us regularly enjoy rich and engaging discussions and conversations via e-mail all the time. These conversations often last for much longer than real-time conversations allow and there is the added benefit of a textual record to refer back to, something that is incredibly useful in a teaching and learning environment.

## 2. *Over-emphasis and dependence on technology*

As with all technology, online teaching and learning tools can either be extremely problematic or a great success. Traditional software development (including many existing and popular educational technologies) has an economic imperative to sell upgrades with accumulating new features. This prioritises technology over experience and it is easy to be swayed by features whilst being blind to their usefulness.

Brenda Laurel, in her book, *Computers as Theatre*, examines this issue in terms of interface design: "Action is indeed the primary component of human-computer activity – not environments, interfaces, or objects. But environments, interfaces, and objects are traditionally much easier to conceive of and represent than a quality that is fundamentally invisible" (Laurel 1993).

By turning the usual process around, Laurel exposes a new way of thinking that is as pertinent to teaching and learning with technology as it is to information retrieval. She continues: "What if we were to define the action of information retrieval, not as looking for something, but examining or experiencing it? This seemingly innocuous shift in point of view puts the emphasis in an entirely different domain: the action involved in perceiving, interpreting, and experiencing information" (Laurel 1993).

*Experiencing, examining and interpreting* are all crucial elements of a successful learning experience (Biggs, 1999). The focus on technology is a natural response to this new modality of teaching, but it overlooks the real issue of the quality of the teaching and learning. As online educators ourselves, our peers more often ask us about the technology we use than the content and structure of our courses. Yet, as described above, for our students this technology is no longer a novelty.

The key, we believe, to successful online teaching and learning is to try and make the technology as transparent or invisible to the learner as possible. Instead of persistent attention on the technology used in online learning and teaching, the central focus should be about teaching strategies with maximum impact on the quality of learning and teaching (Kimball 2002).

## 3. *Negative social and interactive implications*

Comparing online learning and teaching with face-to-face delivery often tends to focus on negative social implications of the absent teacher and the students who 'teach themselves' in an isolated online environment. This is often coupled with the (sometimes very valid) concern that online teaching is simply a case of putting course notes on the Web.

This criticism ignores the fact that with information and communication technologies, the distinctions between distance, time and mainstream education are blurring, and that learning networks provide opportunities for multiple interactions and remove barriers such as location and time (Jones and Asensio 2000). Similarly, the technologies allow for new and effective ways to support current models of education as well as new methods of student-student, student-teacher, teacher-teacher collaboration in the educational process (Norman 1998). The clue to this misunderstanding is in the language used. Online teaching is an *active* process, whilst simply placing notes online is *passive*. Online notes alone do not constitute teaching, they merely facilitate easier access for the students.

What is particularly interesting to recognise is that strong social interactions *can* take place within an online educational context. Following evaluations from art and design courses offered and facilitated

using the Omnium system, social interactions were deemed by students to be some of the most favourable, enjoyable and lasting outcomes of their interactions (Bennett 1999). However, It should be noted that their social experiences were of a different nature to the social experiences they normally encountered through traditional face-to-face classes. This only reinforces our observation that existing online, compared to our more familiar face-to-face world, is often a very different experience and one that needs to be experienced before being understood or appreciated.

#### *4. Confusing Online and face-to-face contexts as same thing*

Another common myth regards online learning and teaching as a transposing of face-to-face course content directly to new media. It fails to consider the need for a complete re-think of activities that will engage and support the learner. This raises issues concerning the fundamentals of appropriate instructions for designing and managing all learning programmes – face-to-face and online - based on the constructive alignment of 'desired learning outcomes and corresponding learning activities' (Biggs 1999).

Online learning and teaching should not be about taking face-to-face course content and curriculum and transposing them for delivery using new media. It should be concerned with how online learning and teaching strategies can augment qualities within face-to-face learning and teaching. When approached from a completely new method of facilitating and managing the learning and teaching process, online delivery can present a new paradigm which ultimately will determine the extent to which courses are effective. The same concerns arise in traditional settings also, when shifting from mass lectures to tutorials or from single student to group projects. The changing mode of experience requires a change in teaching approach. Moving to online teaching is no different, but it does require an understanding of online cultures.

#### *5. An economical cost cutting measure*

Online education is often perceived as a purely cost-cutting exercise with little regard for pedagogical concerns. In reality it should not replace or replicate face-to-face education in an online mode, rather provide a flexible method of learning and teaching can reach students across geographical boundaries and temporal zones. Initial reports on the real costs of online delivery are varied in its methodology and focus given that such analysis needs to include project start-up costs, staff training, development of new courses, processing of enrolments, course and technical support, and provision of university infrastructure including academic and administrative staff, space and information and communication technologies (Ash and Bacsich 2002).

In practice, the costs of online learning and teaching are comparatively high in their early stages, although it is estimated that costs decrease and spread out as more courses share and utilise the resources and technologies which are already set up for the delivery. Online learning and teaching requires as much attention to pedagogy as face-to-face. In fact, we would argue that it requires more attention because it is a new teaching environment, which requires careful planning and evaluation because there is less historical experience to draw upon. The act of devising online learning activities forces the teacher to think through the pedagogical flow of the material in a manner that is sometimes not present in lectures where it is possible to speak about a topic 'off-the-cuff'. Additionally, underlying suspicions towards online teaching and learning often results in new courses being far more rigorously analysed by education committees than many face-to-face courses.

#### CONCLUSION

In 1998 the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) issued a report on a broad-based approach to identifying appropriate methodologies for evaluating online learning and teaching in Australia (as a result of consultation and cooperation with interested universities). It recommended an activity-based management approach to cost management (Eggins 2000). Comparative analysis of the report, *Costing Methodology for Use within Australian Higher Education Institutions*, and reports from other countries indicate 'confronting and overcoming cultural resistance' as a major challenge to online learning and teaching at universities. Carl A. Raschke argues that the third knowledge revolution and the coming of the hyper-university are inevitable; computers will no longer be 'add-ons' and technological systems will no longer function as tools but will simply constitute the environment (Raschke 2003).

So what implications may this have specifically for those of us teaching in tertiary art and design courses? For decades self-directed learning has been a central part of reflective studio practice, and collaboration has been a continuing feature in art and design projects. The Internet presents an ideal space for creative collaboration in art and design education, reflecting existing and emerging processes in the professional

arena. The issue is not how to incorporate online technologies into education but, as has always been the case, how to make education relevant to students for whom these technologies are part of their everyday lives. The brave new world is already here. The next generation of school leavers will have never known a world without the Internet and its associated communities and technologies.

Art and design education is well placed to lead in the ever-evolving online education arena, having long utilised a mentoring, studio-based mode of teaching as opposed to the conventional model of "transferring knowledge". By exploring how online technologies are used in daily life *outside* the realms of education, we can reconfigure what Gunther Kress (Kress et al 2001: 1-3) terms 'multimodal' approaches to learning and incorporate these new technologies and social interactions *within* education.

If the result of the first decade of online education has been to raise a series of myths, insecurities and negative opinions, it must be the aim for the next decade to dispel them as misconceived. It is now the task for online educators to be conscientious in their planning of courses, and for institutions to express credible and clear reasons for adopting online education profiles. As a new approach for education, online learning and teaching is bound to initially cause discomfort to many affected by it. However, the sooner it can be viewed as a viable and worthwhile addition (not replacement) to more traditional pedagogical methods, the more it will become part of the 'direction of the present', rather than an alienated and resented vision of the future.

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In 1995 Andy Polaine co-founded the award-winning new media agency Antiom in London working with clients such as the BBC, Levis Strauss and Co. and The Science Museum. He later worked as a senior producer at Razorfish in London before moving to Sydney, Australia in 1999 where he started the interactive department of visual effects company, Animal Logic. Andy left Animal Logic in 2001 and is now a Senior Lecturer in Interactive Media at The University of New South Wales's College of Fine Arts as well as working as a freelance designer and writer. He writes two regular columns for Australia's

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