

POST THE E-LEARNING GOLDRUSH:

ENCOURAGING PURPOSE AND QUALITY  
IN NEW ONLINE ART AND DESIGN COURSES

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ABSTRACT

The last decade witnessed a 'virtual goldrush' of activity in regard to online education worldwide. Unfortunately, many institutions and software companies flattened the pedagogical landscape in a scramble to establish their own online presence. In general, what remained were hastily planned and generally low quality subjects/programs: sadly reinforcing belief that online education is a poor substitute for face-to-face learning and teaching.

Fortunately, time has moved on, with more credible institutions realising that quality must be the key component of online education. Some have begun to identify highlights of previous examples and are building upon them. It has become apparent that to achieve purposeful and quality online subjects, educators need to look past an immediate return and view a more long-term solution.

*COFA Online* was established at the College of Fine Arts in 2003, and has since been planning, developing and teaching online subjects in art and design practice, education and theory - methodically building the foundations of a sustainable online program. This paper outlines the *COFA Online Course Author Fellowship* program and how it aims to provide a quality experience for students studying online.

ISSUES TO CONSIDER WHEN EXAMINING ONLINE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES

Before discussing specific issues to encourage *quality* within any online subjects and programs, yet alone those in art and design disciplines, one should question the need or purpose for online pedagogical approaches within today's educational context. Initially, perhaps two questions should be posed prior to any decision on adopting such new strategies:

1. Is there any need for online education?
2. If such a need exists, what can ultimately be achieved or even gained?

When examining the 'lay of the land' regarding online education worldwide, it is not difficult to see the drivers that led to the rapid growth in this area over the last decade. It seems that *Economic* reasons have clearly led the impetus, although this observation is often strongly denied. Instead, decisions to engage in online delivery of subjects and programs are commonly defended on issues of improved teaching and learning.

However, there *are* a number of economic advantages that make online education an attractive option. After all, using the Internet as a basis for education surely *can* increase the potential for additional enrolments. Delivering subjects online *can* lighten the demand on institutional resources. And with international linkages between institutions increasingly being encouraged, the Internet *can* offer the perfect context for such engagements to be realised.

A second influential driver for online education worldwide in the last decade appears to be *Technology*. It is often argued that technology merely provides a 'tool-set' for allowing important pedagogical structures and issues to be implemented. We argue that this is not the case in many online programs we have observed. It is often apparent that technical issues actually dictate the content and its delivery. Online education has been strongly influenced by the availability of the latest technology, and in many instances

colleges and universities now find themselves locked into expensive licensing contracts for software that on reflection does not seem 'comfortable' for subject delivery or use by students, academics or administrators. Notably, this is particularly the case for areas of online education relating to creative arts.

Despite *Economics* and *Technology* clearly being important considerations when planning any online education initiatives, perhaps there are other equally important issues that need to also be considered before engaging an online presence. We propose that to encourage quality within online education, one might first look to areas of theory and practice to help inform decisions. It must surely be beneficial for example, to acquire an understanding of the Internet as the context that we expect our students to learn, and to appreciate the nature of interaction that they may be expected to adopt when using it. Too much design for the Internet, especially relating to education, is based on 'real' face-to-face scenarios. An online classroom is *not* the same as an on-campus classroom. Online social interactions certainly exist and indeed can be very strong, however, they are very different social interactions than when meeting someone face-to-face. Online teaching and learning is a different practice to that which most of us are accustomed.

The 'online experience', whether shopping, socialising, resourcing or teaching and learning, is different to when undertaking the same face-to-face activities. If the differences are acknowledged as potential advantages rather than obstacles, we believe that exciting and valuable things can begin to take place. The 'goldrush' decade perhaps did not consider these other issues enough, or in some instances consider them at all. It is for these reasons that online education is often considered a 'lesser' option compared to face-to-face teaching and learning. However, to consider it as an *option* is important, instead of a replacement, or competitor to traditional face-to-face approaches.

In 2003, the city of Busan, South Korea hosted the *Core Pacific-Rim Universities' Seminar on International Distance Education*. Representatives from twelve countries agreed that generally, a poor quality and under-researched standard of online education existed worldwide. In essence, the economic and technology driven educational 'goldrush' had temporarily flattened what is certainly a viable, interesting and valuable landscape. In many cases, what has eventuated as a result of the first decade of online education is merely an updated version of some fairly un-engaging distance learning.

One of the aims for universities and colleges throughout the next decade, must be to raise the credibility of online education. This may be achieved through an emphasis on communicating it's place and purpose pedagogically, explaining appropriate reasons for developing online education profiles, and by encouraging and developing quality, rewarding experiences for both students and teachers.

## A SECOND DEVELOPMENTAL WAVE FOR ONLINE EDUCATION

In a positive and significant response to previous outcomes, many institutions have established departments to specifically focus on Internet assisted education. Flexible delivery, or e-learning experts are increasingly commonplace in universities and colleges. However, a body of critical online education theory is still yet to be established. Reports and findings derived from ongoing practical online educational initiatives remain scarce, although a significant amount can be read from more isolated experiments. A strange situation currently exists where a quasi-online educational theory has emerged; either based on established face-to-face teaching and learning principles, or on predictions of what will most likely occur when teaching and learning online. Specific theory relating to online education seems to have preceded a significant body of practice. In time, through the work of such new departments and units, this will no doubt change.

This decade has already seen dramatically different approaches take place toward online education. The rather bleak picture that we have painted of the 'goldrush decade' should be seen as an advantage to future initiatives and a foundation to improve upon. There is no doubt that education using the internet *will* take place, and our students *will* actually demand it to compliment the many other areas of their lives where the internet is already established as the norm. A second 'developmental' wave for online education has already begun, and is adopting a far more cautious and considered approach. Increasingly, education institutions worldwide, and indeed in Australia, are beginning to form very interesting and successful online profiles.

Curtin University of Technology for example, has a well-established reputation for researching and practicing online education. One only has to enter 'online education' into their website's search engine to observe a wide variety of high quality interests and reports across it's faculties and units. RMIT also have a reputable online presence, including the very interesting and thoroughly developed Master of Design (online) program of study. Overseas, on a much larger scale, perhaps one of the leading and most significant online education profiles can be seen emanating from UCLA with their 'Extensions' program. Their philosophical approach to online teaching and learning across a broad range of disciplines, and their integration with the existing functions of the University is inspirational and a great source of advice and ideas. Online education is here to stay, and it's previously poor reputation is already rapidly changing as evidenced in the examples described.

#### COFA ONLINE – EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF ONLINE COURSES IN ART AND DESIGN

In 2002, the College of Fine Arts established COFA Online; a unit dedicated to the development of online courses. It aims to create a credible online educational profile at COFA, and in time a series of quality online undergraduate and postgraduate subjects in art and design disciplines. COFA Online will represent the wide range of offerings that already exist via traditional face-to-face modes of teaching and learning from the five schools within the Faculty.

Influenced by many examples of interesting online initiatives both nationally and internationally, (particularly the UCLA *Extensions* model), the *COFA Online Course Author Fellowship* program was developed to allow staff the time and support to acquire some of the skills and understanding needed to write and deliver quality online subjects for art and design.

#### COFA ONLINE COURSE AUTHOR FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

The Fellowship program is a collaborative endeavour between COFA Online staff, the Online Course Author Fellows, and various learning and teaching professionals. It is a formalisation of a course development process centred around the issue of quality; derived from the collective knowledge and skill base of its participants.

One of the main purposes of creating the program was to establish a strong supportive *community* of peers, in which fellows can share their combined experience, ideas and knowledge. No course is developed in isolation, and no fellow is ever alone in their experience. The Fellowship program also offers financial support and incentive in the form of a progressive payment, based on course development milestones.

Those involved in the fellowship have a diverse range of professional backgrounds. There are designers, artists, art and history theorists, a sculptor, an art gallery curator and a PhD student involved in the initial program. The subjects being written are equally diverse. However, while the content and structure varies, the subjects share a common thread in the development of quality writing, teaching and evaluation techniques. It is this shared experience that draws fellows together, working as a group with the common goal of writing and delivering high quality, relevant online subjects.

All subjects are initially written as General Education subjects. This is to ensure that they are properly 'road-tested' in an online classroom context, ensuring quality in terms of content and delivery. Once a subject has been successfully delivered online for one semester as a General Education course, it can be upgraded to undergraduate Elective level. The final stage of an online course's development sees the author evolve the content for delivery at postgraduate (coursework) level.

The Fellowship program is cyclic, running every six months to coincide with the academic calendar. To achieve its goals, a series of workshops have been developed to facilitate the development of the online subjects in a group context. The fellows are supported and guided each month by six specifically designed workshops.

## COFA ONLINE COURSE AUTHOR FELLOWSHIP WORKSHOPS

A fundamental component of the program is the Fellowship Workshops. Each workshop is a chance for Fellows to meet regularly with their peers, achieve incremental course development goals, receive ongoing professional feedback on their work, and to gain incentive to share ideas and experience within a supportive community environment.

The entire structure of the Online Fellowship Workshops has been planned and developed in conjunction with UNSW's Learning and Teaching Unit. It has been invaluable when structuring the workshops to be able to utilise the knowledge of experts in the field of learning and teaching practice. In addition, experienced Online Course Author Fellows from previous fellowship programs are invited to contribute to the Fellowship workshops to pass on their own experiences and to continue to improve the collective knowledge base in online course authoring via practical experience.

### THE WORKSHOP SERIES

#### WORKSHOP 1

##### Writing Course Descriptions

The first workshop assists online course authors in writing successful course descriptions in preparation for the mandatory Education and Standing Committee review and approval process. By ensuring this material is of a high standard, the resultant subject should be more relevant and engaging for the student. Fellows will hear a first hand account of how teaching methods must be adapted to the online environment from a guest speaker with over two years of online teaching experience. This advice proves valuable in promoting understanding, allowing the fellows to tailor their knowledge specifically for online delivery from the outset.

In preparation for the next workshop, the fellows are asked to write a draft of their subject outline with these factors in mind. During the intervening weeks, questions that fellows may have can be addressed by their peer community, via a web board specifically established to assist such communication.

#### WORKSHOP 2

##### Constructive Alignment: Developing Course Aims and Learning Outcomes

Together with staff from the Learning and Teaching Unit UNSW, course authors are assisted in determining their goals and learning outcomes, particularly from the students' viewpoint.

Drafts of the new subject outlines are presented and reviewed by all the fellows, COFA Online and the Learning and Teaching experts. This gives fellows a chance to refine their work taking into consideration different viewpoints and the professional advice received.

#### WORKSHOP 3

##### Planning Course Structure & Content Aligned to Aims and Learning Outcomes

Fellows will be assisted in devising a week by week plan for the implementation of their course. Principles of constructive alignment introduced through the last workshop will be applied to this structure and the development of course content.

#### WORKSHOP 4

##### Designing Assessment Tasks and Activities Relating to Course Structure

Working closely with the Learning and Teaching Unit, The Learning Centre and existing online Fellows, new Fellows will receive guidance and assistance in designing relevant and educational assessment tasks for their course.

Evaluation is a crucial component of any course. Learning how to evaluate the success of an online course is an important skill. This workshop will help fellows write appropriate assessment tasks for their students, and establish an unbiased evaluation procedure for their own course. As online education is a developing 'landscape', the fellows must learn to be flexible in continually adjusting their subjects to ensure successful evolution.

## WORKSHOP 5

### Clarity of Written Materials & Added Relevance for Online Delivery

Language experts work with the fellows within this workshop to improve the quality of their writing for online delivery. One of the most pertinent observations through practical experience in teaching online, is that student misinterpretation of written language is a common occurrence. It is therefore imperative that the language used in online lectures, briefs, activities and assessment tasks must be as clear and concise as possible.

The level of preparation for quality online subjects needs to be more comprehensive than face-to-face classes, as writing is the only method of communication between the teacher and students. Proficient language skills are an essential component of delivering quality online subjects.

## WORKSHOP 6

### Embedding Information Literacy into Course Content and Assessment

COFA and UNSW Libraries are involved in this workshop which focuses on the integration of Information Literacy (IL) principals into subject material and related assessment tasks. Information literacy is the process of *accessing* information resources both online and in a traditional context, *selecting* which of these resources to use, and *evaluating* the quality and relevance of these resources.

Course authors will learn to embed IL principals into their lectures and assessment tasks, passing this crucial knowledge onto their students through the structure and content of their online subjects. The initial lectures written by the course authors deal with issues of IL in the context of each proposed subject.

## POTENTIAL GAINS FOR DELIVERING SUBJECTS AND PROGRAMS ONLINE

With a need for online education clearly viable, what then can be achieved or even gained by delivering our subjects and programs online? With general access and use of the Internet still in relative infancy for the majority of us, it is no surprise to suggest that the potential for online education remains largely unrealised. Certainly, online pedagogical approaches have yet to be formalised and are relatively experimental still. However, the Internet does allow us huge potential through its inherent qualities and in turn should allow:

- increased connectivity and flexibility for students and staff
- easier and more frequent inter-cultural exchanges
- increased links to professional practice
- a context for increased collaborative initiatives
- stronger linkages for education institutions worldwide
- more contemporary and appropriate options for teaching and learning
- potential for increased and/or wider enrolments
- relief for institutional resources and facilities

In the context of online education for art and design disciplines, the Internet will also encourage new creative realms. This should bring with it an excitement toward a 'new wave' of online creativity, outcomes from which will perhaps co-exist with more traditional creative processes in student exhibitions and galleries for years to come.

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Rick Bennett has worked for The University of New South Wales for 12 years in the School of Design Studies at the College of Fine Arts. The last few years have seen a dramatic change in his role within the University: from coordinator of the first year Bachelor of Design program to that of directing significant research into the Internet and possibilities it holds for collaborating across distance for art and design education. In 1998, he founded The *Omnium* Project as an ongoing research initiative for online collaborative education for the creative arts. In 2001, he was awarded the first UNSW Vice-Chancellor's Award for Teaching Excellence Using Educational Technology. Today, Rick is continuing to develop interesting advances in online creative interaction between distanced individuals and in 2004, *The Omnium Project* was awarded significant funding through an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery grant. Rick has presented and published outcomes of his online work, both nationally and internationally, at design and education conferences as well as in peer reviewed journals and publications.

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Simon McIntyre has taught graphic, interactive and information design at the University of New South Wales, College of Fine Arts for the past seven years, including two years of teaching design in an online environment. During this time he also designed and produced interactive media and video material professionally within his own business. This understanding of interactivity and user interaction led him to work collaboratively with Rick Bennett on several projects before being invited to join COFA Online permanently in 2004. Using his understanding of interactive principles and communication, along with his years of practical experience teaching and practising design, Simon is helping to develop systems to improve the quality and delivery of online education at COFA.