



CHANGING PROVISION OF GLOBAL ONLINE LEARNING

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Summary

Anita Pincas is Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of London; Visiting Fellow at the University of Westminster and Director of Pedagogy for the Virtual Learning Development Trust based in the UK. She has been a specialist in pedagogy at the University of London for 30 years with a focus in online learning and English language teaching and is one of the earliest users of the internet for educational purposes with wide-ranging experience in the use of computer conferencing software. After graduating from the world's first online course in methods of teaching online, the Certificate in Online and Distance Learning from the Southampton Institute of Higher Education, she started the London University Certificate in Online Education and Training in 1992. This grew into a worldwide multilingual qualification with local groups in Germany, Belgium, Portugal, Italy, and Hong Kong, several using their mother tongue for half of the 20 week course. Anita also started the world's first online MA TESOL in 1993 for the University of London. She is the founding director of ELAS, the Education Law Society, and a member of the Royal Institution, London.

As synchronous videoconferencing and asynchronous classroom interaction become more common, the potential of the internet for real teaching is now being realised.

But however much we might hope the present generation will become independent lifelong learners, evidence and experience show that the vast majority still need teachers for sustained learning as opposed to informal snatches of learning.

Whether teachers are transmitters of knowledge or facilitators of problem-solving activities, they have as essential a role to play in internet education as in familiar contexts.

University administrators who want to use the technology to save money (supposedly) have given rise to strategic partnerships and brought a myriad of players into the course team. This non-pedagogic industry has brought enormous benefits, but has not substantially improved learning.

This article examines the changing provision of online education since the commencement of London University's Certificate of Online Education course in 1992, through to the present, and contends that not only are teachers still an integral part of the learning process, it is essential that all players in the course team gain practical experience as an online student in order to fully understand the issues involved.

Introduction

Since the Certificate in Online Education and Training course commenced in 1992 from the University of London, entirely online, there have been many developments in teaching on the Internet. However, for people wanting to run online courses, there are still two key factors that have not changed, viz. gaining experience as an online student and the importance of teachers in the education process.

It is still crucial to get the experience of being an online student and thus gain an insider's view from which to observe the benefits and problems of course design by new media. That is much easier to achieve today than in the past, although most courses still only offer a rather limited set of online experiences. Training courses from widely sold platform providers like WebCT and BlackBoard give you only their take on Internet teaching.

Linked to this point is the way people now expect to work in teams to design internet courses, so it is equally important for non-teaching professionals such as librarians, technical staff or administrators, to take part in online programs as a student to ensure they really understand what the issues are.

Learners still need teachers. Although it is right to expect students to develop skills in finding and using resources, whether in a conventional library or on the world wide web, much e-learning hype exaggerates learner independence. In truth, it is rare for a learner to be able to manage without skilled teacher guidance.

Both points are important because of the pre-occupation with the great potential of online discourse. Internet education started when group email communication became possible. It was called computer conferencing in the early days of **The Network Nation** (Hilz and Turoff 1978) and **Mindweave** (Kay and Mason, 1989) and is still a key issue in books like **E-moderating** (Salmon, 2001). The last publication is an example of how too many people assume that because online discussions can be very rich and are a very successful way of enabling group collaborative learning, the teacher can disappear from the scene except as moderator or facilitator of the discussions.

The problem is often crudely expressed as an opposition between the 'sage on the stage' versus the 'guide on the side'. But experience, or indeed a glance at Salmon, will show that moderating a group who are essentially learning on their own without what I would call a real teacher, is an enormous burden and far more work than teachers have time to cope with nowadays. The difficulties are compounded by the fact that many people are still uncertain about the nature of online communication, especially because of the lack of paralinguistic features and the anonymity that is possible.

There are worries about discourse issues such as quality and quantity of participation, how to motivate students, how to promote good interaction, how to manage a group online, how to organise the messages in systems like FirstClass or on the WWW, whether or not to assess online discussions, how and how much the tutor should give feedback during the process, how online learning communities develop, and so forth. Surprisingly, most people just accept that there has to be more tutor involvement online than there would be in face to face workshop situations. Tutor overload is just not viable, and more sensible methods need to be developed. In any case, for educational reasons, the whole approach is mistaken.

While many have hailed the internet as heralding a new era for independent or active learning or problem solving, as well as an opportunity for teachers to change their approaches quite radically, it can be equally valid to use our new technology

to replicate what we do already. There is no point being too pessimistic about common teaching methods, for the simple reason that there is not, nor will ever be, one ideal method to suit all learners.

So there is merit in retaining the teacher as the sage on the stage as well as the guide on the side, and keeping the notion of a classroom in which learners get taught. But good classroom teaching also includes practice activities, and that is equally possible online; indeed some would say that in the asynchronous mode of communication, leaving a permanent record, it is often superior. The method, both on the Certificate Program and the Internet Masters degree course, was to use edited video lectures, either films from live classrooms, or talking head with or without PowerPoint, followed or preceded by online discussions for structured workshops of the classroom kind where the teacher does not intervene much. Since there was over 90% completion rates in the master's program, it can't have been too far off the mark!

In many ways, the education world has been led by enterprising corporations and small businesses, though the balance is swinging again since the dot.com collapse. What remains is the concept of strategic partnerships, or borderless global alliances, in which teachers often find it quite difficult to make their voices heard above market and technology-driven forces. Let's hope that when the excitement dies down, and the internet is a familiar and accepted part of life, commonsense will prevail.

We can see all what is wrong with current online higher education where the bean-counters use the technology to save money (supposedly) rather than looking for better ways to teach. The rise of strategic partnerships through outsourcing has brought a myriad of players into the course team. Some institutions have paid £1 million sterling for a new online masters course of the kind that many of us in the past would have prepared as part of our on-going jobs.

In other words, an industry of a non-pedagogic kind has grown up here, yet it attempts to cover both technical and academic factors. Clearly, this industry has brought us enormous benefits, in the form of new and very varied options, for hybrid on-campus as well as for distance teaching. Some examples are:

- Alternative forms of asynchronous discussion management such as KnowledgeForum;
- Synchronous CHAT or videoconferencing
- Mobile technology (with texting) and wireless LANs
- Computer based assessment

But we should not be blinded by technology and forget human nature. The evidence is all around us that there is a limit to what people will learn on their own or with a group of peers. Teachers will always be needed, and we must keep our foothold on the stage.