



Reflections on Learning and Teaching During the Pandemic

PRACTICE-BASED PAPER

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ABSTRACT

This is a short paper which reflects on learning and teaching online during the pandemic. The paper observes the growth of technology as an attempt to aid traditional learning and how this has been expedited due to the pandemic. There is a focus on diversity of learners and how we understand engagement, from the teacher's perspective. There is also a focus on law as a discipline at the conclusion of the paper.

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My name is Brett Koenig, I am a Senior Lecturer in Law. I was formerly a Commercial Litigation Solicitor, and I teach on both professional postgraduate courses as well as on the undergraduate law programs.

INTRODUCTION

The use of learning technology as an attempt to supplement traditional teaching methods has been on the rise in higher education for as long as the last decade and has been in existence for centuries. Technological developments were always on the horizon for higher education but have been fast tracked as a consequence of the coronavirus pandemic. The online learning sector is predicted to be a market worth upwards of £140 billion by the year 2024 (*Technavio.com*, 2020).

Whilst changes should usually come about in an evolutionary rather than revolutionary way, the pandemic has forced overnight changes onto education. We need to ensure that the experience is student-centred rather than entirely focused on the technology itself. Whilst the means of delivery have changed, the principles should not. The science is clear that the most productive environments are where students are fundamentally involved in the community.

The principles that are true of face-to-face learning remain in play in this online experiment. Whether delivering face-to-face or online, or through a blended format, we have to provide a framework in which the curricula enables all students to gain the skills and knowledge necessary. The shift has been a learning curve but the value is still in providing flexible information resources, student interaction through groups, and flexible assessment methods. The focus should not be on the technology itself but on the diversity of learners, so we can develop truly inclusive teaching practices. By remaining focussed on these ideals we will develop expertise in our students who will become more focussed and motivated.

OBSERVATIONS

Prior to the pandemic, the online domain served as a storage facility for soft copy course materials. As a result of moving online we are now more aware that this space can be used to engage and supplement the learning environment. Clearly we do not want students to attend online teaching and just sit and look at a blank screen, so there has been an active attempt to make use of videos, online polls, quizzes and interactive media. There is no reason that these aspects should not remain in the months that lie ahead of the pandemic. There may previously have been a view that by merely turning up in person that students were engaged. The pandemic has magnified the fact that engagement and physically being present are not synonymous. I believe the pandemic has forced educators to really consider what engagement means and to be confident that it does, in fact, take place.

The majority of students have little understanding of what to expect from higher education before their journeys begin. Indeed, studies have shown that the workload and need to exercise independent learning is a fairly alien *concept* (Lowe and Cook, 2003). However, we are in an era of a more student-centred approach. Ultimately, expectations are important. If it is true that students have improbable notions of what university entails then institutions can act to manage these before they get away. But it is a two-way street, and the student can serve to help in the design of modules and programmes. A number of studies point to the success that expectations can have on *participation* (Sander, Stevenson, King and Coates, 2000). I believe the shift to online teaching and learning has increased the need to view students as a factor in the equation and this can only be a good thing. Students should be active learners who help to participate in their own learning.

We now have scope to consider how we can develop courses to maximise the benefits of online learning. Research suggest that students want to retain the vast majority of elements of online delivery. Can we use the online VLEs to provide curriculum that can be consumed independently, and reserve the face-to-face format for more interactive and engaging tasks?

The move to online teaching has also changed methods of feedback and assessment. Reflecting on law as a discipline, there is room to improve by offering feedback as a more continuous feature of the process. The benefits of formative assessment are demonstrable and do not have to be overly onerous on educators. A simple recorded comment on an advocacy submission, a line or two on an ungraded section of letter writing can make all the difference. There still tends to be a focus on the whole. The methodology adopted should allow students to submit drafts in sections formatively allowing quick live feedback (as would happen in practice). By adopting a more interactive and engaging style students become engrained in the process and must act assertively to improve the next formative assessment.

It is clear to me that there has been a more active thought about student engagement and participation because we have moved online. The key now is to keep that at the forefront of our minds and not revert back to old methods. The future of teaching and learning will need to be a blended approach that boasts the best of both online and face-to-face.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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