

It's online, but is it learning? - A reflection on the acceleration towards digital distance learning (DDL) in mainstream higher education.

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1. Introduction

The Coronavirus pandemic (March 2020-March 2022) accelerated investment in and use of digital distance learning (DDL) in higher education (HE). Few academic practitioners, observers, managers, or students could have foreseen the rapid pace of change. The emergency conditions created an opportunity to implement rapid changes to delivery methods with less consideration or scrutiny than would have been the case in more normal times.

In this opinion piece, I begin with a brief history of distance learning. I then reflect on some pedagogical implications of the rapid transition to DDL in mainstream HE and finally reflect on the future of DDL.

2. Brief history of distance learning

Distance learning is a complex phenomenon that involves choices and transformations in *"...instructional design and delivery, redefining the roles of partners in distance education teams, media selection, technology adoption, change implementation, methods and strategies to increase interactivity, inquiry, and active learning, learner characteristics and modes of learning, teacher mediation and learner support, operational issues, policy and management issues, and cost/benefit trade-offs."* (Sherry, 1995, p.337).

Digital learning in its essence is an extension of distance learning. In the 1840s, Isaac Pitman developed one of the earliest modern distance learning courses, to widen access to his innovative method of shorthand writing (Archibald and Worsley, 2019). The new system of universal postage in the United Kingdom (UK) allowed learning materials to be distributed at a uniform cost anywhere in the country. The 'penny stamp' launched in 1840 is a precursor to modern-day fixed-cost internet broadband. The University of London 'External' study programme was established in 1858. 'Mail order' courses continued well into the 1970s. The Open University UK, founded in 1969, has employed a variety of different media, including print materials supplied by post, television broadcasts and, more recently, web-based, and other digital modes of delivery.

The notion of 'distance learning' can be traced back even further. McLuhan (1962) notes how the advent of the printing press allowed written communication to replace speech as the dominant form of academic communication. More than five centuries since the development of the modern printing press in Europe, and a thousand years after mechanical typesetting emerged in China (Needham, 1983), we continue to grapple with the disruptions and opportunities that arise from new communication technologies.

3. Impact on academic vocation

Teaching has been likened to artistry (Barrell, 1991), performance (Greenberg and Miller, 1991; Pineau, 1994; Schonmann, 2005), performative act (Liew, 2013), aesthetic labour (Yang, 2016; Lipton, 2021) and emotional labour (Constanti and Gibbs, 2004; Berry and Cassidy, 2013; Bodenheimer and Shuster, 2020).

The modern classroom, notwithstanding contemporary 'open-concept' classroom design, retains its academic ethos. As social ritual, the classroom is similar to a theatre or temple. The in-class experience is a multi-sensory liminal experience. However, the digital education medium is more like television (again, recall McLuhan). As we know from the arts world, not all theatrical performers are suited to the small screen. Conversely, television-trained performers can seem wooden or robotic in a large live theatre. The television (i.e., digital) medium is more restrictive of the performer's autonomy than the live stage (Chapple and Kattenbelt, 2006). The transition to DDL, blended and hybrid delivery models has resulted in increased work and duplication of work, as well as stress and exhaustion owing to overwork, lack of training and information technology (IT) failures (Gewin, 2021).

Effective DDL is more reliant on technical and multi-media acumen than oratory skill and content knowledge. Teaching-as-broadcasting explains the parallel rise in 'teaching fellow' and 'teaching demonstrator' roles. Television weather presenters do not need to be climatologists, as long as they can read the forecast in a convincing manner. However, university teaching and learning must be more than mere content delivery.

The notion of 'hybrid' educational delivery is fundamentally flawed. The needs, perceptions and experiences of the on-campus group will be distinctly different from the on-line group (Mueser and Vlachos, 2018). In television production, the studio audience is an extension of the props and set scenery because the 'main' audience is that receiving the broadcast. Hybrid teaching models (Rao, 2019; Mourtzis *et al.*, 2019) make the mistake of presuming that on-campus and on-line learning are the same.

4. Impact on student critical and analytic skills

In my classrooms, increased reliance on DDL appears to result in poorer analytic skills, weak source-appraisal skills, and information overload. Students struggle to understand quality of sources: they do not understand what an 'academic journal' is. Few have ever seen a physical paper version of an academic journal; the format is as foreign to them as VHS tape. Students struggle to distinguish between a publishing platform (e.g., a website) and an author. In my teaching experience, live face-to-face teaching and learning appear to more effective for developing students' critical capabilities. The physical classroom leaves little room to hide and enables prompt intervention when needed. By contrast, participation in online 'breakout rooms' typically results in weaker participation: it is simply too easy for students to remain hidden, with personal cameras and microphones switched off.

Stronger students stand to benefit more from the positive elements of DDL, such as ease of access to journals; speed; and the convenience of booking a one-to-one support meeting. However, reliance on DDL exacerbates inequalities. Digital poverty creates barriers (Digital Poverty Alliance, 2022). In 2020, the UK government, with the support of British Telecom, identified the need to offer internet vouchers to 10,000 families, on account of concerns about

the 'digital divide' affecting poorer students (Coughlan, 2020). Meanwhile, publishers and software providers flood the email boxes of academics and university managers with the promise of 'mass customisable' digital solutions. As the urgency of COVID retreats, these increasingly resemble traditional sales tactics: a (digital) solution in search of a problem.

The accelerated transition to DDL in mainstream HE has hastened a move away from traditional full-time study. Few students behave as traditional full-time students (i.e., seven hours per day, five days per week). Instead, many of them adopt a fluid and less than whole-hearted approach to their studies. For example, with their mobile devices, they tune in to lectures and tutorials when otherwise engaged: while they are at work; when they are driving (!) or travelling on public transport; or as they attend to other – such as domestic – obligations. This is not distance learning, but rather what I label 'background learning'. Moreover, in my experience, it is often students who rely on DDL because of these other responsibilities who would most benefit from the face-to-face support in a physical classroom. Online DDL for many students is too prone to distractions. As in the live arts and entertainment industries (Auslander, 2008), the live educational experience has an 'aura' (Davis, 1995). By contrast, online attendance often results in poor participation and low interactivity. For many students, DDL is akin to tuning into a YouTube video.

5. DDL moving forward

Is this DDL non-engagement very different from what typically happens in the on-campus classroom? Numerically, perhaps not. However, the physical environment in which a student is, literally, physically surrounded by the learning experience offers more scope for (inter)active learning. DDL on a comparatively small screen competes for the attention with surroundings. DDL students need a quiet, distraction-free environment. Yet it often seems that the students who are most desirous of DDL on account of its convenience are also often the same ones who have many other commitments (e.g., work and family) which leads to 'background learning'. It is easy to blame academics for this lack of student engagement: "The tutor should use more interactive digital tools" or "It is the teacher's job to keep the students engaged". However, these technologies can become stale quickly, especially when overused across multiple modules. In my classes, for example, students quickly noted the repeated use of Mentimeter across modules. The lustre of novelty soon dulls.

During COVID, a 'pseudo-distance learning' model emerged in a somewhat haphazard way, in response to constantly changing public health conditions and government policies. Many HE providers have treated DDL as an 'easy fix' during the COVID crisis (Pucciarelli and Kaplan, 2021). However, after two years of COVID restrictions, many students are already 'fed up' with online learning (Waterhouse, 2021).

DDL is here to stay in some form or another. The key questions are how and where it can be employed most effectively for the benefit of students, while placing realistic demands on academic staff. Greater attention needs to be given to the segmentation of students, to ascertain which students or modules are most conducive to DDL delivery. For many, if not most, students, DDL is a next-best alternative to on-campus attendance. For some students, however, DDL may be their preferred, main means of attendance. More investment is needed in IT upkeep and support and staff training. For DDL to work effectively, more IT technicians are needed – and they need to be available at all hours.

To conclude, I am reminded of McLuhan's (1964) often-quoted mantra: "*the medium is the message*". *How* we teach our students is at least as important, if not more important, than *what* we teach them.

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