Virtually face-to-face: changes in the meaning of 'online learning'

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1. Abstract

Online education is not only part of the changing face of VET, but has itself also had a change of face in the last six years. This paper explores what these changes have been and what online learning means now in the VET sector.

Six years ago, online learning was envisioned as fully autonomous learning at a distance from the teacher, and in many cases at a distance from the organisation. Online learning was going to revolutionise education; the bricks and mortar infrastructure would be obsolescent. The new model was students with lap-tops, logging in from home or work. All learning content would be online with highly sophisticated, interactive resources available. The primary focus was on the design of learning materials.

Today, our ideas are rather different. In the VET sector, the teacher is still the centre of the learning experience for most students. Online does not necessarily mean learning away from the organisation, but rather has become part of a blended or hybrid delivery mode. Online technologies include web-based learning resources, but also:

- Email and chat between teachers & students
- Use of the internet for research
- Use of online learning environments such as TAFE Virtual Campus and Swinburne TAFE Online to support both on and off campus learning
- Web-based discussion forums
- Electronic submission of students' work.

Many of these devices are used in class as well as at home or work. Sophisticated virtual reality environments are used by a small minority of Australian VET students.

Does this mean that online learning has failed to live up to its promise? On the contrary, recent research by the authors suggests that these hybrid forms are preferred by many students and teachers, and offer more flexibility and educational quality than pure online systems.

2. Introduction

This paper draws on a study (Cashion and Palmieri 2002) which has recently been published by NCVER.

An examination of recent literature told us that a good deal had been written about what online learning *should* be like – good practice frameworks and things of that kind. We found also studies in which students were asked to evaluate the programs

they had studied. But we found little, if anything, which asked students what they thought made for a good online learning experience in general.

We decided to conduct an online survey of TAFE students in all states and territories to see what their views would be. We received responses from about 400 students; we also received about 70 responses from a similar survey aimed at educators. We conducted a number of focus groups of educators to provide another dimension. Focus groups with students proved too difficult to arrange, so we interviewed a very small number of students. We asked students to comment on their own experiences, and to give us their opinions about the most important factors that contribute, positively and negatively, to the online learning experience.

The study gave us an insight into students' and educators' views about a number of aspects of online learning. In this paper we will concentrate on one aspect, the place of face to face in relation to online learning, because it is a matter about which we were uncertain as we began the study, and one about which opinions are becoming increasingly clear as time goes on.

In planning the study, we debated hotly about what we meant by 'online' learning. We were uncertain what should be the definition of online study and, in particular, whether we should target only learners who were using purely online methods, or whether we should include those who were using blended or hybrid modes, where online study was mixed with other methods. In the end we decided to include any study method where online systems formed an integral part. This might include the use of online content, and/or interaction with teachers or with other students, by any means that made use of the internet or an intranet. It would not, however, include study where the online component was peripheral, for example if email was used to submit an assignment where the learning and research had been done face to face or using print media. It would, however encompass class-based learning that included online research.

3. Online learning as seen in the literature

A sampling of the literature, mainly of policy documents and frameworks, is offered here to illustrate the changing ways in which online learning is portrayed.

Such changes are to be expected. In the mid to late 1990s, online services were new and exciting, and fired the imagination of many educators. In addition they held out the promise to governments of cost savings – reaching more students for the same cost, and offering a way to reduce reliance on costly bricks and mortar facilities. This hope can now be seen to have been misplaced; online services certainly do extend the range and flexibility, and sometimes the quality, of offerings and techniques, but they are rarely if ever cheaper than more established modes. Some students prefer to study independently online, like the traditional distance student, but many benefit from at greater or lesser degree of face to face contact as part of their study. A further reason for the push towards online programs was the expected influx of courses from large,

prestigious overseas teaching organisations, and the consequent need for preparation to enter the global education market.

The changes that can be noted in the literature are subtle. In recent literature hybrid and blended learning are prominent in discussions. In earlier documents they are not ruled out; but the omission of such discussion often implies that online learning is considered in isolation.

Chizmar and Williams, in discussing the choice of pedagogy, posit as one of the essential questions 'will the pedagogy work over the Internet using a variety of Internet delivery techniques, including Web documents?' (Chizmar and Williams 1997). Again, while not excluding the use of mixed modes, the paper assumes (or at the least, appears to assume) that one or the other mode will be selected.

In many cases, of course, the environment prescribes the orientation of the literature. Online conferences, naturally, are likely to produce papers which concentrate on the technology-based aspects of teaching. Again, however, it is the implicit assumption that the teaching will be *only* online that is notable in hindsight, as in the case of a paper which, in discussing the rapidly expanding number of online courses, suggests that 'such assertions would seem to reinforce the observation that online systems in general and particularly those which are Web based are rapidly being accepted as a legitimate *alternative* to the more traditional methods of teaching' (Corderoy and Lefoe 1997, our emphasis).

A useful study of TAFE online teachers concentrates on the dichotomies between online and classroom teaching. Mixed modes do not figure in the discussion. The closest that can be seen is a quote from a respondent that 'good teaching is good teaching. I believe a good teacher in face-to-face will be a good teacher in the online environment. I suspect good teaching is as much attitude as it is technical skill'. (Kemshal-Bell 2001: 26).

This line of thinking is more clearly marked in government publications such as policy documents and frameworks. In many cases the introduction of online learning is presented not as an expansion of teaching methods, but a move from one form to another.

So, for example, we read that 'it is likely that in the next few years, the shift to online delivery of TAFE products and services will be fuelled by the demands and expectations of clients, who have developed their technological literacy at work or secondary school, or who require delivery at the workplace at convenient times' (Office of Training and Further Education 1998: 5). Again, ANTA's national strategy for VET predicts that 'capital investment will increasingly be shifted from "bricks and mortar" to infrastructure which supports flexible delivery methods, particularly through the use of new technology. National technical guidelines are being developed to ensure that online training delivery is consistent across States/Territories (Australian National Training Authority 1998).

A planning framework commissioned by the then Office of Training and Further Education in Victoria suggests that 'some disadvantaged groups prefer to learn in collaborative, communal contexts, which may be in conflict with the move to independent learning using the new technologies' (Mitchell and Bluer 1997: 4). It is interesting to note here the reference to independent learning, which was strongly promoted as desirable at the same time as online learning was seen to be the new panacea.

Similarly, in a series of brief descriptions of online practice produced as a part of the promotion of the Victorian TAFE Virtual Campus, four out of six scenarios discuss purely online or technology-based teaching and learning. The fifth deals with mainly online teaching with a reduced face to face component. The sixth is a description of a learning network. (Office of Training and Further Education 1998).

In an interesting move, there was a tendency to equate flexible learning (constantly the subject of definition and redefinition) with online learning. This is evident in the Australian Flexible Learning Framework, where, for example, the second of seven Guiding Principles places an increase in 'the capacity of VET systems and providers to deliver accessible, flexible and client-focussed training' under the heading of 'Strategic use of new learning technologies' (EdNA VET Advisory Group 2000: 13).

Much of this thinking is connected with notions of the 'information economy' and the consequent push for education to compete in a global economy. So, for example, we read that 'to fully achieve all the economic and social benefits of the information economy, digital technologies, particularly the Internet, will need to be as wide-spread in use as the telephone. The overarching policy task for all VET stakeholders is therefore to encourage the use of the Internet and information technologies where possible and when appropriate to the needs of learners' (EdNA VET Advisory Group 2000: 6).

Around the turn of the century, online learning lost the shine of the brand-new toy. The technologies advanced to a stage where they were more universal, more robust and easier to use, so that they became an integral part of daily life. At the same time, we recognised that they had limitations as well as strengths. They were not always flexible and they were not always cheap. For people living in non-urban areas, they were sometimes slow and difficult to access as well as expensive. Used alone, they were not ideal for learners who were low in self-motivation and self-discipline. And the feared influx of programs from overseas educational institutions did not occur. This change in perceptions became visible in the language of public documents, as can be seen in the following examples.

A recognition of the possibility of mixing methods has become evident at the level of national and state/territory agencies, as in this Victorian example: 'flexible and online learning is not just for off-campus education. A learner who prefers to engage in classroom based learning should still be offered the convenience of online enrolment,

submission of assignments, interaction with teachers and fellow learners, access to resources and library catalogues, and access to the full range of student services' (Office of Post Compulsory Education Training and Employment 2000:6).

A case study in the much-quoted report *The Business of Borderless Education* provides an example of this trend in a commercial training environment: 'flagging a greater reliance on online training, Sun plans to use the web for information components, and retain face-to-face classes for social interaction, moving to a hybrid model' (Cunningham et al. 2000: 59).

Zariski and Styles (2000) propose that the solution is to 'mix modes – the online mode should be used for what it is best at, which for these students [undergraduates in legal studies] is for linking material, for research the literature and for (in some cases) discussion'. This view seems to be becoming more prevalent, with the proviso that the most suitable ways of using the online mode will differ between student groups, depending on their level of literacy and computer literacy, whether the program is self-paced or not, and the nature of the content material, among other factors.

5. What learners say about online learning

In this section, we will discuss what learners (and some educators) told us in our recent study.

As it turned out, the question of boundaries – what is encompassed by the term 'online learning' – provided some interesting data. In various ways, we asked students to contribute to the definition.

We asked students where, in their opinions, does the online learning experience begin and end. This, we felt, was important in assessing the value of online information about programs and teaching institutions. Do students see the online experience as beginning when they first seek information about possible programs, or at a later stage? The majority of learners told us that the online experience began for them at enrolment. Educators, on the other hand, mostly considered that it began with the start of tuition.

The majority of questions in the survey were designed to elicit, by a mixture of agree/disagree type questions and more open-ended questions, students' positive and negative views about the online environment, online communication, online materials, online support, online assessment, online technology, and some other, less classifiable, items.

A generally (but not universally) positive view of online learning emerged from the study. This is not very surprising, given that the respondents were all enrolled students who had been successful enough to complete at least some of their study online, and who had adequate computer skills to answer and submit the online survey.

Eleven factors for quality emerged from the study. These were:

Table 1: Factors for quality

Areas of quality	Student responses	
	Number	Percentage
Flexibility/convenience – time, place, pace	79	24
Interaction with teacher	50	15
Quality of materials and course design	48	14
Access to a wide range of online resources	29	9
Online assessment and feedback	22	7
Uses/improves computer/online skills	19	6
Learning style, reflection, multitask, independent learning	19	6
Interaction with other students	18	5
Communication – email, chatrooms	16	5
Ease of use	11	3
Hybrid – balance of face to face and online	9	3

While the number of students who put forward hybrid mode as a critical factor for quality is not especially large, its presence is validated by comments made by other students elsewhere in the survey – for example: 'a highly interactive course that has a good balance between online and [face to face]'. Students who were having problems with their online study suggested that face to face contact might help:

'Face-to-face interaction would help'
'Inclusion of at least one face-to-face [contact]'
'A personal workshop every six weeks – mid-term'
'More support for students in remote areas through the provision of workshops at regular intervals – feedback and encouragement for work submitted'
'A few classes to explain – from the absolute basics!'

As well as face to face interaction, other media were suggested as being helpful. Some respondents felt that print materials should be provided as an alternative or an adjunct to online materials.

For administrative and technical support, too, backup to online systems was suggested. When students are having difficulties with the technology (in setting up their systems or when things go wrong), they will obviously not be able to access an online help system. A telephone helpdesk will clearly be of assistance here. One respondent suggested 'a field officer with full computer knowledge to be available for those unfinancial enough to pay for a computer expert to provide assistance'. It was evident, too, that staff who are likely to talk to students with difficulties need not only the technical understanding of technological or administrative systems, but also the communication skills to help students to solve their problems.

In our focus groups with educators, many participants expressed a preference for hybrid delivery. One suggested that:

'…the learner has to be taken into consideration in deciding whether the whole program should be online or hybrid. Some students can't take to using a computer, or are not motivated for online learning. Face-to-face [teaching] should always be offered as an option.'

One group suggested that there was a tendency to over-stress the importance of online study, declaring that 'online is only part of the learning process'.

Both educators and students considered that the most important time for face to face contact was at the beginning of the program, so that learners could get to know each other and their teachers and build a level of trust and community, and so that initial difficulties could be overcome. This is an interesting counterpoint to the view of Gilly Salmon, who at the NET*Working 2002 conference stated her opinion that face to face contact should take place, if at all, at the end of the program.

Some respondents, too, valued the telephone. Some teachers told us that students telephoned them to establish a sense of personal contact.

An especially useful time to build in some face to face contact may be at an induction activity. A number of students reported that they had no idea what to expect of their online program when they began it. It became clear to us that very many students need a planned program of induction. They need information about the structure of the program, what will be expected of them, and what they can expect from the teaching institution, the teacher(s) and other staff, and other students. They need to know what support is available to them when they get into difficulties, and how they can gain access to this support. They need to know what hardware and software they should have, how to set it up, and where they may be able to find access to it apart from at home or at work. They need to be certain that their computer skills are adequate for requirements, that they can use the platform and communication devices, upload and download, as required. All this information is required not only at the beginning of the program, but whenever a significant change is made.

None of this is to deny the value of online interaction, particularly since flexibility (of time, place and method) emerged as the number one quality factor. The development of a relationship of mutual trust and respect was valued. Teachers in the focus groups expanded upon this point. They reported their experience that relationships may develop more quickly online than face to face, and more democratically: students are often quick to talk about themselves, and expect their teachers to do the same. They may see the online relationship as more personal than the relationship with a classroom teacher. This can be a challenge to some teachers, who may need to consider the extent to which they wish to reveal details of their own lives.

Students and educators valued some attributes of the Internet that cannot easily be replicated in other forms. One of these was the quantity and richness of resources for the researcher (even though it is necessary to be highly discriminating in the use of

these). Another is the ability to interact with fellow-students in far-flung places, and to interact at a personal level with subject experts from around the world.

Online communication demands some special skills on the part of the teacher. It is necessary to set the tone for online discussion, to spell out the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable expression, and to ensure that discussion is not dominated by a few individuals. Teachers must respond promptly to postings, and ensure that their written language is clear, positive and respectful of students' feelings, since there are no visual cues to compensate for poorly chosen words. They can participate in discussion in order to keep up momentum and enthusiasm, but should encourage the students to take centre stage. Some of the educators who took part in the study saw the potential for the development of online learning communities in which students could share in the leadership roles, while teachers could work with individual students who needed this attention. Learners were not aware of this possibility, mostly having a more teacher-centred orientation.

6. Conclusion

It is clear from our study that TAFE students value flexibility most highly of all the attributes of online study. Clearly crucial, too, is the skill of the teacher, not only in making good use of the online technologies, but, most importantly, in doing what good teachers have always done: providing a safe, supportive setting in which students can learn. One way to make the most of these two factors is to offer to those students who want it the opportunity for face to face and telephone interaction as well as online services.

This may present some challenges to teaching institutions, in terms of cost and staff management. Particularly where students are working in a self-paced manner, it may demand some ingenuity to organise. On the other hand, activities such as introductory workshops have long been a successful part of distance education programs. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that some students prefer to work independently, or are precluded for one reason or another from attending in person, and their needs too must be catered for.

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