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Editorial - Implementing online learning: Stories from the field

Benjamin A. Kehrwald
ben.kehrwald@gmail.com, *ben.kehrwald@gmail.com*

Barbara Parker
University of South Australia, *barbara.parker@unisa.edu.au*

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Editorial - Implementing online learning: Stories from the field

Editorial: Implementing Online Learning - Stories from the field

After more than two decades of online learning in Australian higher education, the provision of online programs has moved closer to the mainstream in many Australian universities. According to the IBISWorld (2018), online education in Australia is booming with expected growth in revenue from online learning of 3.6% in 2018, making it a \$5 billion industry. In 2018, more than 20 Australian Universities offered some form of online classes and least six Australian universities have launched large-scale online learning initiatives in recent years. To support these initiatives, there is increasing emphasis on good practice in online teaching and learning. Once seen as fringe activity or niche innovation, online learning has been increasingly central to universities' responses to changed revenue streams and efforts to open and cater to new markets.

Notably, the technology and tools which support online learning have changed considerably since the advent of online learning in the mid/late 1990s. Learning Management Systems (LMS)--once monolithic, proprietary and control-oriented-- have evolved. LMS developers have embraced open source software licensing, modularity, customisation and flexibility. Some enterprising online educators have even moved away from LMS use to promote user-driven online learning environments which utilise a variety of media and communications tools and promote learner choice in the selection and use of online learning tools. Likewise, the technology infrastructure has evolved. Dial-up internet, once an expensive luxury, has been superseded by multiple generations of ever-faster connections, including the current National Broadband Network. This has created new possibilities for the use of rich-media in education, shifting the focus from (almost) exclusive use of online text combined with offline media packages delivered via the post, toward richer, integrated online learning materials with text, audio, imagery and interactive learning objects (see, for example, Taylor, 1995; 2001; and Aoki, 2012). Users' access to technology has also improved. Advances in computing and communications technology have given most Australians access to multiple powerful computing devices including affordable desktop and laptop computers, powerful yet mobile tablets, sophisticated mobile phones and, more recently, wearable technology. The combination of increasingly ubiquitous high-speed networks and mobile computing devices has made Australians seemingly more connected to the Internet than ever before (See Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018)

Like the technology, online teaching practices have changed (Aoki, 2012). Online learning materials were once largely static, derisively described as 'shovelware' as loads of digitised text had been 'shovelled' into online learning environments. However, with the emergence of the read/write web (Web 2.0) in the late 1990s, educators embraced the potential of the web to facilitate interaction, conversation and user-generated content. The emphasis on participation re-defined the focus of online learning practices. Dialogue, conversation, discussion and debate became the norm for online learners whilst online teachers were cast as 'moderators' and 'facilitators'. This trend continued with the emergence of social media. It is now common to find learners of all ages using a variety of tools for communication, information gathering and creation of different forms of knowledge artefacts. Online learning is now at least as much about productive learning activity as it is about the consumption of content.

Meanwhile, online teaching practices have evolved to keep pace with improved technology and higher learner expectations. The uptake of online learning and teaching practices has been driven by two forces, both pushing online teaching practice into the mainstream of university teaching. First, online learning has been taken up more widely-- that is, by a larger number of education providers and more extensively within individual universities as each institution seeks to identify and exploit opportunities to attract students. This has brought increasing numbers of teaching academics and higher education professionals to online learning. Second, increasingly widespread use of educational technologies to add richness and flexibility to on-campus experiences has promoted 'technology-enhanced' and blended learning models which draw in the theory and practice of flexible online learning and have pulled non-online educators into flexible, technology enhanced teaching practices.

Despite the advancements in technology, pedagogy and practice, there is much work to do to continue to make online learning a core aspect of academic practice. To this point, we reference our personal experiences with academic development in online learning. As academic developers or leaders in large educational development projects, it is somewhat discouraging to be confronted with practical online teaching questions in 2019 which are identical to those being posed in the late 1990s. Issues of engagement, participation, commitment, integrity and quality continue to surface in conversations about the implementation of online learning. In our experience in recent large-scale educational development projects in Australian higher education, several persistent attitudes have challenged efforts to implement online learning at scale. We posit that in the six universities that we have worked in over the last 15 years, it would not be surprising to hear academics espouse the following viewpoints:

- **Online learning is not a legitimate form of higher education.** Basically, this view suggests that online learning is inherently inferior to campus-based teaching and participation in local communities of scholars and educators. This view is supported by several related beliefs identified below.
- **Lectures are the best way for people to learn at university.** Driven largely by personal experience and historical roles associated with their place as the 'sage on the stage', academic teaching staff may believe that their ability to mediate a subject and deliver a personalised view of that subject to students via lecture is the gold standard for higher education. Or, at the very least, the continued use of lectures represents an acceptable, stable, 'known' form of course delivery which is part of a long and respected tradition.
- **Face-to-face exams are the most robust form of assessment.** Amid concerns about disciplinary and academic integrity the familiar (perhaps 'tried and true') method of summative, exam-based assessment of student learning is preferred by some academics. This view may also be supported by the efficiency by which exams can be marked (sometimes via machine)—a situation which is increasingly pragmatic in tightly resource constrained Australian universities.
- **Learning is predicated on in-person attendance.** In other words, you must be on campus, in the presence of experts (academics) to learn. Learning happens in lectures, tutorials, workshops, seminars and in other campus-based events. A version of this view is that as an academic, if you are not 'with me' on campus, I cannot easily see if you are learning and intervene as required.

- **Learning activity should be compulsory and assessed.** Based on all-too-common experiences of low levels of participation and engagement or even student apathy, some educators have embraced the idea that assessment drives learning. The extension of this point is that learning activity should be assessed as part of efforts to both ‘engage’ and ‘motivate’ learners.
- **Academics are the ultimate authority on teaching in their discipline.** Again, the historical role of the academic as expert- particularly for experienced teaching academics- may support a problematic view that in addition to being disciplinary experts, academics are experts in teaching and, by extension, know what is best for their students. This view works against a team-based approach to development which includes a variety of recognised experts in learning design, assessment, learner support, information services or media production.

At the risk of ignoring the legitimate historical and experiential bases for these views, we must be critical of them. Contemporary views of online higher education highlight the disconnect between the ‘new’ of highly flexible learner-centred learning and the ‘old’ of historical, traditional or established approaches to teaching. The focus on teaching, including aspects of delivery (lectures), assessment (exams), control (compulsory activity, need for in-person attendance) and academic authority is inconsistent with views of learner centred higher education which foregrounds the learner: catering to a diversity of learner needs through flexible learning; identifying and accommodating learner preferences; creating outstanding learning experiences; supporting and facilitating productive learner activity; and sharing control with agentic learners.

More to the point of this editorial, we must foreground evidence-based academic practice to continue to improve online learning. We must move beyond personal experience and anecdote. Our research and practice in online learning should be based on a process of prioritising and systematically addressing the persistent challenges which are impeding the uptake and evolution of online learning and teaching.

This special issue seeks to showcase innovative and progressive features of contemporary university online learning and teaching through illustrative case studies. We have managed to collect ten case studies of the implementation of online learning in Australian universities. Each case study highlights at least one critical issue associated with online learning and teaching, with an accompanying discussion of the key theoretical and practical implications of the issue and reference to situated examples of teaching practices from the case. The use of case studies emphasises the theory-practice nexus and seeks to highlight not only good practice, but emerging practice. Individually, the case studies illustrate a range of teaching and learning practices which represent specific, situated advances in online learning practices in higher education. Together, the case studies provide a snapshot of flexible, technology-enhanced teaching in Australian universities in 2018 and contribute to the growing record of good practice in online learning in Australian HE.

This issue is organised around key themes emerging in the implementation of online learning in higher education in Australia, namely:

- The shift toward online learning within the sector with attention to different models of provision in different universities and high-level considerations related to learner needs, learner experiences, flexibility, transitions to online higher education and efforts to support learner success.

- The emphasis on design as a key feature of quality online learning. The evolution of design practice in educational development from systematic instructional design, to educational design influenced by social and cultural considerations to learning design which operates at many levels, down to individual learning tasks is reflected in the emphasis on design in this issue. Student-centred design, collaborative design, the inclusion of external stakeholders in design processes and the use of dedicated technologies to support extensive design processes are all featured in this issue.
- The role of digital rich media to support online learning. The articles emphasise a shift from place-based lectures or even recorded lectures toward smaller, targeted rich media experiences within highly engaging course designs. One example featured in this issue is the use of rich-media virtual site tours which can be delivered online and mitigate the need for distributed student cohorts to physically visit industrial sites.

In addition, the articles highlight other practices emerging in contemporary online learning systems. One example is the practicalities of online exams as part of assessment in online courses. Another is the changing role of academic librarians in online learning.

In the first article, **Bevacqua and Colasante** observe focus on the lessons emerging from a pilot project to re-imagine flexible student centred approaches to higher education and the definition of flexible modes of delivery which blur the lines between online, blended and on-campus delivery. Their work raises interesting questions for others seeking to re-define modes of delivery and support more flexible, student centred approaches.

In the next four articles, the issue turns to the subject of design for various aspects of online learning. In the second article, **Davey, Elliot, and Bora** present a case of collaborative design between learning designers and subject matter experts in the “Age of Disruption”. This piece underscores the collaborative nature of educational design for online learning and describes an approach to design and development for online learning which emphasises design thinking. The third article by **Horvath, Stirling, Bevacqua, Coldrey, Buultiens, Buultiens and Larsen** focuses the design and development of an online orientation and learner support program and proposes eight best-practice strategies for online orientation and transition programs. The fourth article in the issue, by **Croxford, Thomas, Horvath, Buultiens, Stirling, Larsen, Stasis, Radcliffe, Buultiens, McDonald and Forsyth**, describes another team-based approach to the development of an online course, in the case of working with an external partner. It focuses on academics’ experiences to draw on key learnings from the case. The fifth article by **Thomson, Auhl, Uys, Wood and Woolley**, centres on the parallel processes of a) implementing institution-wide approaches to systematic design and development and b) the development of software tools to support systematic design and development.

The next three articles focus on the development and use of rich media in online learning. In the sixth article in the issue, Dinmore describes the use of digital video as a replacement for on-campus lectures. The article highlights the evolution of presenting course content away from lecture-based approaches toward more modular rich-media artefacts. Following on from that point, in the seventh article, **McInnes** explores the collaborative development of rich media educational resources for online delivery in large-scale curriculum development. There are interesting insights in this piece which may inform how educational developers approach the planning, design, development and use of rich media in a collaborative way. In the eighth article, **Quinn, Cioffi, Hill, Kor, Longford,**

Moller and Rathore look at a situated example of rich media in the form of 4-dimensional virtual tours which replace site visits for online learners. For those designing online courses in disciplines which historically require place-based activity or site visits, this article may provide options for alternatives.

The ninth article in the issue turns to the issue of online examinations. **Cramp, Medlin, Lake and Sharp** highlight lessons learned in the implementation of remotely invigilated online exams. Using an action learning process, they extract key issues and potential solutions to help ensure the success of remotely invigilated online exams.

The tenth and final article focuses on an often over looked feature of support for online learning- the academic librarian. **Ciccone and Hounslow** describe their experiences re-imagining in and re-defining the roles of academic librarians in the context of large scale development for online learning. They highlight both a) social and cultural and b) pedagogical issues that manifest in their work as digital curriculum librarians. They make a contribution to our understanding of academic librarianship by drawing out a list of skills for 21st Century academic librarians.

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Benjamin A. Kehrwald and Barbara Parker, University of South Australia

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