

Teaching Online as an Act of Looking Inward Before Outward

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Discourse regarding the use of online technology in teaching is arguably saturated by utterances of change and productivity. Consequently, teaching with online technologies can become an outcomes oriented exercise where pedagogy is largely disconnected from curriculum design. In order to incite greater synergy between curriculum and pedagogy, I propose two questions for teachers to consider in respect to their own work:

- What multiple or contestable meanings exist for teaching using online technologies?
- What are the rationales informing your use of online technologies?

I will be exploring these questions largely through reflection on my work as an educational developer in tertiary settings over the past eight years.

Online teaching is an endeavour arguably driven by long standing discourse(s) related to aspirations of productivity and teaching efficiency. These aspirations now sit comfortably within a broader neoliberal discourse where “primacy is given to the flexible individual who acts ‘responsibly’ in relation to the market and who is valued in market terms” (Davies, Browne, Gannon, Honan, & Somerville, 2005, p. 347). Using vocational education as an example, such discourse can be easily traced back as far as the Kangan report of 1974 (Kangan & Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education, 1974); despite this being two decades before the internet became an avenue for offering education. Online education is still viewed as a new or emerging field (Phillips, Kennedy, & McNaught, 2012), whereby decisions regarding its use are often not properly considered at the curriculum design stage. It is at this point, where I believe there is greatest opportunity to grapple with discourse related to productivity and teaching efficiency made visible through an institutional expectation to teach in a blended or online mode.

Drawing on poststructuralist thought(s) (Foucault, 1982), I present this discussion paper largely based on my experiences through working as an educational developer. Over the past eight years I have worked in a variety of educational development roles in vocational and higher education where for each, there has almost always been a key performance indicator related to supporting the increased use of online teaching. Expectations have been firmly centred on supporting teachers/academics increased use of technology in facilitating existing units of study. In contrast, there has been relatively low or non-existent expectation to participate in or support curriculum design. The design of these positions aimed to support the uptake of online teaching is one way in which the separation between pedagogy and curriculum is both visible and reinforced. Potential consequences of this separation include:

- online pedagogy largely informed by normative use of technology
- use of online technologies treated as an add-on to existing learning design
- an inability to develop program or unit wide pedagogical approaches

In order to facilitate a greater synergy between curriculum design and pedagogy, I propose that it could be aided by individual teachers considering the evolution of discourse which informs the moment where they find themselves being asked to teach in a blended or online mode. Through investigation of the past, it may be possible to re-question the applicability of normative online teaching practices.

The following two questions may serve as a useful starting point for reflection:

- What are the rationales informing your use of online technologies?
- What multiple or contestable meanings exist for teaching using online technologies?

The remainder of this discussion paper will explore why each of these questions is worthy of reflection and how consideration of these questions may enable greater synergy between curriculum design and pedagogy in relation to online teaching.

Question 1 - What are the rationales informing your use of online technologies?

I propose that consideration of this question can foster greater visibility of conflicting discourse related to teaching (where there is use of online technologies). These understandings can subsequently be used by teachers to explore how they are positioned as a consequence of multiple, conflicting rationales. For example, if online learning is considered within discourse related to productivity and teaching efficiency, it is not a new rationale; simply an available response. Within the Vocational Education space, this rationale is clearly articulated in the four decade old Kangan Report:

“The committee recalls the accelerating social effects of new techniques of communication, including computers and colour television, and increasing sophistication in their production and use. These techniques and production methods could well be the basis of new strategies for self-paced learning in TAFE. It is of the view that technology must be developed for or adapted to TAFE in such a way as to redistribute and make better use of its teachers” (Kangan & Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education, 1974, p. 102).

For nearly two decades the technological capabilities have been available to well and truly respond to this agenda. However it is difficult to achieve this objective solely through a ‘perceived’ increase of accessibility afforded by the use of online technologies. Curriculum related decisions such as the study period duration and scheduling of assessment tasks, learning activities and instruction are complementary enablers of flexibility. However, these acts are simply techniques without a rationale. Exploring the productivity/flexibility discourse within which online teaching can be associated; is one way in which teachers can consider how they are positioned and determine their capacity to practice within this context. For example, the aforementioned extract from the Kangan report (Kangan & Australian Committee on Technical and Further Education, 1974) could elicit a multitude of responses from teachers working in the sector. One of which may be a pragmatic scepticism where greater reflexive work is undertaken by the teacher in regards to identifying a rationale and pedagogical approach relevant to their teaching context. A description of the teaching context would now not simply restricted be to using demographic language such as student numbers, age and prior learning; learning topics and discipline area. It would now contain utterances which indicate and/or speak of multiple, contestable rationales.

In regards to my position as an educational developer, the potential benefits of a broadened description of teaching context are multiple:

- Possibility for conversations between teaching stakeholders regarding online learning to not be dominated by binary opposites.
- Capacity to critique normative online teaching practice and develop subsequent approaches which are a direct response to reflexive constructions of rationale
- Opportunity to consider the merits in developing online teaching practice which disregards using an existing unit (product) as its creative source.
- Capacity to discuss reasons for token use of an online environment.
- Scope to reconsider approaches such as parallel online and on-campus delivery where the teacher is effectively teaching two cohorts, whilst only being acknowledged for working with one.

Question 2 - What multiple or contestable meanings exist for teaching using online technologies?

I propose consideration of this question on the basis that it may incite more diversity in online teaching pedagogy. There is an endless flood of new technologies and approaches being documented in blogs and academic journals, however they rarely appear during my work with teachers/academics. Whilst an availability of pedagogical ideas and new technologies should not blindly translate to their use; I contend that online teaching pedagogy is comparably standardised to that currently visible in on-campus learning environments. Two ways in which this sense of standardisation may be reinforced, is through the use of umbrella terms to describe online teaching and/or dominant pedagogies, and the emphasis placed on a small suite of technologies that are institutionally mandated and supported. Revisiting my earlier argument that curriculum design is separated from pedagogy within this discourse of standardisation in online teaching, these dominant practices (which are questionably informed or reflected in curriculum design) only serve to reinforce this disconnection. Curriculum design being a neglected opportunity to undertake structural change to a unit or program design cognisant of pedagogy; is a cycle that continues.

Online learning is often described under umbrella terms such as e-learning and sometimes through the name of the learning management system (i.e. MyLO at UTAS). Umbrella terms such as these can serve to mask the contestable nature of online learning through them being interpreted as having limited historical association with normative understandings of pedagogy and curriculum. In effect, there is an artificial division between what is conceived as resting under the banner of online teaching (or associated umbrella term) and teaching practice commonly placed under the traditional methods banner. In parallel, they can serve to create (or enable the creation) of identities which are tightly nestled under these banners. One example is in many of my initial interactions with teachers (as an educational developer) I am asked closed questions specifically directed at technical and/or procedural aspects associated with use of online technologies. Despite being frustrated by the way I am initially positioned within this discourse, such interactions only serve to remind me how online teaching can be categorised as an isolated, generalizable action. They can simultaneously serve to constrict individual teacher's

capacity to engage in dialogue about online teaching that encapsulates focus on both curriculum design and pedagogy.

The main technology used in online teaching is the learning management system. Learning management systems have been utilized in Australian tertiary education since the late 1990s (Coates, James, & Baldwin, 2005). They are typically implemented by institutions to provide teachers and students with a standardised suite of commonly requested capabilities which range from making learning materials available for download through to managing and marking assessment tasks. Advocates for their use often refer to the standardised look and feel which is often reported as being an attribute desired by students. Meanwhile, learning management systems have attracted criticism as being a site for surveillance of teaching (Paliwala, 2009) and for having limited capacity to support collaborative learning (Mott, 2010). Common platforms such as Blackboard, Moodle and Desire2Learn are continuing to offer an increased breadth of teaching capabilities with each new version. However, there is a small sub group of tools within the learning management system which remain exponentially more utilised than the remainder of the suite. Within my working context, the vast majority of enquiries I have received in regards to use of the learning management system are directed at use of the content, discussions, assignments, quiz and gradebook tools. This has been irrespective of the learning management system and institution. My concern is that use of this small array of tools represents normative online teaching. Acknowledging that this small group of tools have been available for nearly two decades, I question whether they remain, or ever were the most suitable tools available to teachers to work in a manner which reflects the rationales they are attempting to respond to.

Concluding comments

In order to conclude, I will revisit the initial question posed by the conference organisers: “what does a teacher need to know in order to use these technologies to the best educational outcomes for students?” As a response, I have tried to briefly argue that teachers may have greater capacity to develop creative online learning pedagogy through locating and critiquing the discourse(s) which they feel inform the rationales for online teaching and its normative practices. Following such a trajectory may enable teachers to draw greater links between pedagogy and curriculum design. It may also enable greater capacity for new practices to not be reappropriated within the confines of dominant online teaching practices.

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