Online learning: the good, the bad, and the ugly

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Abstract

Do learners prefer a hybrid mix of modes of delivery and interaction, a variety of resources and formats, and the application of 'simple' technology to successfully engage in online learning? This seminar will draw on research on online learning in Australia, and personal experience in the management and delivery of the Australian School Library Association (ASLA) online conference, *Constructing communities of learning and literacy*. Features and characteristics of online learning communities will be presented, including the profile of an online learner, the role of a facilitator, and the application of low and high end technology tools. The turn-ons and turn-offs of online learning will be explored. The good, the bad, and the ugly will form the basis for interactive discussion on how ASLA can best deliver online learning and online conferences in the future.

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Online learning has experienced an early adoption across all sectors of education within Australia. It has not been unusual for Australians to embrace the use of technologies for the seeking of information, engaging in interactive and networked learning, and enhancing communication. Australians are keen users of the Internet, Intranet, electronic mail and discussion groups, mobile phones, and digital technology.

E-learning, online training and online learning have been used interchangeably in discussion, definition and presentation. Derek Stockley (2004) presents a definition that encompasses the basic focus for utlising online utilities and a variety of equipment to provide learning materials.

> The delivery of a learning, training or education program by electronic means. E-learning involves the use of a computer or electronic device(e.g. mobile phone) in some way to provide training, educational or learning materials. (Stockley 2004).

Basically, learning is the core activity, and there is a paradigm shift from the 'traditional' ways of teaching and learning to incorporate the 'new' digital mediums to compliment, enhance and extend learning opportunities.

'Good' Learning architecture

Flexibility, interoperability, reusability and *efficiency* are the benefits identified by the Ministerial Council of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) (2003, p.6) in developing a learning architecture that ensures

investments in technology deliver standards, systems, and a learning workspace to provide educational support structures and improved learning opportunities in response to the learning demands of a contemporary society.

The application of information and communications technologies (ICTs) enables the integration of learning, administration and management. These are essential areas to consider when planning the delivery of online learning.

Flexibility means using systems that can adjust quickly and responsively to new opportuntities for delivering learning and training to a community, such as the teacher librarianship community. Within this professional group, analogue, digital and online delivery models are utilised. This provides a hybrid mix of information and resources to assist the profession to develop their knowledge, understanding, skill and expertise.

A focus on *interoperability* ensures the sharing of information across systems is transparent to the user. Seamless, integration and use of resources, internal and external to the profession, will help to minimise the duplication of materials and effort. For example, EdNA Online provides an extensive range of online information, communication, education and training services that benefit all sectors of the Australian educational community (Education Network Australia 2005).

Reusability maximises the information and infrastructure for multiple purposes. For example, documentation stored in a single repository can be made available to the public, specific individuals or organisations.

Efficiency leans towards minimising time. An integrated system can provide a central utility for the administration and management of learning materials, as well as the users of the system, when it comes to delivering online learning and training programs. From within the central workspace the user is able to register, access the learning and support materials, engage in collaborative discussion, access archived resources in respect to the activity, and provide feedback and evaluation of the learning activity. In addition, the provider of the learning program is able to administer the registrations and manage the learning workspace accordingly.

'Good' communities of learning

Communities involve people who gather together for a particular purpose or reason. An online learning community is simply an extension, whereby people are utilising online utitlies and resources to learn together, to deepen their knowledge, understanding, skills and expertise within an agreed area of interest. The utilities allow them to interact with each other regardless of time, and physical or geographical location. 'Deep learning' occurs when the focus is on communication and interaction, the emotional IQ, rather than content.

Effective online learning communities recognise the importance of social interaction as part of the learning process, and emphasise a constructivist model for knowledge acquisition (Backroad Connections 2003, pp. 3-4).

As cited in Oliver and Herrington (2001), Cunningham, Duffy and Knuth (1993) suggest that constructivist learning environments are those which concurrently:

- provide experience in the knowledge construction process;
- provide experience in and appreciation for, multiple perspectives;
- embed learning in realistic and relevant contexts;
- encourage ownership and voice in the learning process;
- embed learning in social experience;
- encourage the use of multiple modes of representation; and
- encourage self-awareness in the knowledge construction process.

(Oliver & Herrington 2001, p. 15)

The learning process is personal and involves the learner in the development of his/her undertsanding through a process of interaction with others and the learning material over a period of time.

A 'good' learning community encourages creative and constructive response, participation and respect, and development and growth of ideas.

'Good' online turn-ons

Research on online learning in Australia by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) indicates that learners 'prefer hybrid approaches which mix modes of delivery, resources and technologies' (NCVER 2002, p. 2).

The main priorities for learners is 'flexibility', 'responsive teachers', and 'quality of materials and course design' (NCVER 2002, pp. 4-5).

Flexibility allows the learner the freedom and convenience to access the learning materials at any time and place. Discipline and good time management are required. The hybrid mix also provides multiple pathways to learning and accommodates different learning styles.

Teacher or facilitator responsiveness is crucial in an online environment otherwise the outcomes can get 'bogged down' or are not delivered. Someone who motivates, assists, responds, encourages, communicates and contributes helps to keep the learner motivated and confident.

The technology used plays a big role in the quality of material and the design of the learning space. For the end user it is important to keep in mind the 'type and age' of the technology he/she could be using, particularly if working from home.

When planning for and delivering the ASLA Online I conference in 2004 the following points were taken into consideration:
- Variety of formats for documentation and web display with consistency of style and layout
- Efficiency and speed for downloads across a variety of platforms
- Everything easy to read
- Documentation is comprehensive and concise
- Site is easy to navigate
- Support materials are available with clear instructions, e.g. outcomes, schedule, FAQs, registration procedures, hints and guides, etiquette

- Interactive discussion space available
- Help Desk contact
- Forgotten password link or equivalent service
- Evaluation of the program form available online
- Orientation / induction program to assist the user
- Alternative means of communication with admistrator if online access not working
- Total accessibility to the site
- Weblinks to other resources of use to the user

'Bad' online turn-offs

The greatest turn-off is when the technology just does not work! Technology problems can include:
- Slow bandwidth for Internet access
- Speed of the hardware or software
- Access to up-to-date hardware or software.

The learner can get quite frustrated and anxious, resulting in the affective domain interfering with the potential cognitive process of learning.

Other turn-offs are often the opposite experience of the turn-ons (NCVER 2002, pp. 8-9). The learner loses motivation and interest due to the unresponsiveness of other learners in discussion, for example, and a lack of facilitator/teacher interaction and feedback. The learning program is poorly resourced or out-of-date, and online links are not working. Support material and resources provide unclear instruction, are difficult to locate on the site, and are only available in one format which may not be easily accessed by the learner. The design of the learning space is confusing, hard to navigate, and requires access to online tools that are difficult to download or use. Technical support and help are not available at the point of need, or the personnel providing the support are not knowledgeable enough to assist the learner.

Within an online learning environment a combination of low and high end technology will be present. For example:
- Simple electronic mail applications for small groups
- Mailing list software for larger groups
- Internet Relay Chat (IRC) for real-time discussion
- Learning Management Systems (LMS) that are specifically designed to incorporate content management in a variety of formats, user database, and a variety of discussion and interactive facilities (asnychronous and synchronous).

Keeping the technology 'simple' and/or providing training programs for specific technology tools will help to minimise excess demand for support.

Then again, there are other factors involved in online turn-offs such as the literacy and information technology (IT) skills of the end user.

The topic of this paper indicates there can be an 'ugly' side to online learning. For the purpose of being positive I will now refer to this as the 'challenging' side of online learning.

'Challenging' the learner profile

For learners to experience success in an online learning environment they need to be self-motivated, interdependent learners. The reality is, this is not always the case.

Self-motivation and interdependence requires a reasonable level of competency in emotional intelligence. According to Goleman, our emotional intelligence is based on five elements –'self-awareness, motivation, self-regulation, empathy, and adeptness in relationships'(Goleman 1998, p. 24). An online learner needs to be willing, regardless of position or status, to recognise and acknowledge their strengths and limitations in respect to information literacy and information technology skills, time management, confidence and capabilities, accepting responsibility for their actions, interpersonal skills, and constructive and collaborative learning processes.

It is important for the provider of the online learning program to be sensitive to the potential barriers and limitations experienced by the learner. Providing teaching and learning support materials, technical advice, and a variety of communication channels to assist the learner through the challenges is essential.

Even so, the learner needs to take the initiative to access these options. Alternatively, if a hybrid delivery approach is achievable and possible, then some of these options could be pre-requisites for the online learner.

'Challenging' the facilitator profile

The facilitator or teacher also needs to be a self-motivated, interdependent learner and capable of exhibiting a similar level of competency in emotional intelligence. Working in an online environment requires the facilitator to have a combination of technical, facilitation and mangerial skills.

Professional development and training needs to be provided to help the facilitator develop competency in the range of technologies used in the learning environment. One of the best ways to develop these skills is for the facilitator to experience the process by engaging in an online program.

Facilitation skills can be challenging as the facilitator is having to develop new ways to build relationships with the learners. These skills include:
- engaging the learner in the learning process, particularly at the beginning
- appropriate questioning, listening and feedback skills
- the ability to provide direction and support to learners
- skills in managing online discussion
- ability to build online teams
- a capacity for relationship building
- motivational skills

(Backroad Connections 2002, p. 3).

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Managing the environment will require different working arrangements. Online availability is often twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week (24/7). The hours involved and the actual place of work need to be flexible to align with the times when learner usage is high. For example, the facilitator may work at night when learners are accessing the environment, and work from home to minimise the disruption so as to be attentive and responsive to the learners.

Conclusion

Regardless of the interpretations of the good, the bad and the ugly sides of online learning as presented in this paper, the basic core activities are teaching and learning. Technology is the tool used to provide a facility for a teacher facilitated, learner centred environment.

Engaging learners in real and authentic learning, lively discussion, interaction and debate, and a constructivist approch to knowledge development should be the basic ingredients for delivering learning, training or education programs online.

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