

Reflections on Online Courses

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We are living through a revolutionary era that mankind has not hereto experienced. It might not appear so, as I contemplate the hush of the train commute whilst my fellow passengers pour over their mobile phones. Yet, it is their silence that is deafening. It represents the creation of the first, greatest primary resource in over four thousand years, alongside labour, land and capital : the internet. This invention can only be described as revolutionary, as it continues to change every aspect of our daily lives, globally. Moreover, this development needs to be considered in a time frame of approximately only twenty years with a current reach of over half the planet's population!

Education has not remained untouched. In fact, the arrival of computers, laptops and tablets with the internet beamed into the classroom, continues to proliferate at an increasing rate across the globe. So much so, that our students no longer need to be present in the classroom to fulfill their academic goals.

Advances in technology and communications have served as essential tools in integrating a globalised community. On-line courses reflect virtual classrooms filled with a diversity of students reunited from nearly every corner of the world, at appointed hours for lectures. My courses in Communication Skills have gathered students remotely from Australia, Africa, the Middle East, North America and Europe simultaneously.

The profiles of my students illustrate the appeal of on-line courses. A significant majority are working individuals. On-line courses, despite challenging forums and assignment schedules, provide them with an opportunity to progress their academic aspirations, whilst in full-time work and often caring for their families, at the same time.

The courses themselves are carefully prepared and checked in advance on Moodle (the educational cloud platform) by faculty, IT and administration. As courses progress, units are opened weekly for student access, enabling them to participate in on-line forums, complete assignments and review articles, links and slides, prior to each lecture.

In spite of the absence of normal classroom interaction, on-line lectures often develop into full-blown virtual discussions, which are wholly supported by the lecturer. They not only reinforce and illustrate concepts, but help bonds to flourish amongst the students and with the lecturer. The ability of students to "tweet" comments and to participate both orally and visually during lectures often generates a scenario where student contribution exceeds that of the traditional classroom.

As changes in technology continue to thunder on relentlessly, so, undoubtedly, will on-line courses continue to develop? It will not be long before and students across the globe will be donning special virtual lenses and experiencing the full classroom experience in the comfort of their homes.