

Now's the Time to Understand Digital Learning's True Potential

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Like so many others, I've been reading everything I can get my hands on, and in particular, how this crisis offers society, governments, companies, individuals ... everybody ... the chance to take stock, to reimagine what we have become so accustomed to, to question what we see as default settings, and to go back to first principles of why we do the things we do.

Will those in the higher education space take that opportunity? We are a sector that has been remarkably resistant to the quantum of change that has swept through other industry sectors, clinging to a model that has proven particularly resilient and hardy. But is that hardiness a good thing? Is the model actually worth preserving?

As educational institutions from the youngest of early learning centres to the oldest universities in the world come to terms with mandated measures that prevent the congregation of people in one location, the central question that underpins the concept of education remains: what is the most effective means of facilitating learning, of developing wisdom, and of exchanging knowledge? Specifically, does it need to be done face-to-face?

As someone who has been leading pure-play online education businesses for well over a decade, I've become accustomed to the slightly sneering view that what my colleagues and I do is only a fall-back option for those who can't undertake the traditional face-to-face model. For a time, that view was probably justified; not because online education is inherently less effective than face-to-face learning, but because what institutions traditionally served up as "online learning" was substandard, often just on-campus courses quickly and haphazardly retrofitted for an online environment, without any regard to the differences in the way people behave, consume content, interact and learn online.

But this last month has opened the eyes of many to the fact that quality online education isn't just about filming a lecture and putting it into a video player on a website. And that designing, developing and delivering online education is really hard, and requires you to think about what actually constitutes good teaching and learning.

Quality online education always engages with the first principles of education: what are the learning outcomes we're seeking to ensure? What types of learning experiences will embed the knowledge required to achieve those outcomes? What types of content and learning materials will illustrate the key concepts and help the learner apply those to different situations? How do we engender curiosity and the capacity for critical thinking? How do we best draw out and share the different perspectives and experiences from students to enrich the understanding of all students? What forms of assessment will help the learner demonstrate that they have met the learning outcomes?

But it does all of that both without the constraints of the conventions of face-to-face delivery, and through the prism of the potential of data capture to make those things more efficient, more effective, and more individualised.

So, for example, the convention of the hour-long class can (and should) be seen for what it is: a physical infrastructure utilisation model, rather than a reflection of the optimal amount of content for the human brain to digest in order to achieve real learning. We know that humans consume content on mobile devices in shorter, sharper, more-focused packages. Some will want to debate whether that is a good thing, but the fact that it is so gives us the opportunity to think about the modularisation of course content to be focused on key concepts rather than units of time. This allows us to reimagine whether every student should receive the same content, in the same format, at the same time, and in the same sequence. Probably not, given that these cohorts are never homogenous.

Using data effectively enables us to make a virtue of that lack of homogeneity, and to create individualised and adaptive paths through the material based not on a one-size-fits-all approach, but instead on individual students' ability to demonstrate mastery of the material. It enables us to build predictive models of success, identifying the signals that indicate that a student is not comprehending the concepts, and to build individualised interventions to keep people on track, draw attention to the fact that they are failing to grasp key concepts and give alternative learning experiences to embed the knowledge through different means. It allows teachers to work out which parts of the course materials are unclear or confusing to students and make changes in real-time to improve learning outcomes. It gives students licence to engage in discourse in ways and at times that suit them, their styles and their confidence levels in ways that on-campus tutorials do not.

I'm hopeful that this crisis will lead those involved in higher education to see the virtue, the benefits and the potential of digital learning to lead to better outcomes for more students, but only if we all engage in the type of learning that we want to see from our students. The benefits to our learners, our institutions, our funders, and our economy are just waiting to emerge.



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A lawyer by profession, Paul Wappett has been the Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Institute of Business (AIB), Australia's market share leader in online MBAs, since the start of 2018. Paul is a sports tragic, a milkshake addict, an enthusiastic but ordinary guitarist, a grammar, syntax and apostrophe pedant.