



Learning without Limits: The Experience of Students Engaging as Online Learners on a Master Program in London UK

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Received on August 01, 2018; revised on October 01, 2018; published on November 18, 2018

Abstract

At the beginning of the twenty-first century developments in information and communication technology (ICT) have had significant repercussions for educational practice and for models of pedagogy. The application of ICT has contributed to increasing levels of participation in Higher Education. In 2010, two students were recruited to a Master Degree program at St Mary's University, London, as online learners. Within four years, numbers had grown exponentially with more than fifty students having started the course as online learners. Online learning implies that through asynchronous participation, learners are not required to be together in the same place and at the same time but can access course materials and communicate with tutors and other learners flexibly at their own time and convenience through a virtual learning environment (VLE). In this way, learners, at any level of study, through online engagement with course content and instruction, are able to participate with colleagues in a range of teaching methods and learning opportunities. This paper explores the personal reflections of learners who successfully completed the course through online learning. There is a paucity of literature on the experiences of learners in their engagement with online learning so it was interesting to consider their perspectives. Adopting a phenomenological approach, it was possible to conduct a small-scale enquiry to explore the views of students who had graduated from the course and to evaluate their individual experiences of studying in this way. It was therefore possible to interpret the benefits and limitations of studying as an online learner. The intention was to examine the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their unique personal viewpoints in order to assess the extent to which online learning supported, challenged and informed conventional practice.

Keywords: Information Technology, Full Distance Learning, Higher Education, Catholic Education, Phenomenology, Blended Learning

1 Introduction

In order to appreciate the significance of the impact of electronic and technological developments on learning, it would be appropriate first of all to put this small-scale research enquiry into context by presenting an historical and philosophical account of an earlier revolution in communication technology, which has implications for our present age. It would seem appropriate therefore to explore a previous example of innovation in the field of communication in order to compare the way it resonates with contemporary developments in information technology.

A few years ago, I visited the historical city of Mainz, which lies at the confluence of the river Rhine and the

river Main in western Germany. What, you might ask, is special about the city of Mainz?

It was in Mainz, in the middle of the fifteenth century, that a blacksmith in his early forties was experimenting with pouring a metal alloy into letter-shaped cavities. By applying oil-based ink he found that he could utilize an agricultural screw press to mass produce the printing of literature. In using movable type in a mechanical way, he transformed a craft which, up till that time, had been dependent on hundreds of clerics and scribes copying texts by hand.

The name of this man was Johannes Gutenberg. His invention of the movable printing press marked a turning

point in world history and, arguably, it significantly changed the course of civilization.

Gutenberg's invention had a far-reaching effect. It was an important factor in initiating an era of mass communication, which stimulated the expansion of literacy, information, scientific experimentation and education. It facilitated a revolution in the production of knowledge, whereby information was spread at an increasing and accelerating rate. Before the printing press, books were produced by hand as manuscripts, usually by monks in monasteries. Up to that point, the publication of books had been time-consuming and labor-intensive

This was a pivotal event. With the invention of the printing press, book production became much faster and less expensive. Books and all kinds of literature became available to a far wider audience. In 1450 the number of books that were available could be counted in hundreds. By 1470, there began the transition from handwritten books to printed books. By 1500, there was a drastic change and printed literature had exceeded the production of manuscripts. Millions of books were now being printed. The world had changed forever.

Within a hundred years, the printing press would initiate a revolution in the communication of art, literature, science, philosophy and religion. It meant, for example, that Luther and Erasmus would be able to sell hundreds of thousands of their books and therefore spread their radical views across Europe. The ensuing dissemination of new ideas would inform the Renaissance and would lead to the exchange of knowledge through the Age of Enlightenment and beyond to the Modern Age.

Thus, the printing press transformed the history of the world. It triggered an unprecedented diffusion of knowledge and information. Through the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Age of Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, it contributed to cultural changes that led to a profoundly transformed view of the world.

In Berlin, at the Walk of Ideas, there is a 40ft sculpture of a stack of books that commemorates famous German writers. It includes the names of Grass, Arendt, Heine, Luther, Kant and Hegel. All owe a debt to the inventor of the printing press. Mark Twain (1900), considering the good and bad effects of the spread of the printing press around the world, reflected:

What the world is to-day, good and bad, it owes to Gutenberg. Everything can be traced to this source, but we are bound to bring him homage, for what he said ... has been literally fulfilled, for the bad that his colossal invention has brought

about is overshadowed a thousand times by the good with which mankind has been favored.

In a similar way, it is contended that technological developments in our own times, such as the World Wide Web, have set off a comparable revolution in communication technology that will define the world of education for generations to come.

In his book, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, written in 1962, Marshal McLuhan, paying tribute to Johannes Gutenberg, coined the term 'the global village'. By this, he was referring to the way in which developments in mass media and communication would have the impact of bringing the people of the world closer together. This would result in greater interdependence amongst nations across the globe.

Although it has to be admitted that the earliest system of movable type had been developed by the Chinese four hundred years before, it was Gutenberg's introduction of the printing press into Europe that was to make such a momentous impact on the world. The title of McLuhan's book pays tribute to the contribution of Johannes Gutenberg and draws attention to the effects of his invention of movable type and the printing press in the 1450s for future historical developments.

Moreover, in advance of the introduction of the World Wide Web, McLuhan predicted that, with the immediate exchange of information, electronic communication would eventually enable us to connect with and appreciate and value the concerns of communities and societies across the world.

McLuhan's work was prescient. Thirty years after the publication of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Tim Berners-Lee and his colleagues, who were working on the development of the Internet, created the World Wide Web as a global information forum. As a result, users could read and write messages using computers connected to the Internet. Today, books themselves are being reinvented.

We have now entered a new era dominated by the World Wide Web. The effect of the invention of printing nearly six hundred years ago will be as nothing compared with the impact of the invention of the internet. Compared with the century following Gutenberg's invention, the power of today's technological revolution is having – and will continue to have – an even greater impact in terms of the explosion of knowledge and the exchange of information.

When I started teaching in a secondary school over forty years ago, there were no computers or mobile phones. Our main concern at the beginning of the academic year was to order 'some colored chalk for the blackboard'. Moreover,

when I embarked on my studies towards my first Masters degree in 1979, I thought I was at the ‘cutting edge’ of technological progress when I purchased an electric typewriter! It would have been difficult then for me to imagine the changes that would take place in the next forty to fifty years. How can we predict the developments that will take place in the next fifty years?

The escalating use of the Internet as a means of global communication has been dramatic. In 1993, the Internet communicated only 1% of the information flowing through two-way telecommunications networks; by 2000 it had reached 51%; and in 2007, it was responsible for more than 97% of the telecommunicated information. Today, 2.4 billion people around the world are using the Internet and there are 100 million searches in Google every day.

We are living in exponential times. The world’s knowledge is increasing at unparalleled rates, as is technology. The number of text messages sent and received every day exceeds the total population of the planet. There are over 2.7 billion searches performed on Google each month. There are 3,000 new books published every single day. It is estimated that a week’s worth of New York Times contains more information than a person was likely to come across in a lifetime in the eighteenth century.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we are increasingly aware that we live in an era of continuous social, economic, cultural and political change. Benjamin Franklin said that ‘in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.’ Today, we can add that another certainty is that there will be constant change. Tomorrow is going to be very different from today. Change is accelerating rather than slowing down.

We are in a new electronic age marked by rapid change; the human race is experiencing a greater technological revolution than ever before. Moreover, it is significant that the world is changing faster than any of our educational institutions – schools, colleges and universities. So how can education respond to the challenges that are posed by this revolution?

The effects, as Mark Twain suggested, are hard to predict but, as with any new innovation, there is potential both for good and for bad. As long ago as 1970, Alvin Toffler, in his book, *Future Shock*, warned that:

Future shock is the shattering stress and disorientation that we induce in individuals by subjecting them to too much change in too short a time.

Most people working in organizations are suspicious of change – and the bigger the change, the greater the resistance. In the face of new initiatives, many teachers are reluctant to make dramatic changes. Those responsible for leading the curriculum face the challenge of supporting and encouraging colleagues not to constantly protest at yet another new initiative but to ‘learn to love change’.

The application of information and communication technology, such as the Internet and the World Wide Web, has become prevalent in our world. Online social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter have provided original and innovative means of collaboration and conversation.

These advances in telecommunications have contributed towards the phenomenon of globalization, generating global interdependence in economic and cultural activities. Defining globalization, Roland Robertson (1992: 8), for example, says it is:

... the compression of the world and the intensification of the consciousness of the world as a whole. One feature of globalization has been the rapid and increasing dissemination of knowledge.

We cannot turn our back on these developments and pretend they do not exist or, like King Canute, try to hold back the waves of change. With globalization, the challenges and opportunities of the internet have become universal. Globalization has brought the world more closely together in that it has become easier and simpler to communicate ideas across national boundaries. Moreover, these developments have significant implications for learning and teaching in the future.

In the past, learning and teaching in educational contexts could be characterized as a direct, interpersonal and face-to-face classroom activity. Traditionally, the predominant model of education can be defined in terms of a teacher standing at the front of a classroom to teach learners in real time. Within a traditional pedagogy, Watkins (2005:1) says that ‘learning’ has often been construed as equivalent to ‘being taught’. Jarvis et al (2003:117) define this traditional model of education as a ‘closed’ model.

The emergence of the World Wide Web and global forms of communication, however, has served as a catalyst for the expansion of learning to reach out beyond the limits of the classroom. This has implications for the development and broadening of courses beyond the confines of the classroom. By exploiting information and communication technologies, learning and teaching has a potential for extending both temporal and spatial boundaries. This has led

to an increased focus on the learner rather than the teacher.

With advances in technology, the 'closed' model has been challenged. Progressively, new patterns of pedagogy and assessment have arisen, which have become a more pervasive component in education. The combination of a traditional approach to learning and teaching with online communication is transforming the nature of educational provision. This has had a significant practical effect on learning and teaching. Consequently, the development of information and communication technology and the use of online and distance strategies through the Internet has contributed to an 'open' model of education. (Jarvis et al; 2003)

With blended learning¹, we can enjoy the advantages of combining traditional face-to-face teaching, through conventional lecturers, seminars, and recommended course reading, with a range of technology-based facilities. Therefore, a blended learning experience can enhance communication, dialogue, cooperation and collaboration between teachers and learners.

In applying blended learning, learners are encouraged to adopt personal responsibility for their learning. As a result, students can enjoy the benefit of having greater control over the time, the place, the pathway and the pace of their learning, giving them greater control over their learning experience.

By exploiting the use of computers, blended learning has the advantage of amalgamating traditional classroom methods with the use of information and communication technology. In effect, blended learning, by combining traditional pedagogical methodologies with online technology, can contribute to a richer experience for learners.

Today, learners can communicate in a variety of ways: by Skype, Face Time, video conferencing, email and blogs. Facilities such as Skype and FaceTime, for example, offer opportunities for learners to engage with teachers and other learners face-to-face as individuals.

By augmenting traditional pedagogy with the adoption of online facilities, students are encouraged to become independent learners in that they can engage with a community of learners across national boundaries at times of their own discretion. Their dependency on teacher-led instruction is thereby reduced. Indeed, in adopting online facilities, the process becomes more learner-centered. As a result, there is an emphasis on personalized learning. According to Eduard Pogorskiy (2015: 66):

...personalization is particularly relevant for online and distance education when educational content is selected on an individual basis for each student by system software and self-learning systems.

The spread of open educational resources (OERs) and massive open online courses (MOOCs) illustrate the potential to develop effective learning through the personalization of educational content. Learners are no longer bound by the parameters of their classrooms but are enabled to reach out beyond the classroom to other learners throughout the world. The process is participative, and it encourages learners to adopt personal responsibility for their learning. As a result, students can enjoy the benefit of having greater control over the time, the place, the pathway and the pace of their learning, giving them greater control over their learning experience.

Significantly, by integrating asynchronous computer discussions into course design, it is possible for students to enjoy greater independence in their learning. Thus, by engaging with online learning, students are able to contribute to the discussions in the virtual classroom at any time that is convenient to them. They can therefore give much greater consideration to their responses so that they can be more thoughtful, reflective and analytical. This encourages greater self-reflection and peer evaluation.

Marginson (2008: 303), drawing attention to the potential universal appeal of online learning, says:

Although most activity in higher education is nation-bound, a distinctive global dimension is growing in importance, connecting with each national system of higher education while also being external to them all.

Characteristically, in a traditional classroom of, say, twenty students, each student, at most, could, realistically, only make a few minutes' contribution towards any particular discussion.

In the traditional classroom, moreover, there is a tendency for one or two students to dominate discussions. In the virtual classroom, however, even the most reticent student has the opportunity to shine! Online learning is therefore compatible with a democratic approach to learning, as it provides the opportunity for all students – even those who are least confident – to share their reflections with others.

In the virtual classroom, students are empowered to take greater responsibility for their learning. Consequently, greater emphasis can be attached to learning as opposed to teaching. As Lea (2004: 759) argues, potentially, the use

of a virtual learning environment will open up new perspectives

...by offering the students the opportunity for electronic debate and discussion and, additionally, providing a permanent record of these which can be accessed repeatedly by students throughout their studies.

In summary, the introduction of online learning, presents an historic development that will have the capacity to impact significantly on pedagogy and assessment in education. It encourages students to become more independent as learners and places the emphasis on learning rather than on the teacher, thereby reducing the learner's dependency on teacher-led instruction. In effect, in the future, the learning and teaching process will be largely determined by the nature and needs of the learner.

2 Methods

There is a paucity of literature on the experiences of distance learners in their engagement with online learning and it was considered that it would be interesting to investigate approaches that would support them in their studies. The emphasis was on capturing the 'lived reality' of participants pursuing a Masters course, who were known as Full Distance Learners (FDLs). The study was concerned with the authentic and subjective experience of learners within an online community. Therefore, the enquiry can be characterized as a phenomenological research study, setting out to understand participants' understandings, perceptions and perspectives of a particular situation (or phenomenon) that they had experienced. This was considered to be the most suitable method of achieving an appreciation of the experiences of the students because it would focus on the reflections of the individual learners themselves.

In 2010, two students (one based in Malta and one in the Republic of Ireland) were recruited as online learners on a Masters Degree program. It should be noted that all the students were mature adults, who are obliged to balance their academic studies with the demands of their professional – and domestic – commitments.

By 2014, seven students had completed their studies and had successfully graduated from the course. It was decided to elicit information from them by using semi-structured questionnaires as a means of retrieving their perspectives of their experience of online learning.

Distance learning implies that, through asynchronous participation, learners are not required to be together in the same place at the same time but can access course materials and communicate with tutors and other learners flexibly at their own convenience through a virtual learning environment (VLE). Learners, at any level of study, through online

participation with content and instruction, are able to engage with a range of teaching methods and learning opportunities.

This has been demonstrated in practice. Since the inception of online learning at St Mary's, the MA program has been able to recruit students not only from the Republic of Ireland and from Malta, but also from the Netherlands, Nepal, Australia and from China. I am currently supervising a student who lives and works in Australia. This diversity of participation leads to a richness in the sharing of online learning experiences. By 2016, seven distance learners (including two from Malta) had graduated two with a distinction; they were all invited – and five responded – to take part in this small-scale research.

By the nature of the experience of online learners, students proceed with their studies in their own time and place. They can complete the course at their own pace and may finish at any time within two to five years. We say that students are independent but not isolated learners. Numbers of learners on the course grew significantly over the first six years of the initiative until there were more than fifty distance learners taking part at some point in the course in 2016.

In his research, Fincham (2017), presented the experiences of students who successfully completed the Masters course at St Mary's University as distance learners in their own words. Adopting a phenomenological approach, it was possible to explore individual perceptions of students' experiences and to evaluate their experiences in a focused way.

I shall now explore evidence of the impact that developments in information and communication technology has had on the learning experience of students from the perspectives of full distance learners in a course initiated at St Mary's University in London.

3 Results

Whilst it is perhaps too early to make conclusive statements about the experience of students pursuing their studies as distance learners, the initial impression elicited from my enquiry was positive and the results indicated that students who studied in this way were generally satisfied with their experience.

Evidence elicited from participants who contributed to this research provided invaluable information about their personal experience of studying as distance learners. Advantages articulated by participants included the flexibility, independence and convenience that allowed them to balance professional and career commitments with their

academic studies. One respondent, reflecting on the benefits of distance learning, commented:

I could work at my own pace and fit the study in around my commitments.

(Respondent 1)

Respondents indicated that their rationale for opting for the Full Distance mode of learning was based on its convenience and its flexibility with regard to their domestic circumstances. One respondent, for example, stated that

It was more convenient for me in terms of organizing my time. I am a busy working mum of two and so time is precious. I prefer to work in the evening when my children are asleep.

(Respondent 2)

Whilst a significant investment of time has to be made both by teachers and learners to keep up with the demands of academic study, there was a feeling that distance learners had greater control and direction over the way they allocated their time.

As an example, one respondent indicated that an asynchronous and flexible approach to learning proved to be advantageous where the vicissitudes of life, career and personal circumstances of the learner were fluid and unpredictable. She reported:

I started off studying as a semi-Full Distance Learner and (attended) Saturday schools (in London). My husband was then transferred to Gibraltar with his company and I was luckily able to continue the course as a Full Distance Learner. Whilst I was still studying, we then decided to emigrate to Australia and so, being a Full Distance Learner, I was able to continue and complete my studies in Australia.

(Respondent 5)

Although some students were more comfortable with the arrangements than others, it was acknowledged by all participants that studying as a distance learner required self-motivation, self-discipline and organization skills. This is not to say that all students would need to develop these qualities, but evidence produced from my enquiry indicated that they were particularly important qualities.

On a personal level, full-distance required a lot of self-motivation and discipline.... I do think you need to be a very disciplined person to complete a full-distance (or in my case, make yourself one!) having to sit and study, at times, required a great deal of discipline.

(Respondent 5)

Further to this, it was considered essential for students' successful completion of the course that their tutors maintained regular and consistent contact:

Detailed advice and suggestions were offered promptly and regularly and I felt that the contacts really promoted an effective dialogue.

(Respondent 2)

It might be argued that lack of face-to-face contact would be a significant limitation for distance learning. However, it was evident that the use of Skype and Face Time mitigated this concern and the development of information technology skills and engagement in the virtual classroom was regarded as advantageous.

The availability of Skype gave me the opportunity for personal one-to-one supervision and guidance.

(Respondent 4)

Respondent 3, furthermore, reported that, as there were no 'diarised sessions', the diary was freed up, and, consequently, there was no need to travel long distances to classes. Moreover, it was considered that communication with a personal tutor via email or Skype facilitated prompt responses to any queries. In fact, the personal one-to-one supervision was acknowledged to be a significant component in the experience of distance learning.

Indeed, students felt that the quality of supervision and guidance from tutors was superior to that that might have been enjoyed by class-based students:

I think that I had more one-to-one support time as part of this programme than that I would have had if I had attended face to face sessions.

(Respondent 2)

It was important that students maintained regular communication with tutors and students alike by frequently engaging with online conversations. They should not leave it too long before contacting their supervisor. For the best results, it was suggested that, from the start, students engage regularly with the online virtual classroom:

I would say the most important advice is it must be made clear that an important element of Full Distance Learning is taking part in the online discussions on a regular basis; ensure that one sets up contacts with other Full Distance Learners

and arrange seminars through skyping/conference calls so that one is able to interact with people.

(Respondent 3)

Moreover, studying as a distance learner did not impair professional and career progression and it was noted that some students were able to achieve the highest grades at the end of their studies.

It was interesting to note, too, that it was confirmed that online learning was seen to be more 'democratic'. In traditional classrooms, for example, it is not always possible for all learners to contribute to discussions. Online, all learners are enabled to contribute to discussions. One participant in the enquiry said:

As someone who tends to be more of an introvert in a 'classroom study' situation, I found the opportunity to think through my answers in my own time or read responses, process them and then work on my replies better suited how I like to learn (as opposed to being in a room and feeling the need to contribute to a conversation then and there).

(Respondent 5)

Above all, it was evident that the quality of experience as a distance learner was dependent on the quality of tutor supervision. Indeed, if distance learning is to be fully appreciated, it is incumbent on supervisors to engage with students on a regular basis.

From the evidence of this small-scale research, providing access to a virtual classroom not only facilitates the participation of learners across the world but also lends scope for the increase of numbers of students involved in courses.

Furthermore, by enabling students to pursue their studies 'at a distance', universities and institutions of higher education can greatly encourage individuals to develop a commitment to lifelong learning. In a world of constant change, it is imperative that we see learning as ongoing and sustainable throughout life. In fact, allied with the emergence of new technologies and inherent changes to the way we receive and gather information and communicate with others, it is evident that opportunities for lifelong learning can be enhanced.

Acknowledgements

I take this opportunity to thank all participants who generously gave their time and consideration in contributing to this enquiry.

Funding

This work was self-funded.

Conflict of Interest: none declared.

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¹ The simplest definition of 'Blended Learning' is that it is a formal program of education that offers learners, at any level of study, at least in part, an engagement with a range

of learning opportunities and teaching methods, which includes the delivery of online content and instruction.