

Forum Insights

Digital Learning: Myths and Reality

Introduction

Technology attracts fears and expectations in all fields, not least in education. If technology is to be harnessed to enhance teaching and learning in higher education we need to be really well informed about what works and in what contexts it works. We need to confront the persistent myths with evidence-based approaches to understanding the rationale and the implications of embracing technology in appropriate ways. Persistent rhetoric has promoted notions that there are willing

and waiting student markets for online courses across all cohorts and disciplines; that technology-enhanced teaching necessarily provides more cost effective ways of teaching and will automatically improve access to higher education; that students have unproblematic enthusiasm for learning online; that technology will, of itself, bring a change in the way people teach and learn.

Myth	Example	What evidence shows
The myth of diminishing costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online learning is a cheap means of providing high quality education. • You make lots of money if your course is online. • Moving courses online will help save our department money. • We will cut costs by 'going digital' with our textbooks. • The content we need to put online is already available – and free. 	Expect significant start-up costs: for fully online programmes allow at least one hour of work per student-learning hour; on-going investment in training/support is required, both for students and staff; smaller numbers (optimum 20–25 students) make for more successful online experiences.
The myth of the disappearing teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The teacher's time is freed up to concentrate on research. • Technology will make teaching more efficient. • Online means just having all of your lectures recorded. • The use of technology undermines teaching and teachers. 	Successful online learners require enhanced support and course design; the levels of online engagement in successful online courses demand much more time and involvement on the part of the teacher; the support needs of distance learners in terms of 'teacher presence', motivation, pacing and individually targeted feedback are all vital for retention and completion.
The myth of the digital native	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people are experts in technology use; for them 'We always had the internet'. • Students are all 'digital natives' and are very comfortable with online learning tools and approaches. • Students will spontaneously participate in online discussion. • Teenagers are addicted to social media. 	There is considerable diversity amongst learners at all ages; many students prefer to be taught in a traditional, more passive manner, but successful online learning demands active participation on the part of students. Students separate social and formal digital usage, and technology use for entertainment does not necessarily imply readiness to learn through digital systems; there is also a fundamental difference between relating to digital media as a 'consumer' of content and being a 'producer' or using the technologies as a set of tools for learning and the construction of knowledge, meaning and understanding.
The myth of diminished quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching online is by definition very depersonalised. • Online students don't get as much personal tuition as face-to-face students. • Technology de-humanises learning. • An online course is second best, it can't be as good as face-to-face. 	No significant difference has been demonstrated between online and traditional formats, although evolving evidence suggests better results from well designed online courses. Distance learning can be of very high quality and be highly regarded by students, employers and others as demonstrated by the UK's Open University. Well designed online courses demand more active learning from students both in terms of their contribution and peer learning activities.

Myth	Example	What evidence shows
The myth of technology as benefactor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technology always enhances learning; more technology will result in more learning. • Digital learning materials will engage and motivate our students. • High production value online learning materials (video, interactivity, etc.) are superior means of learning. • Using technology will in and of itself make students more engaged and/or raise standards. 	Technology of itself does not bring any noticeable pedagogical benefits to the learning and teaching process. In fact, used badly, technology has been shown to hinder learning: poor completion rates have been reported from many online courses (generally as a result of poor pedagogical strategy and design). High production value materials on their own can often encourage 'pseudo-learning' rather than deeper level understanding.
The myth of insignificance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A good face-to-face teacher is just as good online. • You can translate your face-to-face course directly into an online version. • There is nothing that can be learned from previous experience of technology deployment in education or from educational research. • All lecturers do with technology is put lecture notes online. • 'Teachers don't want technology.' 	Effective online learning requires a different approach to teaching and learning design. Digital is not going to go away: it already has begun to profoundly change education. Teachers are engaging with technology, and research conducted internationally is mirrored by findings from the National Forum which indicates that there is a growing appetite for it.
The myth of imminent revolution	<p>'An Avalanche is Coming'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) will change forever the way we teach and learn. • 'In 50 years, there will be only 10 institutions in the world delivering higher education.' • The virtual learning environment is dead. 	The expected revolution has been better described as an evolution: educators generally have been cautious about how they engage with technology in the teaching and learning space, while at institutional level, educational leaders have been slow to impose directives regarding its use. A 2014 report from the European University Association suggests that this caution is common across higher education within the EU. Educators are deciding how they want to engage with technology rather than having technology imposed upon them. Many of the early MOOC models have proven to be unsustainable and of poor pedagogical design, though much is being learned through this experience by the institutions involved. In the recent Babson Survey (2014) the proportion of academic leaders who believe that MOOCs represent a sustainable method of offering online courses has significantly decreased.

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