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The state of Australasian online higher education post-pandemic and beyond

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The state of Australasian online higher education post-pandemic and beyond

Abstract

Online learning is not a new phenomenon that had just been discovered in March 2020, it has been developing very strongly for 20+ years. What is new is that we are now realising that what was conceived as being good online learning pedagogy is being challenged by many of the newer student-centred approaches that have evolved in learning and teaching. Not the least because the technologies now allow us to do way more in a more synchronous way, allowing students to work more collaboratively with others. Or maybe it's more that we have rediscovered some activities that were harder to achieve in the past. Either way, what has also changed in higher education is the emphasis on the student and how providing them with a greater level of agency in their learning presents more traditional educators with new challenges. This paper presents some options for those looking to understand and meet those challenges head on.

Practitioner Notes

1. Consider changing one or two of your assessments to be more active, collaborative or authentic by using some of the suggested approaches
2. See if you can place your practice in the continuum or evolution of online learning in Australasia
3. some of the student-centred learning approaches suggested may even make your assessment more robust, with students less likely to cheat
4. Post-pandemic higher education is an opportunity for us to consider newer interactive a collaborative forms of teaching
5. Engaging with more contemporary technology enhanced learning tools can allow students to experience a range of solutions and options they might use in the future

Keywords

post-pandemic, technology enhanced learning, online, higher education

Where we have been

The path to online learning, particularly in the Australasian higher education sector, did not have its genesis in March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, but rather in what happened in the 20 years prior to this and more particularly over the last decade. This somewhat long history (long in terms of online learning) did however make the transition to fully online learning in 2020 slightly easier than it otherwise would have been for many institutions in the sector. However, there were many institutions for which the pandemic barely made any difference to their delivery model in its initial stages (Baker et al., 2022). These were the institutions who had been specialising in distance education for the last 40-50 years, and who had entered into fully online learning from as early as 1999 (Clark & McDonald, 2007). On the other hand, for some other institutions the move to online simply meant digitalisation of their lectures to Zoom or Teams, with very little consideration for the well-defined and research-rich practices associated with quality online learning that had preceded this (Bates, 2022).

Notwithstanding, traditional face-to-face universities have slowly been moving quite a bit of their practice into the online space for well over a decade now. For example, Open Universities Australia (OUA: established 2004), having previously been Open Learning Australia, initially brought together a consortium of universities with the express aim of offering online courses for those institutions who were not fully equipped to do this independently. And in January 2006, they were offering courses from, Curtin University of Technology, Griffith University, Macquarie University, Monash University, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology and the University of South Australia (WayBackMashine, 2022), all of which offered these courses in addition to their face-to-face offerings, but only through the OUA.

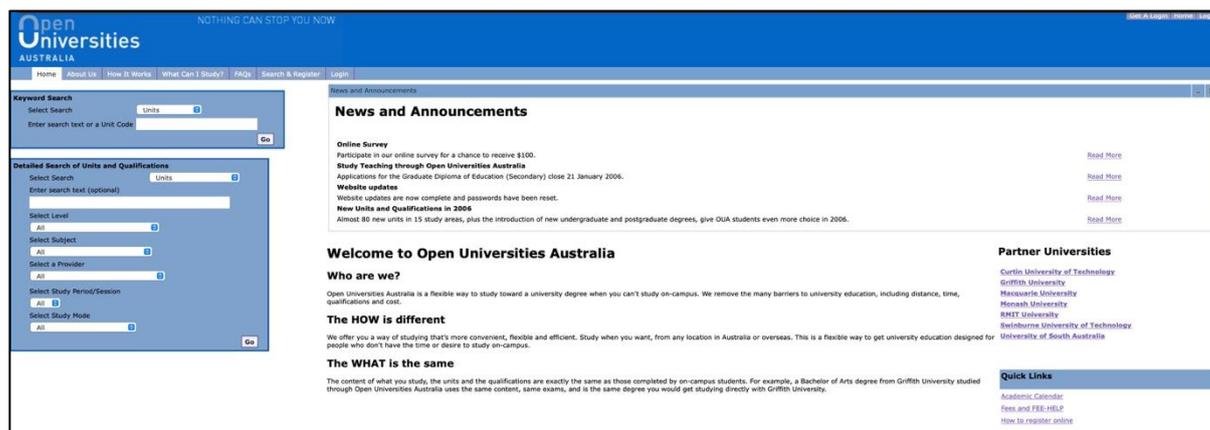


Figure 1:
Open Universities Australia Website from January 2006.

Once this model had been shown to work, the pace of change greatly accelerated over forthcoming years with the emergence of companies like Pearson's Online Learning Services (established 2010); Open Education Services (OES)/SEEK in partnership with Swinburne University (established 2011); Future Learn in partnership with the Open University in the United Kingdom (established 2012); and Key Path (established 2015); with a number of other smaller companies similar to this starting-up in the more recent past (too many to name here).

These companies, unlike the OUA consortium model, strategically positioned themselves as partnering with individual, well established institutions who still did not necessarily have the internal wherewithal (or were tired of the consortium model), in relation to instructional design professionals, to move many courses/units online quickly, based on a regularised template, and whose internal business model were far more focussed on maintaining the face-to-face status quo. But what these institutions did recognise was a relatively large untapped market for fully online courses, mostly targeting the professional postgraduate and the lucrative international market (Croucher, et al., 2021). Their simplified template-based model to moving courses/units online quickly, using the content and expertise of those more traditional practitioners, provided an easy win, albeit at a significant cost to the individual institution. For example, this cost to institutions could vary between 40-60% of the profits for running these courses through these third-party providers.

However, it was recognised around 2006 by some in higher education sector, that this form of online learning, that largely used a heavily templated model of delivery, did come with its drawbacks, particularly in relation to the simplified cookie cutter approach many of these courses adopted (Scanlon, 2007). This stood in stark contrast to the earlier forms of online learning, that were largely built on an online socio-constructivist pedagogical model developed in the early 2000s (Mbatia, 2012; Sthapornnanon et al., 2009) that was being championed by the more traditional distance institutions (Lipson, 2013). And yet the templated model proved just as popular with the, so called 'consumer', as it met a market demand from professional not necessarily wanting all the bells and whistles (or did not know any better). There was a clear preference for an unbundled or less touchy-feely approach, that allowed them to access what they wanted, when they wanted (Ivancheva et al., 2020).

Nonetheless, this was only made possible through the newer generations of learning management systems (LMS) coming online, along with their associated tools, to enable this rapid move online, which began to level the playing field. This was further enhanced when a new breed of user experience (UX) designers started to enter the industry, bringing with them a new understanding/knowledge, based in a mix of commercial web design and cognitive psychology (Stevens, 2021).

Further, as second generation, synchronous, browser-based virtual classroom tools started to appear, such as Skype, Zoom, Collaborate, Big Blue Button and the like, this allowed institutions to more easily implement new virtual education opportunities, designed to help engage their remote students in new ways and often

in real time (Camilleri & Camilleri, 2021). This new form of democratisation of education (Hurley, 2021) provides a very real opportunity, not a threat, to envisage a new way of engaging with our students.

Where we are now

As institutions seek to recover a sense of ‘where to now’ after the last two years of uncertainty, and in many cases having suffered massive staff cuts, new blended forms of delivery are emerging as are being seen as the ‘new normal’ or the ‘new imperative’ to help future proof their activities (Hu, 2021). Some institutions would call this Hyflex (Binnewies & Wang, 2019), others Polysynchronous (Dalgarno, 2014), or Hyperflex (Cowling et al., 2021). But at the end of the day, whatever catchy title an institution wants to give it, it's quite simply just different forms or iterations of blended learning, containing a mix of online and face-to-face learning components (Binnewies & Wang).

What will be interesting to observe moving forward is the effect this may have on those courses/programs that are offered by the above-mentioned third-party providers that do not offer this blended form of delivery, as those options may in fact become less attractive to students.

Taking this forward

So really, we are not talking post-pandemic here, for all this current crisis has done is awaken us to a new day, and many institutions do not see themselves simply returning to what they had previously, even if that were a desirable thing (Alexander et. al., 2021). Instead, what it has roused in us is the possibility to recalibrate our thinking towards having a more ‘productivity-based’ mindset to post-secondary learning. Croucher (2019, ¶1) states,

The study of productivity in higher education, and its contribution to local and global economies, has become an increasingly important area of focus for scholars, as well as for those who fund and administer higher education institutions.

This notion of productivity that has its basis in ‘collaboration’ rather than just ‘participation’ links to a more fundamental shift in emergent hegemonic processes at play within higher education and the freeing up of knowledge linked with the larger processes of socio-economic and cultural restructuring that has now been underway for some time (Apple, 1998). This is intrinsically tied-in with the notion of the student being at the centre of higher education, not a just participant in higher education (Byrnes, 2020). In that, each student is seen as being an emerging professional from day one of their studies. Aligned with this, new terms have arrived in our lexicon, such as ‘the student voice’, ‘students as partners’, and the ‘student learning journey’, that all speak of a new ‘agency’ that sits at the heart of human growth and development (e.g., Wilson et al., 2020). The OECD (2019, p 5) put it this way,

Student agency relates to the development of an identity and a sense of belonging. When students develop agency they rely on motivation, hope, self-efficacy and a growth mindset to navigate towards wellbeing. This enables them to act with a sense of purpose, which guides them to flourish and thrive in society.

So here is the challenge; if participation is the key to student agency, although this requires a high level of contribution, this is not the measure of success. The success comes when a students' skill set and behaviours positively relate to their career outcomes, "because students are able to direct their own learning and transfer the knowledge they learned in the classroom to new settings" (Zeiser et al., 2018, p. 1).

This rhetoric is all well and good, unless it is backed up by practical action through the act of teaching, or as some would prefer, learning. But one might say 'we are dealing with people's lives here'. Yes, that would be true. But in saying that are we not limiting just ourselves here, but also limiting the thinking of those we teach, for those who succeed, who really succeed, take risks. Or as T.S Elliot famously said, 'Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go'. And is that not the very mentality we want to engender in our students, rather than reinforcing a herd mentality (Solomon, 2014).

Why have we not progressed then? Is this because we are comfortable with our herd mentality or is it a true lack of foresight or just a lack of finance. It cannot be the later, as many other things have progressed. Nor do I think can it be the middle reason, as we can see the potential in all these things. So possibly it's the former and a fear of taking risks. The trick is, that's the way we were taught and so it needs something like a pandemic to get us off our butts and to start thinking a bit differently; to break the cycle (oh no not 'outside the box again').

It is not okay for this commentary to pause here, on that note. That would not be fair. Instead, it will now propose some possible ways in which this cycle could be adjusted in favour of a more engaged way of learning and teaching; one based in the notion of active, collaborative and authentic practice that may provide students with a greater level of agency in their learning.

Putting this into practice

As previously stated, online education has been with us for 20+ years now. In fact, in 2001 the author was teaching web design and publishing, fully online using a rather ancient (by today's standards) Blackboard 4 LMS. But boy, we have learned many enduring lessons over that time. Or have we?

Although we established some positive protocols for teaching online early, these were almost exclusively around how we should approach the use of tools within the LMS (VLE) such as discussion forums, quizzes and the appropriate format for documents being uploaded. And importantly, how we needed to keep students

informed about their studies, through welcome messages, timely feedback, etc. Most of which are all still relevant.

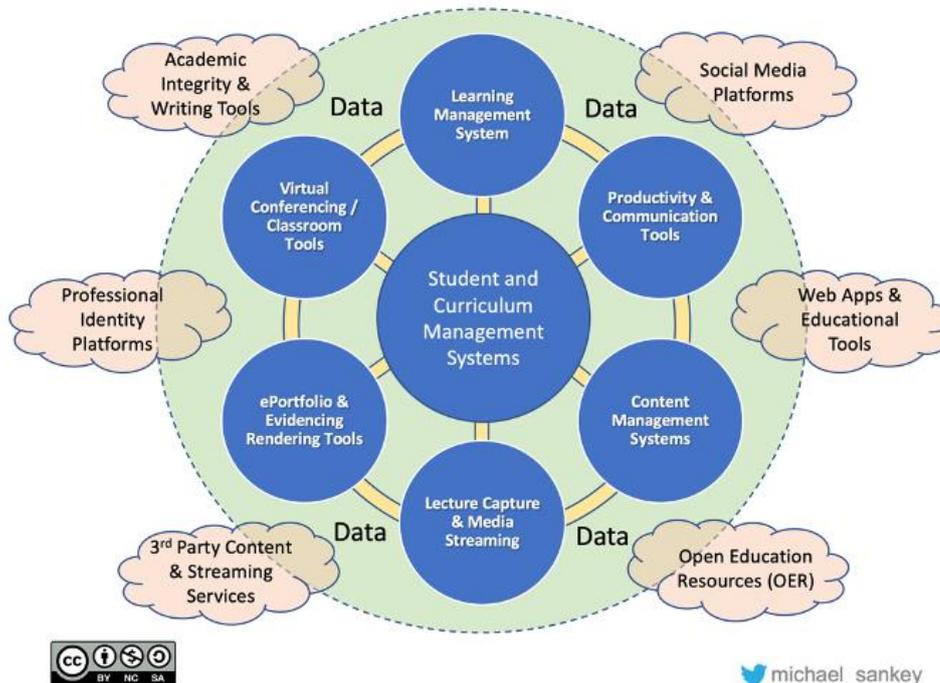
However, there have been many newer developments within our systems that now allow us to do much more than before. More collaborative forms of learning and assessment have seen new tools emerge that can better help us to systematise a range of new teaching approaches. But the funny thing is, many of these so-called new teaching approaches are not actually new, lots of them were in use well before the LMS or online teaching came along. It is just that, now the LMS and its associated technologies have caught-up, which is allowing us to once again engage in some truly meaningful activities that were previously only undertaken in the domain of ‘traditional education’. Mosley (2022) in a recent blog reflecting on the present shift to online learning stated,

It's also worth saying that online education does not diminish the ability or scope for people to think, dwell, reflect, write, self-test, summarise & self-explain, draw, imagine, map, practice retrieval, interleave and sleep...all of which are things that help aid learning and are not dependent on the existence of digital technologies.

Before we look at these new (but sometimes actually old) teaching and assessment techniques, we should first look at how these opportunities have come about. They are now possible because the LMS/VLE is not the only system used to conduct learning and teaching in and around. We have evolved a whole ecology of interoperable tools, both internal to the institution and external. This must be the case, for if we had tried to put all these functionalities into one system, it would be over engineered, confusing for teachers and students, and virtually impossible to maintain.

Figure 2 illustrates a view of the types of systems or technologies that are now typically seen in contemporary higher education institutions. This ecology of tools does not nominate platforms, as such, rather the types (genres) of platforms that are used across almost every University in Australia and New Zealand (and probably now in most developed countries).

A Contemporary Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) Ecology

**Figure 2:**

The typical suite of tools found in contemporary institutions (Sankey, 2021)

In this illustration we see that the LMS is no longer the centre piece of learning and teaching, although still important, rather a key agent among other tools; tools that allow students and staff to interact more authentically, communicate both aurally and visually, access common content, evidence practice, engage socially, and have their data used in their favour. With regulatory bodies playing a way more central role in the thinking of our institutions, the quality agenda, ensuring students have consistent and coherent access to their systems is centrally represented here. Within this ecology, we now have other ways of creating engaging learning experiences. These experiences lead to more active, collaborative, and authentic forms of assessment. Kind of like what we used to do before we had to be limited by the LMS to simply do essays, quizzes, reports and if you were lucky, presentations.

One of the new technologies that has seen a rise in popularity over the last couple of years is that cluster name 'Productivity & Communication Tools'. This represents the rise of tools now being widely used by institutions to support learning and teaching, such as Microsoft Teams (Grant & Learning Futures, 2020) and Slack (RMIT, 2022). Tools that are heavily used in the workplace to drive a more productive workforce.

What might these active, collaborative, and authentic forms of assessment look like in practice? Well, Table 1 shows us a whole range of different activities that can be used for assessment, that are all possible using this suite of online technologies as seen in Figure 2. You might look at this list and say, 'oh yeah, I have heard of doing

something like this, but haven't seen this done for a while now'. This list is only the start. But what I would like to do here is unpack some of these for you. I will not unpack them all, as I'm sure you will get the idea after a while.

Table 1:
Some different forms of assessment/activities

Create an online (SM) advertisement on the topic your learning	Analysis and respond to a case study that you have been given	Analysis and report on information or data in a graph	Online brainstorming using sticky notes A/Synchronous
Create an annotated bibliography (helps summarize readings)	Create a one-page promotional flyer, webpage, brochure	Create a chart, mind map, infographic, or diagram of a concept	Organize an online debate, formal or informal in teams
Ask students to do a description a process, as though to a novice	Development of a product or proposal for a new product	Create a table, chart, diagram, visual aid to extrapolate a concept	Write a diary entry for a real or fictional character
Write an executive summary of an article or a website	Give an explanation of a multiple-choice answer.	Write only the 'Introduction' to a research paper	Create a legal brief, that somebody else will need to present
Write a letter to a friend about what you learned this week	On a given topic, create a literature review of key studies	Contain a topic to one meaningful paragraph/synopsis	Write a newspaper article or editorial, maybe with a photo
Record yourself doing a Performance or a presentation	Create a policy memo or an executive summary for a Board	Create a work of art, music, architecture, sculpture on a topic	Self-record a practical exam or demo of lab skills
Write a poem, play, or dialogue about the topic of the week	Create a Portfolio (online) of the things you have learned	Create a PowerPoint presentation that could be used	A reflection on what they have learned over the week
Peer assessment: 1 student marks 2 other students work	Review of a book, play, performance, TED Talk or YouTube	Write a scientific abstract summarising key points	Create a poster online, with text and images to speak to
  michael_sankey			

In Table 2 we now outline or unpack some of the different activities/assessments seen in Table 1 and the types of tools and tips that could be used to undertake these tasks. These are only examples, and it is really up to the imagination of the teacher as to other tools that may be used to achieve similar outcomes. However, it is hoped that these seven examples might also help stimulate thinking around what other assessments might also be achievable in these different tools and that, importantly, assessment doesn't have to be an essay or a quiz, as it can take whatever form helps students understand the concepts at play in their courses.

Table 2:
Examples of different activities/assessments

Assessment	Tools and tips for use
Create an online social media advertisement on the topic you're learning	Most students today use some form of social media platform and are familiar with seeing ads being put in their faces. By students creating a image that speaks of a particular topic they could post this into a safe institutional collaboration tool like Microsoft Teams or Yammer or an ePortfolio platform, where other students can view it, 'like' it and comment on it. It could be put in Voice Thread with the students giving a verbal explanation of why they have chosen to do this in a particular way and what they were trying to convey.
Online brainstorming using sticky notes a/synchronous	This can easily be done in OneNote or Padlet or even on a shared document on Google. Students can do this in smaller groups or individually at the same time or over a set period. It would be like pasting sticky notes on the wall in the classroom, but online. The key here is that there will be a synthesis of the ideas at some point, again either done individually or by the group. This is then presented as the outcome of the brainstorming activity.
Ask students to do a description a process, as though presenting to a novice	This could be done synchronously or asynchronously. If live you would use Zoom, Teams or Collaborate to have students present their ideas. If a recording is required they could do this on their phones and post the recording either into the LMS or Teams. Voice Thread is also a good tools for this. The trick here is to ask other students to ask questions as though they are the novice to try and tease out un-explored concepts. It a bit of a role play which adds an element of fun to this.
Create a chart, mind map, infographic, or diagram of a concept	Infographics are all the rage now and students are exposed to these in all walks of life. The trick here is to get them to precis their ideas and to bring them back to the core constructs. Again, this can be accompanied by a description, either in writing or in an audio explanation. This could be simply created in PowerPoint or Word, or a more sophisticated tool, but the tool is not the point it's about how they represent their ideas. This can be posted onto a forum, put on voice thread, hosted in Teams, or presented live in Zoom or Teams meeting. They could prerecord the explanation also and post this with the visual.
Write a letter or email to a friend about what you learned this week	Pen pals may not be the cool now, but the point is, we are getting the student to summarise their learning for the week as though they were explaining this to an old friend. Alternatively, they could create a 5-10-minute audio explanation as though they were explaining it on the phone. Initially, until they get the idea, this could be set us as a scaffolded scenario where they are given some guidelines as to how much they should cover, or provide an example so they can see what is required. Really there are many tools that could be used for this. It could be a blog or journal page in an ePortfolio tool, written in word and posted as an assignment. But in this case, I would not make it a shared document with other students as this could be seen as a bit threatening by some.
Write a poem, play, or dialogue about the topic of the week	Asking student to act out through something like a play (written), where actors could be used to play out a scenario around a given topic being studied. The art of creating a dialog from a concept get them to see a topic from different angles, putting on different shoes, as it were. A rhyming or acrostic poem may also get them to process information a wee bit differently to what they normally do. Again,

	this could be done in an ePortfolio tool as a blog or journal. If it is designed as a play, a group of students could even play this out in Zoom or Teams. It could also be recorded separately and placed online.
Create a policy memo or an executive summary for a Board	Role play, getting students to pretend to be somebody they are aspiring to be can provide valuable meta cognitive insights into how they may see themselves. Many board meeting are now held online and board members have to present their ideas to their colleagues. Like board meetings, papers, memos, etc, need to be provided ahead of time so others can read them, then the person presenting them does not have to rehearse all the concepts in the paper. In this scenario students would post their written work in to a team channel or forum set up for this scenario. Ideally students would take on different roles on the board. One might be the CEO, another the chief finance person, another the CIO. Each ten need to see what is being presented through that lens (that they are representing).

These few examples may provide you with some cues to possibly experiment with yourself, or find some other forms of activity and assessment that can engage your students in different ways. Ways that may be seen as a bit more authentic to the profession the students are aiming to enter and provide a greater level of agency to the students in their learning. In all these things an extra element that could be added is ‘reflection’. That is getting student to reflect on what they did and on the work of others. This does not necessarily need to be made public, but it does add an extra level of cognitive rigour. Importantly it helps start to piece together not just their thoughts around the learning they have done, but also how others have responded to the same circumstances.

The essence of all the above activities is that they are using the new capabilities we have with our online tools to their full advantage. These activities all have an element of authenticity to them as being things they may have to engage with in the workplace. Many of them are active, in that they need to participate in an activity with others, and some are collaborative. They can also be approached as being somewhat fun and a bit light-hearted, as the knowledge will shine through regardless.

Conclusion

As noted on several occasions in this article, online learning is not new, it has been around for more than 20 years. But early-on in its evolution the tools we had to do online learning with were quite rudimentary. But times have changed and the technologies we now enjoy allow us to rediscover some of the more authentic activities that had previously been practiced almost exclusively in the face to face environment. We are now realising that what was conceived as being good online learning is being challenged by some of the newer more student-centred approaches to learning and teaching. Not the least of these being due to the technologies that have evolved to allow us to be way more collaborative. It can also be seen that the changes in higher education have placed an emphasis on the student and how providing them with a greater level of agency in their learning presents more

traditional educators with new challenges. This paper presented some options for those looking to meet these challenges head on, by providing some examples of active, collaborative, and authentic learning activities.

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