

DeTao Masters Academy

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Combining the Old and the New for Effective Teaching

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Ladies and Gentlemen: It is an honour and a pleasure to make these opening remarks at this conference on the Internet and Education. I shall make four points in these brief comments.

The Internet is a driver of change

First, the Internet is changing the way we do things in most areas of life. China leads in some of these areas. The scale of Alibaba's e-shopping operation is famous around the world.

However, we often overestimate the **short-term** impact of innovations such as the Internet whilst at the same time we underestimate the **long-term** changes they will stimulate. During the dotcom frenzy of 1999 some people assumed that all human transactions would immediately go online. Some of the new companies they created with that assumption then lost a lot of money.

Change takes place more slowly. But it does happen, as this plot of the growth of online enrolments in US universities shows. What this means for DeTao is that we have time to work out how best to use the Internet and online learning. We do not need to rush into it.

How best to combine old and new?

Second, the key question is how best to combine the old and the new. How do we combine online learning with face-to-face or onsite teaching in the most effective way? Many universities say that they now offer blended learning, which is a mixture of online learning and classroom teaching. How do they decide which mixture is best?

In most cases they assume that face-to-face teaching is the norm and add some online learning when it is available. But the Canadian scholar Tony Bates suggests that it should be the other way around. We should now consider online learning as the norm and only use face-to-face teaching for areas where it is clearly better. Unfortunately, there is very little research to guide us on what the strengths of face-to-face teaching really are.

What limits to flexibility?

Third, one of the great assets of online learning is its flexibility. You can study anywhere at any time. But what are the limits to this flexibility? There is much research evidence,

from older forms of open and distance learning, to show that students don't perform well if you give them too much flexibility, especially in using their time. To take an extreme example, if you let students enrol in a course at any time and take as long as they like to complete it, the completion rates will not be good. You do better to give students deadlines for assignments and exams so that they have to give some priority to their studies. But give students plenty of flexibility within those deadlines.

For example, I have taken 12 MOOCs as a student and I like the idea of concentrating my study time on days that suit me. I will start a new MOOC this week on *Mindfulness and Wellbeing for Peak Performance* from Monash University in Australia. Clearly, only through online learning could I begin a course from Australia in Shanghai and continue to study it at home in Vancouver.

O+O is a step in the right direction

My fourth point is that DeTao is doing just the right thing by experimenting with online learning through its *O+O (Online plus Onsite)* programme. By offering online learning material to Chinese universities that will use it with their face-to-face teaching DeTao will be able to discover what blends of online and onsite work best and how much flexibility the partners can give the students and still get good results.

I wish the O+O programme every success.

Thank you.