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Two Keys Issues in Online Learning: What Blend & How Flexible?
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The 17th ICDE World Conference

I start with a publicity flash. Next year the most important event in the international calendar for online learning will be the 2017 ICDE Conference in Toronto from October 17-19. Its title is the *World Conference on Online Learning - Teaching in a Digital Age: Re-thinking Teaching and Learning*. The host is Contact North | Contact Nord, where I am a Research Associate. Canada celebrates its 150th birthday next year so it's a great time to visit. I invite you all to put the Conference in your diaries.

Introduction

I now turn to my topic. I shall attempt brief answers to two important questions about online learning.

First, what is the best blend for blended learning? Second, how flexible can you make flexible learning before the wheels fall off?

I begin with some background.

A media frenzy around the MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) offered by a few elite US institutions in 2012 alerted universities worldwide to the opportunities and threats of online learning.

As they faced up to this new reality most universities decided not to offer MOOCs. Instead, for some years now, they have been including more online teaching in their regular programmes leading to credits and qualifications.

'Blended learning' and 'flexible learning' have become the most common terms for their institutional strategies to do this. Both are vague words that can be applied any mixture of classroom activity and online instruction. But what is the best blend and what are the limits to flexibility?

Blended learning - what mix?

I begin with blended learning. Any discussion of online learning today owes a huge debt to Professor Tony Bates for his splendid book *Teaching in a Digital Age: Guidelines for Designing Teaching and Learning* (Bates, 2015). It is an excellent guide to the past,

present and likely future developments in online learning.

First, we need some definitions. The Babson reports that have appeared each year since 2003 use the following definitions.

- Online: at least 80% of the course content is delivered online.
- Face-to-face: courses in which zero to 29% of the content is delivered online (this category includes both traditional and web-facilitated courses).
- Blended (or hybrid): between 30% and 80% of course content delivered online.

What does the research tell us about how blended learning might create a better future for higher education? Expressed succinctly, four key research findings are:

- First, we should aim for what Tony Bates calls hybrid learning, that is learning designed for optimum synergy between online learning and face-to-face teaching interventions. This was the goal of DeTao's O+O initiative.

Second, face-to-face teaching is not more effective than online learning. Bates' *Principle of Equal Substitution* says that 'academically most course can be taught equally well online or face-to-face. This means that we should now reverse current practice and treat online learning rather than classroom teaching as the default mode

Third, students engage more deeply with online learning and work harder than in classroom courses.

Fourth, the more independent study and work students do, the better they learn.

- The 21st century requires a blend of skills and knowledge. Interactive teaching is particularly important in helping students to develop certain skills in context.

Flexible learning - how flexible?

We turn now to flexible learning. We looked at blended learning in terms of pedagogy but in discussing flexibility we shall focus on administrative arrangements. Flexibility has many dimensions.

For students it means easier access to learning, greater convenience in choosing where to study, a wider variety of credentials to aim for and more autonomy in scheduling their lives.

For instructors it expands the range of pedagogies available in course/programme design, makes available new (often free) teaching resources, implies less 'stand-up teaching' and permits greater variety and creativity in assessing students' work.

Using these options can improve learning outcomes by stimulating students to engage more fully with their courses.

Flexibility sounds very desirable but it has limits. Buildings and earthquakes are a useful analogy. Buildings constructed too flexibly collapse in a major earthquake but those built too rigidly collapse too.

Some say that current higher education systems are too rigid. But they should not be too flexible either. How far can we extend flexibility in higher education and where are the limits?

Let's look at three areas of flexibility: timing, qualifications and unbundling.

Flexibility of timing

First, timing. Most online learning is asynchronous. Students can choose **when** they study. But using this power to bridge time needs care. If students' convenience were the main criterion, then we should allow them to enrol in a course at any time and complete it at their own pace. Flexibility in start dates is fine but removing completion dates leads to lower completion rates.

All learners need motivating to give some priority to their studies. This usually takes the form of assignment deadlines and a fixed date for the end of the course. Another approach is to break the course into several shorter courses so that the student can complete each one more quickly. This is one advantage of MOOCs.

Flexibility of Outcomes

Second, online learning has also created greater flexibility in the definition of learning outcomes. Where are the limits to that flexibility?

Students coming into higher education are seeking - and being offered - a wider range of learning outcomes than in the past. Shorter learning opportunities are emerging under the stimulus of online learning. There are also new approaches to certifying learning outcomes. Online technologies have facilitated this diversification. Open badges, nanodegrees and microdegrees are good examples.

Because they are in digital format, open badges can include more information about what and how the learners studied, how they were assessed, the time involved, etc. than a normal paper record. Crucially, however, value of the badge will depend on the credibility of the organisation or individual that issued it. DeTao considered offering badges two years ago.

Naturally, new forms of certification take time to establish their credibility.

How far can we 'unbundle' higher education?

Online technology allows us to separate out the various elements in the teaching learning process and address them in different ways. This is a major change. Not very long ago individual teachers usually designed their courses, prepared any needed supporting materials, taught the course face-to-face to students and also, in some countries, set and

marked the end of course examinations. This was called the 'cottage industry' approach to teaching, because one person handled every step of the process.

In the online world these steps can be separated. The components of the learning process can be split up, potentially separating course design, content development, delivery, support, assessment and credentialing so that they can, in principle, be done by different organisations. This is called the unbundling of higher education. Previously instructors and institutions assembled the complete learning experience and offered it to students as a 'bundle'.

Does this describe a happy world of extraordinary flexibility and rich choice for learners or something closer to anarchy? It sounds like a good idea for students to design learning journeys uniquely tailored to their personal wishes, but do many students want that? For several reasons we suspect that few students will choose the fully unbundled model.

First, most people are overwhelmed by too much choice and will not want to handle the complexities of dealing with different bodies for each step of their learning and certification processes. Most students like the security of dealing with an institution that they know and trust. This is why most students choose online providers that have a presence in their own country.

Second, faculty members like to have some consistency and continuity in their student body. They like to get to know their students, both as a group and also as individuals.

Third, institutions also like to be able to identify 'their' students. In many jurisdictions student numbers determine funding from governments.

For these reasons we expect that universities will react to unbundling by organising themselves to re-bundle the total learning experience for students - and that students will accept this gratefully.

As higher education institutions expand their online offerings they find it necessary to strengthen the central administrative function supporting these offerings. Open universities, which function exclusively through ODL (open and distance learning), build these central support systems before they start operations, whereas campus institutions that add ODL offerings must put them in place as the programme expands. This is usually controversial because deeper involvement of the central administration in teaching tends to provoke resistance.

The solution, at least in theory, is subsidiarity: matters should to be handled by the smallest, lowest or least centralized competent authority. This could mean, for example, that central services operate a common Learning Management System for the whole institution, whereas, say, the different faculties organise support and practical work for their own students.

However, as technology evolves and ODL offerings expand, the optimal expression of subsidiarity will change too. Institutions need to take responsibility for helping faculty members re-equip themselves, both materially and intellectually, to handle the options and outcomes that online technology makes possible.

An effective approach to subsidiarity in organising an institution for a more flexible future will also help it to cope with the challenge of unbundling. Some institutions may set up brokerage-style services to help students re-bundle the elements that they want. This will mean hiring increasing numbers of counsellors and specialists of various kinds, which carries its own risk.

Conclusion

We have examined the trends toward blended learning, more flexible study options and the potential for unbundling the components of the teaching-learning process to allow students to pick and choose providers. Our overall goal should be hybrid learning in which the whole teaching-learning system is redesigned to create optimum synergy between the face-to-face teaching sessions and learning online. We should follow Bates' *Principle of Equal Substitution* and treat online learning as the preferred mode whenever there is a choice between online and face-to-face instruction. Flexible study options are important but learners should not be allowed excessive flexibility in the timing of their studies.

Finally, although there will be some unbundling of the elements of the higher education process we expect that most students will continue to look to their universities to re-bundle their chosen elements for them.