

# Teaching and learning online: reflection



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## Teaching and Learning Online

In this reflection, I will capture a few of my thoughts that have changed my views the most. Although there was far more that I reflected on in my learning journal, I will focus on the main topics that interest me to take forward into my teaching.

I found the initial orientation between different tools confusing, as I had been using Blackboard for everything previously. Moving to Canvas was good as it has a friendlier feel, less institutional, more laidback, which helped in feeling freer to informally chat. This helped create a sense of community.

The wiki was initially overwhelming, now, as there are all the course materials and assignments kept there, I see it as a fantastic repository of shared knowledge, I shall use this idea in the future on teacher training courses.

I was tentative about the online sessions as I had previous negative experiences of these and wondered if it was ever possible for the technical aspects to be overcome as Schrum & Hong (2002 b) say, minimizing technical difficulties is very important, I felt this myself and at the start of the course, this experience can lead to a feeling of foreboding about online sessions. After the first synchronous session, I bought a new web camera and contacted my ISP to check all my connections. This worked well for me, as I was able to join the next sessions, albeit tentatively, and the technical problems were fixed. This was a huge relief and meant that I could follow and participate in the sessions. The effect of this meant that where I was originally much more at home with an asynchronous environment, I now

started to see the real benefits in synchronous sessions, not least the social, community building aspect. I think that the technical aspect of online learning must be given a lot of thought and any use of new tools must also include clear guidelines or help in how to use them.

As I progressed through the course, I noted in my journal times when I felt that the literature and course activities were overlapping, which led to several mini epiphanies. For me, this led to a deeper understanding of the subject as I was reading the theoretical background and acting it out at the same time.

Schrum & Hong (2002 a)'s recommendations was a paper I found very helpful. The way that it is set out forms an excellent framework for thinking about how to organize online courses and in looking through these at the end of the course, I was able to see that they were all part of the course.

Vicarious learning was quite revelatory for me; it gave a name to something I had been aware of. This somehow made it a more acceptable way of being an online learner and made me reflect on the fact that all learners are different, and while participation is a key factor in learning online, students can participate in different ways.

On the forum I noted that “ I found the Sutton (2001) paper very interesting from the point of view of reflecting on my own learning in online environments. I think that it would be difficult to categorise myself as either a direct interactor or vicarious interactor, as I use both aspects to greater or lesser extents. I think that the context does influence which one I am at any given time.”

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I was not previously aware of this category, the vicarious interactor, and would have put it down to social anxiety or shyness. This has never really sat well with me before, as I am not especially shy or introverted in social situations, and do not feel intimidated by posting my own opinions online.

However, I can see that I have many traits of the vicarious interactor. I like to observe and process direct interaction, often before interacting myself and I do learn from the actions of others. I find it useful to reflect on my learning style and I think that this also plays a big part in my teaching. This is especially true when I am involved in teacher training, I like to observe the actions of participants, and draw threads and ideas together. I think that this works well when cultivating a social learning environment.

As stated by Garrison & Cleveland-Innes (2010), interaction plays a central role in any educational experience, and online learning is no exception. I had previously noted in my journal that I felt that there were two types of online learning, one where the teacher taught a class online, through a tool such as Adobe Connect, that would be similar to a lecture, and one where the teacher used an LMS to provide learning materials and was fairly hands-off after that. I now started to think that the teacher needs to be more active in monitoring progress and reacting to emerging needs, and also to act as a facilitator to the social experience.

The idea of flexible learning as proposed by White (2006) and Collis & Moonen (2008) was something that resonated with me. I had previously noted in my journal that I thought that one of the key factors in online learning for me was good quality learning materials. While I still agree with

this view, Collis and Moonen (2008) said that learning situations need to be flexible and adaptable and White (2006) talks of making sure that learners receive sustained attention. On reflection, I think that this is a large part of teaching online. In the classroom, students expect the teacher to give them attention and to provide personalized learning according to their needs. I had tried out a number of MOOCs and always gave up due to the sheer size of them. Many of the materials were excellent, but I just did not engage with the course. I realize that this was one of the factors in my failure.

I found that the framework proposed by Collis & Moonen (2008) of the *before, during* and *after* activities one that could be easily and effectively transferred to my teaching context. Many teachers in my organization lack technical know-how and appear unwilling to try out new ideas. This framework can quite easily be adapted as many teachers use a similar lesson framework for activities such as listening comprehensions. This could be an excellent way of getting teachers to start working on using online learning with their students, probably with an emphasis on a blended learning approach.

*Word count: 1, 081*

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