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Online learning in a COVID-19 environment: An authentic learning experience?

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Abstract

For some time, online education has been a good option for students who cannot access face-to-face teaching. While there are still examples of rudimentary online courses, both the pedagogy and technology driving online learning has improved considerably over the last decade. With the COVID-19 pandemic, there appears to be a growing number of cases where online education is actually outperforming its traditional classroom counterpart. This article considers some of the evidence that shapes student success using eLearning and online learning and what the implications might be for future educational encounters.

The COVID-19 pandemic has meant that teachers globally continue to investigate the best ways to support student learning outside the traditional school or early childhood setting. This has meant considering options such as virtual/online learning or home-schooling at scale. Countless new resources, guides and checklists on how to deliver eLearning include a focus on what students and parents should do to make the most of learning virtually. In their planning, teachers also need to bear in mind the difference between online and eLearning. eLearning allows the students to interact with their teacher only through the internet while online learning allows students to use virtual conferencing software such as Microsoft Teams, and Zoom to interact with their teacher face-to-face along with learning online through the internet.

However, as the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) points out, whereas many of these support materials are helpful, some resources are based on little more than anecdotal evidence (AITSL 2020). What educators and parents seek is best practice evidence to guide teachers in planning and delivering online learning and, in turn, guidance that teachers can give to parents during this process. Key considerations include principles that demonstrate the benefits to student learning outcomes including wellbeing.

No matter how well intentioned, parent expertise in teaching cannot match that held by teachers. Teachers are professional experts with the motivational skills to engage learners in individual, small group and whole-class settings. Many parents will not have these attributes, nor will they have access to the student's peer group that is often harnessed by teachers. Similarly, school culture is characterised by routines for students (start time, recess breaks and gazetted time to complete certain activities) which gives a sense of sequence to learning opportunities in a structured school environment. There is a possibility that student achievement gaps may widen during this period if remote learning is poorly implemented. It is thus critical that both teachers and parents work together to implement practical and evidence-based solutions to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic as it relates to online learning as an authentic learning experience.

Distance learning is a complex balance of online content and physical interaction with content that is not delivered on a computer screen. It is also important to remember that there are positives to home-based education. For example, quality education is not always structured or necessarily scholastic or academic. In addition, learning occurs in many different contexts. Home life can provide opportunities for students to engage with nature, bond with family, learn civic responsibility and focus on social health. While barriers to online learning include an absence in social activity and a lack in student readiness to be a self-regulated learner (Acquaro 2020), there is still a range of measures that teachers, school leaders, students and parents can undertake to support effective online and eLearning.

A major factor to consider is the range of a student's visual literacy competency and the way in which reading and reading the visual interact. Classical and medieval theories of memory and learning, for example, placed a strong emphasis on how the visual format of words and lines affected the ordering of information in the mind. According to researchers and educators (Briggs 2015), visual literacy can improve one's creativity, critical thinking, educational achievement, empathy towards others and ability to decipher technology.

Anticipating a kind of image-driven cultural renaissance, Hempel (quoted in Briggs 2015) draws an interesting parallel between the Internet and the printing press:

In the 1400s, Europeans were considered literate if they could spell their name — and 80% could not. Then came the printing press. Within a century, people could read and write in growing numbers, and the literate were able to express complex ideas in writing. This mass shift in literacy ushered in progress in science, general education and the arts. We are now entering a similar period for images. Our smartphones and the Internet that enables them are the modern-day equivalent to movable type — and these tools are still very new.

There is some evidence that students who are heavy visual users (use of mobile phones, tablets, Apps and screen viewing such as television) dislike reading and tend to access digital materials of lower quality. Reviewing research across the past forty years, Neuman and Prowda (1981) and Cunningham (1999) assembled research into viewing habits, reading attitudes, reading materials and preferences on a large scale. The number of students reporting 'enjoyment' of reading decreased with age, while the number of those reporting a 'dislike' of reading increased. Neuman (1982) looked at students' preferences for reading or television viewing and the quality of their leisure reading material. Approximately 200 middle-class students in Years 4-6 kept television and reading logs for a month. Neuman found that students who preferred reading to television read the highest quality books, while heavy television viewers (more than 3 hours a day) and light readers (fewer than 2 books a month) chose books of lower quality.

Morgan (1980) used scores on standardised achievement and IQ tests, as well as data completed by more than 600 students and their parents, representing a variety of socioeconomic levels to examine how reading habits and preferences were related to televiewing. He concluded that heavy viewers (more than five hours a day) tended to read teen romances and books about celebrities, while light viewers (under three and a half hours) read science fiction, mysteries and general nonfiction.

In my own research, I considered the relationship of quality reading experience and its effect on response to visual texts, particularly films (Cunningham 1999). Unsurprisingly, the value of a student's reading experience (the ability to appreciate and decode print-based texts), directly influenced their ability to appreciate, comprehend and respond to visual texts.

Children do learn from television and digital media. Educators can use digital texts to improve reading skills, promote print-based, leisure reading and to encourage active discernment of visual texts. Activities that involve adult guidance, selective viewing or direction in the choice of websites, the quality of online internet searches for educational purposes all seem to be the most effective.

Further studies have investigated the effects of 'guided television viewing' on listening skills and found that Year 3 students who received such guidance scored higher on standardised listening and reading tests than did students who were taught using an educational publisher's listening laboratory program. Other research examined student, teacher and parent reactions to a program in which primary school students read scripts prior to viewing television shows and then engaged in class discussions and other activities related to the show. Overwhelmingly, teachers, students, and parents thought the program increased student interest in and enjoyment of reading. Students reported that the program enhanced their story comprehension and appreciation of characterisation and teachers reported that this approach was effective with all reading levels.

Implications of online learning for teaching and learning

Turning to contemporary research, not much has changed! Alqurashi's (2019) research considered student satisfaction as one of the key elements to evaluate online learning experiences, while perceived learning is considered as an indicator of learning. Her study aimed to explore how online learning self-efficacy, learner-content interaction, learner-teacher interaction and learner-learner interaction might predict student satisfaction and perceived learning. 167 students participated in this research. Results of the study revealed that the overall model with four variables: online learning self-efficacy, learner-content interaction, student-teacher interaction and learner-learner interaction were significantly predictive of satisfaction and perceived learning. The study found that learner-content interaction was the strongest and most significant predictor of student satisfaction, while online learning self-efficacy was the strongest and most significant predictor of perceived learning.

Macquarie University's pilot study (Kohnen 2020) using online reading lessons, used a sample of 18 students aged between seven and twelve. Students were tested on three reading measures: reading words, reading non-words and their letter-sound knowledge, twice before the intervention commenced and once after it concluded. Results revealed scores on two of three measures increased 'significantly more' during the intervention period and that they made more reading progress than they would have while attending school without extra help. Participants each completed three Skype, Zoom or FaceTime lessons a week for ten weeks and the sessions were tailored to their needs.

The overriding implication for teachers was the effective use of video technology. The value and efficacy of this study revealed a number of key points: planning how teachers delivered their evidenced-based teaching and learning program effectively, the use of books, whiteboards and live video to deliver material in each virtual sessions and the length of the lesson (ideally 30 to 45 minutes long). Lead researcher, Dr Saskia Kohnen, observed that more research would be needed, to compare face-to-face and online interventions: 'We don't have good data that has been peer-reviewed on whether this is an effective delivery mode. That is a gap our research is filling. Nevertheless, there might also be children who don't benefit from this kind of delivery. We need to learn more about this' (Chrysanthos 2020).

Teachers planning online learning opportunities for their students obviously need to take into account the level of reading engagement and student ability when planning online lessons in addition to logistical considerations such as time of day, length of online session and the scope of activities students are to undertake. Engagement with learning material, but an awareness of the ability of students to achieve outcomes necessary to produce specific learning goals, is the overriding aim. Lastly, the choice of medium of delivery, for example online as opposed to an eLearning approach, is also an important consideration that relates directly to the efficacy and impact of the learning experience for the student.

Implications of online learning for students and parents

Regardless of the wealth of research into teaching and learning in a classroom context, more recent research in the area of online learning is slowly emerging. Online learning's use during the pandemic has created fertile ground for more sustained investigation. For that reason, this article is provocative in suggesting that while online learning might appear to be a panacea for alternate means and mediums of learning, further research needs to be conducted into the efficacy and impact of online learning.

Preliminary emerging findings, however, suggest that students develop discriminatory frameworks for using online platforms through online learning experiences rather than by direct teaching of these frameworks. Direct teaching towards a discriminatory framework may be counter-productive if the student has insufficient online learning experience to incorporate what is being taught. The role of parents is integral in the development of online learning experience while parental restriction, like teacher intervention, may be counter-productive.

Further investigations emphasise the interaction between students' existing worlds of experience, beliefs, thinking and knowledge as they try to make sense of their world and experiences and the educational outcomes that teachers seek their students to accomplish. Research data suggests that pre-existing knowledge is strongly influential and its identification is one of the central challenges of teaching within an online context. The importance of a supported online learning experience cannot be over-emphasised in the development of the student. In meeting this demand, teachers are increasingly required to display an informed, enthusiastic and discriminating breadth of digital teaching knowledge and experience that is uncalled for in the wider society.

Students and parents most certainly can derive benefit from the 'flipped classroom' approach to get the most out of more limited face-to-face and synchronous opportunities (such as live webinars) in online learning and to manage limited concentration spans online. Student engagement can be channelled ahead of time to do much in terms of reading and preparing. Face-to-face eLearning or in webinar contexts can drill down and gain deeper insights from the students. This approach can also help to weave together the principles of social, cognitive and teacher presence, which underpin a successful online education experience.

Amid the timeframe to complete online course delivery, Owen Shemansky (2020) from the University of Melbourne, senses a concern from educators, students and the community that online study will not be able to offer the same peer support as traditional models: 'Well-constructed online experiences don't have to be like that at all. In fact, they privilege the social cohort experience and put that at the forefront.' Whether it be through peer assessments, group projects, discussion boards or some of the new collaboration-tools, students can enjoy online social engagement with their peers.

The value of 'purposeful play' promotes peer engagement, while also creating an openness to experiment, be creative and explore. In learning to try things together, students lose their inhibitions and fear of failure. This in turn empowers students to take learning risks that adds to their academic resilience. Finally, Shemansky observes that collaboration through group projects online can be an effective way to activate a sense of play, while also mirroring life in a modern workplace – infusing diverse experiences and 'combinational thinking'.

Conclusion

Two important observations arise: firstly, despite the misgivings among some educators and parents to the 'value' or 'purpose' of online learning, the use of online learning and eLearning

platforms as teaching tools cannot be ignored or avoided. It is an integral part of social experience and it is here to stay.

Secondly, the experience of interaction between parent and child in the learning process is paramount in developing the desire to learn 'beyond the pleasure dome' in a meaningful way. Positive parental attitude should continue well into the teenage years as to the value of online learning so that the student may experience the sense of self-worth and value in the learning process. Teachers can reinforce this process, but there is strong research evidence to indicate that parental involvement and support is a strong determinant. Positive and productive attitudes to the use and value of online learning either as the sole instructional means or as an adjunct to face-to-face experience are vital if learning is to progress and succeed.

The COVID-19 pandemic as a once-in-a-generation event is nothing short of monumental in terms of its impact on the social, economic and educational impact on Australia and the world. Yet, despite the challenges in moving so rapidly to online learning this experience will prove a gigantic reconsidering of learning and the way it is delivered as it forces everyone to adapt and puts the student experience sharply into focus.

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Notes

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