

Contemporary Professionals: digitally competent

Comparison of Online and Face-to-face Learning Environments

Perhaps the biggest hurdle to developing faculty for online teaching and learning facilitation roles is the collective lack of the appreciation of the fundamental differences of the learning experience in each mode.

Since McConnell's helpful comparison in 2000 much has changed in terms of the online technology support available to allow meaningful dialogic learning to occur. The roles of teachers in the online context has also begun to fragment into a range of specialisms, mirroring, but emphasizing, a similar specialization that occurs in face-to-face context. It is not uncommon to find tutors who do not teach and assess students, and assessors who don't tutor, as well as those who teach who do not assess.

As you study the following table consider your role in supporting students and reflect on your experience of doing so in the face-to-face context and compare that to the online context you are expecting to experience.

Do you agree with the differences identified? How have the changes in technology since 2012 altered the opportunities and differences outlined here?

| | Online | Face-to-face |
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| Tutors sense of control | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less sense of tutor control • Easier for participants to ignore tutor • Lack of awareness of tracking (analytics) tools | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More sense of leadership from tutor • Not so easy to ignore tutor • Greater sense of tracking performance |
| Context of meeting | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sessions start and finish <i>can</i> be open-ended – minimal disruption for late arrivals or early departures • Attendance can be tracked automatically | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often have to wait for late arrivals • People leave during the meeting, etc. • Attendance registration requires trust or deliberate action |
| Mode of Communication | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussions normally text only; can be structured; dense; permanent; limited; stark • All activity is recorded • Voice participation can be managed • Easy to separate groups out to complete focused | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verbal discussions: a more common mode, but impermanent • Participation requires active teaching to ensure equality • Group activity restricted by physical space |

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| | active (asynchronously or synchronously) – no space limitation | |
| Physical context | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No shared physical context • Challenging norms for <i>text-made</i> space – allowing revision and re-visitation • Online live classrooms can be revisited through recording | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet in a room; strong physical context • Universal norms of familiarity of physical interaction with evidence cultural differences |
| Time | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Option for group to 'meet' continuously through forums throughout a course • Concept of 'to meet' is different in online live context • Time less critical – option exists for asynchronous access to live recording • No travel time to 'get to class' • No sense of leaving the meeting • Less 'time-limitations' on participation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group meets in 'stop and start' fashion at programmed intervals • Strong sense of when group meets - all those involved attend at same time, date, etc. • People leave during meeting for other meetings • Subject to space available and timetabling |
| Context of Learning Activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work on multiple issues simultaneously • Work less condensed-fluid and interweaved with other activities • Group contact continually maintained • Depth of analysis often increased over time • Discussion can ebb and flow as focus changes • Members sometimes lose sense of where they are in the discussions over long periods of time (information overload) • Level of reflection high | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Usually work on one issue at a time and advance through agenda item by item • Work is condensed and focused • Unpredictable group contact in-between meetings unless mandated • Analysis varies, often dependent on time available • Discussions usually <i>completed</i> during meeting • Discussions occur within a set time frame, therefore less likely |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to reshape conversations on basis of ongoing understandings and reflection | <p>that members will lose sense of where they are</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often little time for reflection during meetings • Less likelihood of conversations being reshaped during meeting |
| <p>Group dynamics</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group dynamics not same as face-to-face; participants have to learn how to interpret them online • Different sense of anxiety • More equal participation, especially for females; participants can take control of this • Less hierarchies, etc. • Dynamics are 'hidden' but traceable – captured through analytics • No breaks in forum participation opportunity - constantly in the meeting • Can be active listening without participation • Medium (technology) has an impact on dynamics • Different expectation about participation • Slower - time delays in interactions/discussions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dynamics 'understandable' to most participants because they have experienced them before • Understood perception of anxiety at beginning/during meetings • Participation unequal and often dominated by males, but group may try to share time equally among members • More chance of hierarchies • Dynamics evident but lost after the event, requiring active tutor supervision • Breaks between meetings • Listening without participation may be frowned upon • Medium (room) may have less apparent impact • Certain 'accepted' expectations about participation • Quicker - immediacy of interactions/discussions |
| <p>Accessing other groups</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can access other groups easily dependent on VLE configuration | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extremely rare to have access to other groups simultaneously |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can see who is working in other groups • Can participate in other groups easily if configured to allow. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extremely rare to participate in other groups* • * requires technology intervention • Can't see what is happening to others in groups |
| Effects of medium | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effects of group software • Effects of technology | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effects of room setup, location and facilities (temperature, furniture, etc.) |
| Absence and Rejoining | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Psychological/emotional stress of absence and rejoining is high • Opportunity to review missed content | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress of rejoining not so high • Little opportunity to review missed discussion |
| Students' feedback of each other's work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feedback on each individual's piece of work can be very detailed and focused • Whole group can be given option to see and read each other's feedback • Textual, audio or video easily provided • No one can "hide" and not give feedback • Permanent record of feedback obtained by all • Delayed reactions to feedback • Group looks at all participants' work at same time | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less likely to cover as much detail, often more general discussion • Group hears feedback • Verbal/visual feedback • Possible to "free-ride" and avoid giving feedback • No permanent record of feedback • Immediate reactions to feedback possible • Usually some discussion after feedback - looking at wider issues • Group looks at one participant's work at a time |
| Collective effort | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires active engagement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allows passive participation unless engagement is engineered. |
| Divergence/Level of Choice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loose-bound nature encourages divergence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More tightly bound, requiring adherence to accepted protocols |

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| | <p>in activities, evolving protocols</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Requires shared understanding of context and expectations | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Uncertainty less likely due to common understandings about how to take part in discussions |
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Adapted Atkinson, S.P. (2012) from McConnell, D. (2000) Implementing computer supported cooperative learning. London: Kogan Page Limited.