

Foreword

by Dean Sutherland

The development and proliferation of higher education programmes available via online and digital technologies is the most significant change in tertiary education over the past 20 years. This rise in online modes of delivery is due to factors such as technological advances (e.g., high speed Internet and availability of digital content) and financial pressures on tertiary institutions (e.g., reduced public funding). My own student experience late last century included regular face-to-face lectures, browsing collections in the library, and plenty of time standing by a photocopier and socializing on and off campus. Contact with lecturers was face-to-face and generally by appointment only. During the late 1990s, the use of email and availability of online journal articles, publications, and Web resources increased. These and subsequent changes have now resulted in a very different educational experience for most students.

Online teaching and learning is challenging and rewarding for students and teachers alike. A wide range of professional studies can now be undertaken from the comfort of home, while working fulltime and participating in family life. Many people who may never have considered traditional on-site higher education can now access programs offered by many national and international university programs. These benefits can be countered by students' perceptions of isolation, lack of support, and poor digital literacy skills. Many teachers have also struggled to grasp the idiosyncrasies of the development and delivery of online programs.

As the coordinator of a professional university program delivered online via a *blended* model (i.e., online content and activity together with some face-to-face sessions), much of my teaching time is spent "online." This includes moderating forum discussions, marking online assignment submissions, recording and uploading video clips, video conference calls with student groups, linking students to external Web-based resources, and dealing with a multitude of student emails that arrive all hours of the day, every day of the week. The development of new media and technologies also presents challenges. For example, how can we be sure that content and student contributions are secure? Can effective Masters and Doctoral programmes

be delivered online? What is the most effective approach to developing a learning community when face-to-face contact between students and teachers is minimal or non-existent? The breadth and depth of many of these issues as well as the benefits of online learning are well captured in the following pages.

The book you are holding (or viewing online) is essential reading for anyone with an interest in developing and delivering educational programs via online technologies, in particular programs designed for students undertaking professional programs. From the first chapter, investigating student perspectives of online learning, to the final chapter, considering the security and protection of online programs and content, the book provides in-depth consideration and reflection on cases that illustrate the challenges, benefits, and issues surrounding online teaching and learning. Topics, such as developing a sense of community among students (chapter 4) and designing culturally responsive programs (chapter 7), are central to providing students from distant lands and diverse backgrounds with effective educational experiences.

Contextual features of effective teaching and learning programs include: appropriate and organized (and secure) information; student motivation; student engagement in activities on their own and with others; and opportunity for self-monitoring (Biggs, 2003). The development of online learning programs should address each of these features. The information in the following chapters will help you make more informed decisions about the design and functionality of your online program.

Although future changes to online learning are difficult to predict, I suspect new technologies will play a central part. What will not change is the need for engaging, knowledgeable, and supportive tertiary teachers who possess an understanding of the learning process, students' needs, and a willingness to learn new ways of doing things.

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March 2013

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REFERENCES

Biggs, J. (2003). *Teaching for quality learning at university* (2nd ed.). Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.