DIGITAL EDUCATION: BEYOND THE MYTHS

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Digital education is education that is conducted at least partly in, with or through digital technologies. This is a deliberately broad definition that could encompass the use of technology in traditional classrooms, blended learning (which combines online and face-to-face instruction) and education that takes place entirely online.

Practice in digital education can take many forms, each reflecting 'a very particular – and ideologically inflected – understanding of the relation between technology, education, individual and society' (Bayne 2015a, p.18). These tensions are visible in many contemporary narratives, particularly when technologies are seen to embody various promises or threats.

Engaging critically with pedagogy and research will help you to navigate some key discourses in digital education and enrich your learning and teaching practice. The principles described here will require tailoring to your own context but are relevant to all forms of digital education.

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MYTHBUSTING

Myth 1: 'learning styles'

The idea that students conform to one of four 'learning styles' (visual, auditory, reading/writing and kinaesthetic (VARK)) has been tested in various empirical studies and systematic reviews. They concluded that 'there was no evidence that learners inhabit a single learning style exclusively, nor is catering for learning styles an effective practice to improve learning' (Drumm 2019, p. 4).

Ways forward

As in face-to-face classes, the most effective way to help students learn in online or blended courses will depend on context. Rather than 'learning styles', think about 'tools for the job': what is the purpose of a particular activity or resource? How might this align with the affordances of the various options that are available to you (e.g. text, images, digital media, forums)? And how might each activity or resource fit into the overall 'flow' or structure of the course?

Myth 2: 'digital natives' and 'digital immigrants'

This is the idea that a new generation of 'digital natives' (i.e. people born since the early 1980s) require an entirely different approach to education compared to previous generations (termed 'digital immigrants'). Some even claimed that the extensive use of technologies had altered the neurological development of this younger generation. Again, there is no evidence to support these claims (Jones et al. 2010).

Ways forward

While few would disagree that digital technologies have profound implications for almost every aspect of life, in reality there are many more shades of grey than the 'native–immigrant' binary suggests. Spend some time getting to know your students' expectations about digital education, either informally (e.g. through online forums or social media) or via surveys or interviews. You might be surprised by the range of perspectives you find, particularly in terms of access to digital technologies and confidence in using them. Also, try experiencing what it's like to be an online or blended student yourself: for example do some CPD via LinkedIn Learning or enrol for MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) in subject areas that interest you.

Myth 3: technological determinism

Lastly, some people overstate the innate pedagogical value of digital technologies by suggesting that they will 'disrupt' or 'transform' education in and of themselves. Arguably such a view undermines the role of pedagogy and of the teacher and sets unrealistic expectations for technologies.

Ways forward

Think about why you're using technology and how it relates to your pedagogical approach. Build your critical perspective on digital education by engaging with networks and relevant

literature: Selwyn's (2011) analysis of the role of technology in change and Bayne's (2015a) unpicking of 'technology-enhanced learning' are particularly good starting points.

'WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE'

There is growing consensus around pedagogically sound practices: digital-first course design; online communities and tutor presence; more collaborative and authentic assessment and feedback; and creative and sustainable practice in digital media:

> Contemporary research into online learning almost univocally agrees that structured online discussions with clear guidelines and expectations, well-designed courses with interactive content and flexible deadlines, and continuous instructor involvement … are the most promising approaches to fostering learning in online environments.
> (**Joksimović et al.** 2015, p. 95)

These are overall themes, not hard and fast rules. So think about what might work well in your context – whether it's blended or fully online, large or small cohorts, semester-driven or self-paced. Talk to people who are already delivering online or blended courses to learn from their experiences and seek out advice from any in-house specialists such as learning technologists, instructional designers, media producers or content developers.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- There are positive alternatives to many of the myths, promises and threats that surround digital education.
- While technology is interwoven with learning and teaching practices, the role of the teacher and of pedagogy is no less important in online or blended contexts compared to campus-based education.
- When developing online or blended courses, think about what might work best in your context. Consider doing some research to understand your students' expectations or – even better – find out for yourself what it's like to be an online student.

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FURTHER RESOURCES

MOOCs
The Open University (no date) *The Online Educator* [MOOC] Available at: https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/the-online-educator

University of London and Bloomsbury Learning Exchange (no date) *Get linteractive: Practical Teaching with Technology* [MOOC] Available at: https://www.coursera.org/learn/getinmooc

Harvard University (no date) *Leaders of Learning* [MOOC] Available at: https://www.edx.org/course/leaders-of-learning

PUBLICATIONS
Ferrell, G., Smith, R., and Knight, S. (2018) *Designing Learning and Assessment in a Digital Age* (Jisc guide) Available at: https://www.jisc.ac.uk/full-guide/designing-learning-and-assessment-in-a-digital-age

BLOGS
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