

Let's dare to reimagine education in our time of crisis

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Sustainable changes in digital learning will result from best practice alongside bold experimentation, say Friedrich Hesse, Volker Meyer-Guckel, Bitange Ndemo, Alexandros Papaspyridis, Rahim Rajan and Suzanne Walsh

Nothing has boosted the adoption of remote digital learning tools like the Covid-19 pandemic. With such an urgent need to shift learning online, the focus was inevitably on the speed of transition (sometimes achieved within a handful of days) rather than the effectiveness of the learning. To put it succinctly, the risk of inaction was much higher than the risk of failing.

But as we move towards the autumn term (or H2 in the southern hemisphere), it is imperative that we enter the recovery phase and focus on improving educational outcomes. Not all digitalisation automatically makes for good or innovative teaching; good in-person methods and teachers may not necessarily translate well to an online environment.

The shift to remote digital learning must be accompanied by new pedagogical concepts and evidence-based research to create engaging learning experiences that optimise the power of the digital medium. Unconstrained by the limits of physical delivery, we can enhance access and create an opportunity to reimagine education.

There is a variety of approaches that teachers can use to foster digital learning. Remote learning, hybrid learning (with both remote and in-person delivery) and synchronous and asynchronous online learning all have their nuances – which often translate into distinct dos and don'ts.

The flipped classroom approach enables students to have richer in-person educational experiences while leveraging the digital learning environment for more passive mastery and practice. Open educational resources offer a more individual learning experience, based on intrinsic motivation and personalised learning preferences.

While the potential benefits of digital learning are plentiful, they are not reaped equally because there is fragmented understanding of how digital learning can best be implemented. And while evidence is emerging that faculty and students who

have the necessary tools (electricity, broadband, digital learning technologies and devices, professional development, online digital learning skills) are able to quickly adapt and even experiment with bolder, more innovative approaches, those who lack them are at risk of being left behind. For online education to benefit as many learners as possible, every student across the world must have access to the necessary infrastructure.

We must also recognise that universities have a variety of reasons for implementing digital learning and differing capacities to do so. Deciding which approaches are most valuable will depend on the problem an institution is trying to solve and the context within which it operates. To address this, we can take inspiration from adaptive learning, which uses computer algorithms to deliver customised or modulated learning, addressing the unique needs of each learner.

While some universities are looking into fully digitising their teaching on an ongoing basis, building new learning communities across regions and time zones, others are banking on returning to “normal” as soon as possible, maintaining that in-person teaching is still the most valuable form of transmitting knowledge. Thus, some universities will want to find modalities of teaching that include digital and hybrid approaches with in-classroom settings. Others will want to shift assessments and learning outcomes in line with industry’s call for an agile workforce with 21st-century skills.

To use crisis-driven approaches to bring about sustainable changes in digital learning, we must put in place best practice around effective delivery. We must conduct careful evaluations of existing teaching approaches alongside daring experiments. And we must develop a transnational consensus on quality standards in both online teaching practice and digital learning tools.

We must also allow evaluations of digital learning approaches to capture the diversity of contexts, thereby coming to an understanding of which approaches suit which learners and institutions. In the end, we may not be able to achieve universal consensus on best practice in all settings, but there are evidence-based and research-derived practices that ought to be widely applicable.

To understand, evaluate and implement novel approaches to digital learning effectively, cooperation between actors is also needed. The mission must be to foster a global, holistic examination of the function of education, the role of higher education institutions, and the ways in which digital learning can assist learners, instructors and education leaders alike. This crisis can become an opportunity for the transformation of higher education for the benefit of students.

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