

# Is Online Learning the Future of Education?



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The current global pandemic, COVID-19, has disrupted all aspects of our lives and all sectors of our economy including higher education. In an effort to keep students, faculty and staff safe, universities around the world had to pivot quickly from face-to-face teaching and learning to online instruction in the middle of the 2020 spring semester.

This was very disruptive to students, faculty and staff and few welcomed it. At the University at Buffalo's (UB) home campus, we had a week to make the transition for some 30,000 students. Meanwhile, at the Singapore Institute of Management (SIM), where our programmes are offered, we had a little more time to prepare our 1,400 students for the transition.

As many of our faculty, especially senior faculty, on both campuses, had never taught online, we had to move quickly to conduct workshops and short-term training programmes to bring them up to speed. We also had to assist faculty in adapting their course syllabi for online teaching. While some faculty and students struggled with the technology involved, a number of other students had limited access to technology and the internet. Nevertheless, we managed to make a successful conversion and finish out the spring semester. We also continued with preparations for the summer and fall semesters.

In Singapore, courses with more than 49 students were moved online because of the pandemic. Currently, we are offering our students in Buffalo and in Singapore hybrid or blended learning for fall and spring semesters. What this means is that some courses will continue to be taught face-to-face while others will move online. Some courses may combine both these teaching modes.

## Adapting to Different Ways of Teaching and Learning

Understandably, not all of our students and faculty are happy with online learning, students miss the live classroom interactions with their professors and fellow students. Many of them feel less engaged as anything done online can sometimes result in a lack of attention

span. They also miss the campus academic atmosphere.

Interestingly, our students in Singapore have adapted more readily to online learning than our students in Buffalo, which may reflect their more sophisticated experience with all things digital.

Currently, there is much discussion in the media and in higher education circles about the place of online learning in higher education. Some educators predict online learning will supplant the traditional campus learning experience and prove to be a revolutionary change in how universities provide education to their students.

In my opinion, there is nothing new or revolutionary about online learning and it has been on our campuses for the past two decades. In fact, the Babson Survey Research Group estimates that 33% of American college students were taking at least one course online long before the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has merely accelerated a trend that was already taking place in education. Proponents of online education argue that it is much more cost effective than the traditional face-to-face education. They question the need for expensive campuses with hundreds of classrooms and lecture halls when students can easily take a vast array of courses online from home. Online learning offers accessibility – you can take courses 24/7, and have flexibility. You can also decide when and where you will access your course lectures and materials.

While this is all certainly true, it begs the question of why students want to leave home to join a traditional university campus community. I believe they enjoy being in a student community where they can have face-to-face interactions and the opportunity to learn from one another. They want to participate in on-campus activities and extracurricular activities and to experience living on their own.

International students and study abroad students are eager to improve their proficiency in the language of the host country and to immerse themselves in the local culture. Our faculty want these same interactions as few are satisfied or enjoy teaching to a camera in a smart classroom, and only interacting with their students virtually.

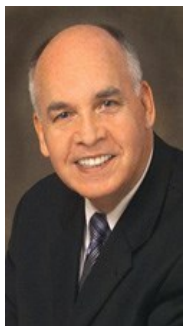
## The Way Forward in Higher Education

Rather than supplanting the traditional classroom experience, I believe online learning will be an additional tool in how universities provide education. It certainly has its place in higher education, especially for students who would otherwise not be able to receive a higher education, or for graduate students who are working full-time and are unable to take a year or more off to pursue an advanced degree. However, for undergraduate students, I do not see online learning as the sole future of higher education. Even if this pandemic were to end tomorrow there will be no returning to the way things were before. Rather, the 'new normal' will see institutions of higher education offer degree programmes in a hybrid or blended mode. Online learning will play an important role in that model, but it will not be an exclusive one.

In order to take measures to ensure the success of the hybrid or blended mode, it requires institutions of higher education to make a considerable investment in IT infrastructure and technology, in smart classrooms as well as in necessary software to ensure the quality of instruction. There should also be investments in the training of faculty who need to acquire new pedagogical skills in order to deliver their courses effectively online. We must also develop appropriate course syllabi, student assessment and advisement tools.

New students entering the university will need to receive an in-depth orientation on how to learn effectively in the digital classroom. There must be constant assessment to ensure quality in both teaching and learning. Feedback and input must be sought from faculty, staff and students.

It will take time for universities to blend traditional live in-class instruction with online teaching in a virtual classroom effectively. Online learning can enhance the learning experience of our students if implemented thoughtfully and well. It might over time cause us to reimagine how we provide better education to our students. From my experience at the home campus of the University at Buffalo and at SIM, I am confident, given the deep concern we all have for our students, that we will indeed get it right.



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