Shopping for Answers: Reflections on a Trial of Online Content Delivery

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I was staring at a girl’s sweater. I couldn’t like focus on the teacher. The teacher was a hologram that day. There had been some funding cuts. The school band was gone, and so were the alive teachers. . . . With a hologram, like when your teacher is one of them, if you aren’t looking right at them, they sometimes seem to be hollow. You see them and suddenly they don’t have a face that pokes out. Their faces poke in, their nose and so on, and there is nothing inside them.

(Anderson, 2003, pp. 248–9)

In MT Anderson’s young adult novel, Feed (2003), students attend corporate-run School™. Education has little to do with the transfer of disciplinary knowledge. Indeed, conventional learning is arguably as redundant as “alive teachers,” since in this dystopic future world “you can be supersmart without ever working” (p. 59). This is because most people are blue-toothed to the World Wide Web by a technology known as the “feed” and can instantly access any information they need. According to the novel’s lone dissenting voice, however, “When you have the feed all your life, you’re brought up to not think about things” (p. 127). Albert Borgmann (1999) makes a similar point “in the context of computer-assisted education” when he “draws a parallel between the mind of the learner and the personal computer: both are able to retrieve and process information, but both know nothing” (Roberts, 2001, p. 108). In other words, “the complement to “having the world database at your fingertips” is to have nothing in your head” (Borgmann, 1999, p. 206).

Both Anderson and Borgmann raise questions about differences between knowledge and information and the changing social context – including the disembodiment – of teaching and learning. These are also some of the preoccupations of this paper, which reflects on a trial of online delivery of lecture content to a cohort of on-campus first year students enrolled in a Children’s Literature unit at a multi-campus Australian university. The specific circumstances out of which the trial arose reflect broader trends in higher education, both nationally and internationally, that have more to do with policy than pedagogy. Australian universities are increasingly moving towards online learning for on-campus entry level students, both entirely online units and hybrid combinations of electronic and live teaching. This creates new challenges for teachers and learners and, as we will explain, particular anxieties for teachers of literature. As such, it was with misgivings that we suspended a conventional lecture and tutorial program and substituted online lecture content delivery annexed to complementary classroom seminars. This paper considers some of the concerns online delivery raised for us as teachers and discusses our students’ responses to the alternative format. What we found were not entirely holograms and empty heads but was that students take a consumerist approach to material made
available online, selecting only what they assume they need to achieve the assessment tasks. As Borgmann puts it, in the online environment, students “are like the consumers of a well-stocked twenty-four-hour supermarket who have made their lists, come in when convenient, move along the shelves, and assemble whatever they need and want” (1999, p. 205).

**Background to the study**

In needing to replace lectures with other means of content delivery we find ourself in a situation that is not unique, either to Australian universities or universities overseas. It is the product of a combination of historical, economic and technological factors. In themselves, these factors have rather little to do with enhancing teaching and learning, but their impact on them is profound. Since the Second World War, there has been a consistent shift away from elite to mass higher education. At the same time, universities have found themselves increasingly positioned by higher education policy and a competitive global environment to serve government and the economy.

Writing in the 1960s, Kerr (1963) argued that the “growth of the ‘knowledge industry’, which is coming to permeate government and business and to draw to it more and more people raised to higher and higher levels of skill,” was already altering the face of American universities (pp. 87-88). Kerr’s coinage of the notion of a knowledge industry was prescient. In 1996, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published *The Knowledge-based Economy*, and this document has been profoundly influential in shaping the innovation policy of OECD and other countries – in Australia, for example, *Backing Australia’s Ability* (2001) and, in turn, higher education reform. Scientific and technological knowledge is regarded as the driver of economic growth in this new economy, making universities – producers of knowledge and “knowledge workers” – the object of unprecedented policy interest (see Kenway et al., 2004).

Clearly, the trend towards mass higher education responds both to consumer demand and serves the policy interests of nation-states as they jostle to secure their position on the global economic playing field. In order to meet these imperatives, higher education has had to become more “inclusive” (Channon, 2000). Distance and online modes of delivery are increasingly designed to meet the needs not only of remote students but to encourage lifelong learning in the existing workforce, to access the global education market and, moreover, to service on-campus undergraduate degrees. As one of the key industries in the knowledge economy, computer along with information and communication technologies have come to play a central role in supporting the massification of higher education.

Discussing the higher education ambitions of the British Government, Channon (2000, p. 256) says that this new model of higher education “is a variably-paced, flexible system, which students of all ages, circumstances, and locations will be able to access, and to enter and leave with portable qualifications”.

However, there are other reasons which underlie the rhetoric of inclusive education. Demand for higher education has exceeded the capacity of the public purse to fund it and, as a result, “In many countries, the costs of education are being shifted from taxpayers to students and their families” (Channon, 2000, p. 255). Universities are increasingly required to subsidize government funding by attracting fee-paying and international students. As Chambers (2000, p. 245) explains, a further way of reducing

unit cost of higher education [is] through introduction of technology-based teaching: at the international level, distance-teaching via the “mega-university”; at the national level the e-university; and, locally, larger classes, more home- and work-based students: so, no commensurate increase in resource for staff or physical plant required.
As Channon’s research suggests, therefore, the rationale for electronic delivery to distance students is very different to the rationale for delivery to on-campus students and raises questions about the pedagogical merits of such innovation.

The electronic provision of lecture content trialled in this project reflects this fact. In making the decision to substitute live lectures with online materials we were concerned that it was a solution simply conforming to prevailing mantra of online delivery as a one-size-fits-all solution to teaching and learning dilemmas in the twenty-first century university. It is for this reason that we developed a research project to assess this shift in delivery as it progressed in real-time across a semester. We did this by asking students to critique the varied modes of material we posted during their learning process. We were determined that the reshaping of our content presentation should reflect Lee’s (1999) guidelines for using technology to teach:

- Technology should not be used to replace teachers or teaching;
- Technology should only be applied in appropriate stages; and
- Technology should only be used where a noticeable gain to teaching quality is evident.

These stringent guidelines were particularly helpful in encouraging us to critique our own practice. The first rule was difficult to navigate without a sense of unease. Equally, we were concerned that online technology may not be the most appropriate teaching method to meet the particular needs of first year undergraduates making the transition from secondary to tertiary education. Finally, Lee’s model raises questions as to whether technology can achieve noticeable gains in the quality of teaching without consideration not only of online pedagogies but of how such pedagogies engage with the methodologies of specific disciplines.

The humanities at large are generally considered at a disadvantage when it comes to the hegemony of scientific models of research in the assessment of research quantum as well as quality measures and grant applications. Is it also the case that traditional humanities pedagogies translate less effectively to the online mode than other disciplines? There has been comparatively little research into the use of technology for teaching Literary Studies and the impact on student learning (Porter, 2000). Views about its effectiveness tend to be polarized and focus particularly on online discussion (see, for instance, LaGrandeur 2001; DeCandido 2002; and, Black 2005) rather than the delivery of content. However, Ellie Chambers (2000) raises a number of salient points about the nature of teaching and learning in the humanities which we summarize here.

As Chambers explains, knowledge in the humanities is “socially-constructed”. This is the case in many disciplines, but in the humanities knowledge construction is, moreover, … hermeneutic, inter-textual, participatory, value-laden, context-dependent, and relatively indeterminate; there are no hierarchical structures of information, no obvious causal explanations, and no indisputable truths of any significance to be found. (2000, p. 247)

Rather, it could be argued that knowledge in Literary Studies is something that students themselves create by engaging in a critical process under the guidance of their teacher. Chambers further notes that “The crucial role of the teacher as ‘expert speaker’ of the discourse (rather than primarily as information-provider [emphasis added]), one who models and guides process of textual analysis-interpretation-evaluation and of
argumentation, is ill-understood beyond humanities education itself” (2000, p. 247).

What Chamber is describing is essentially the transfer of tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1958; 1966), that is to say, the transfer of procedural competencies from, for instance, mentor to mentee or master to apprentice. Lundvall and Archibugi (2001) describe two types of tacit knowledge, know-who and know-how and these are influenced by experiential and environmental factors. This suggests that tacit knowledge is acquired through social practice which, in regard to the teaching of Literary Studies, operates most explicitly in face-to-face classroom teaching. In contrast, codified knowledge, which consists of know-what and know-why, can be codified and transferred, traded and quantified as information. The advent of online technologies has tended to privilege codified knowledge at the expense tacit knowledge.

However, in justifying our decision to place lecture content online, we made the assumption that the purpose of the traditional lecture was the transfer of codified knowledge. In spite of the fact that lectures have traditionally held a central place in university teaching, opinions about their pedagogical effectiveness vary (see, for instance, Lammers & Murphy, 2000). Barnett (2000, p. 159) argues that the formal lecture “keeps channels of communication closed, freezes hierarchy between lecturers and students and removes any responsibility on the student to respond.” Given this, the process of accessing and navigating online information in preparation for seminar discussions would arguably demand a more active engagement with content from our students. As we will explain, however, this was not necessarily how our students engaged with the online content.

Description of the project

Given the centrality of the learner to the scholarship of teaching, we decided to research students’ perceptions of alternative modes of delivering content, specifically, their perceptions of the relative merits of the conventional lecture and tutorial format versus electronic delivery of content combined with seminars. We also canvassed their views on the effectiveness of print and audiovisual online delivery.

Over the course of second semester, 2005, material in various formats was posted to an institutionally tailored version of the Web CT Vista platform. These included:

- Audio-streamed and video lectures
- Lecture texts
- Electronic readings
- Discussion questions.

These materials were made available in variously weighted combinations each week across the semester.

Students at rural and metropolitan campuses of the university (approximately 25 and 100 students, respectively) were invited to participate in the project. Given that the alternatives to live lectures are technology-based, it seemed logical that the method for data collection also be online. A dedicated section of the unit site on the university’s virtual campus was created where students could post their comments and engage in conversation about the relative merits of the various materials. In the interest of even-handedness, we provided a discussion link so that data could only be collected from those students who had agreed to participate, but the materials under scrutiny were available to all students. In order to avoid coercion to participate, a plain language statement advised students that their comments would not be read until their final results for the unit had been posted. Finally, in order to ensure anonymity, the data collected in this project was to be monitored by a third party and identifiers deleted before collation.
However, it transpired that only two students had responded in the online discussion space by week 11 of the 13 week semester, and at risk of collecting no data at all, a written survey was distributed in class in order not simply to ascertain the responses we sought about the effectiveness of the trial materials but also to discover the reasons behind the students’ failure to contribute in the online space. This proved to be fortuitous. As our data analysis will show, only 30% of respondents accessed the unit site regularly and, had the data been collected electronically, it is unlikely that we would have had a viable sample.

There were 50 respondents to the questionnaire across the two campuses, 38 at the metropolitan and 12 at the regional. Questions one and two were designed to establish the frequency and the purpose for which students accessed material online. Questions three and four inquired into students’ preferred types of electronic information format and mode of delivery. Questions five and six sought students’ comments on what was most and least effective for their learning about the online/seminar format, while question seven was directed at students who did not access the online site and sought the reasons for this. The final question asked whether students preferred lecture/tutorial format, online/seminar format or a combination. Once the questionnaires had been collected, responses were collated (see Table 1). The table gives rural, metropolitan and overall numerical responses, and percentages are calculated for applicable questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table: 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. How often did you access the online site for this unit?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Hardly ever</th>
<th>Assignments only</th>
<th>Regularly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. What use did you make of the material online?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not useful</th>
<th>To help with assignments</th>
<th>To choose assignment tasks</th>
<th>To learn more about the subject</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. What online information delivery format do you prefer?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Video lecture</th>
<th>Audio-streamed lecture</th>
<th>Notes and references</th>
<th>Combination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Would you listen to lectures delivered as pod-casts?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metro</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Rural  | 3   | 75%
| Total  | 22  | 56% |
The data and its analysis

In what follows, we analyse the implications of the data, not only assessing the effectiveness of online delivery of lecture content, but also assessing the effectiveness of our survey questions. We draw on students' comments to both interpret the statistical data and as the basis for critical reflection on our teaching.

If we simply make a distinction between those students who never or hardly ever accessed online content (32%) and those who did use it (68%), the data would appear to support electronic delivery as a viable alternative to lectures, especially when attendance at live lectures is subject to attrition. However, when considering the frequency and purpose for which students accessed the unit site, this conclusion becomes less convincing. Only 30% of students accessed the unit site regularly “to learn more about the unit topics (like going to a lecture).” Thirty-eight percent of students accessed the unit materials only when writing assignments – in terms of frequency, this means they accessed information on three topics versus 13 topics covered in a semester lecture program. Responses to question two asking the purpose for their access show another picture: 86% of respondents said that it was to help with assignments or to choose texts for their assignment. The reason for each response is likely to be related, if not the same. Even though we cannot determine this from the data, the resources available on a particular text or relevant to it may be a factor in the choice of assignment texts. In fact, one respondent claimed that online content was ineffective for their learning because it contained material unrelated to the (their) assignment topics.

The fact that the majority of students accessed online resources for assignment purposes raises a number of issues about the extent to which the figures indicate that students used it as an alternative means of accessing material conventionally delivered in a lecture. It is university policy that all units have an online presence and students are encouraged to use it as a resource. Most of the students we surveyed undertaking the Children’s Literature unit completed a companion unit in the first semester. This semester unit consisted of weekly lectures and tutorials and had a strong online presence. Lecture notes, PowerPoint presentations, references and assignment tips were posted to the site, and informal feedback from students indicated to us that they made use of it. Therefore, we can assume that at least some of the students from whom we collected the data would have made a practice of using online resources regardless of the presence or absence of live lectures. As such, our data may be more indicative of patterns of access of the students more generally rather than a reflection of how students changed their learning to adapt to the lack of lectures. Certainly, the students who only accessed online content for assignment-related reasons did not use the resources to prepare themselves for the seminars. As such, the material did not take the place of the lecture in priming students on pertinent issues before coming to discuss those issues in the more open format of a class.

The percentage of students who never or hardly ever accessed online content (32%)
may likewise reflect broader issues relating to electronic delivery. In regard to the virtual campus, one student said: “I just don’t go on there.” We draw further on responses to question seven to support this claim. Students who did not use the site to access unit content were asked why. A number of students on both campuses commented that they found the resources posted to be insufficient or irrelevant or, on a more positive note, adequately covered in the seminars so “there was no need.” However, the majority of responses point to factors relating to the online format rather than the unit materials. This was particularly the case with the rural respondents, of whom 25% never used and 17% hardly ever used the online site. Sixty-six percent described it as “not useful.” In reviewing the reasons for this, we found that one-third of these students felt the material was irrelevant, suggesting that they were not processing what was the equivalent to the live lectures and thus required the mediation of the teacher to do so. Forty-one percent of rural respondents pointed to technology-based reasons for not accessing the online materials, including difficulty in navigation, a dislike of using computers, lack of access to a computer and cost of internet access. One student couldn’t find the content and another described the online platform as “fundamentally flawed.”

While all metropolitan students said they accessed the unit site, 21% provided an answer to question seven, listing reasons why they did not access it. Their motives were similar to those of the rural group. Access to a computer was an issue for several of these students, and this factor raises issues of equity and questions about the extent to which we underestimate the “digital divide.” In fact, this is a trap we fell into with question four when we asked if students would listen to Pod-cast lectures: not all students own i-Pods or MP3 players and some did not know what they were. Also related to access and equity was the comment of a mature-age student who wrote: “I only have limited dial-up and time at home. I am full-time career/chef/house cleaner for two children.” Other comments point to the danger of assuming that first-year students not only have access to the technology but are technologically savvy, information-literate, and have the generic study skills to be effective online and independent learners at this level. One respondent struggled with evaluating the relevance of different information and another complained of the lack of structure and links between content. In our view, face-to-face teaching provides this structure and models critical processes of synthesis, evaluation and interpretation. Academic articles also model the same process but are generally directed at a peer audience rather than undergraduates. In classes, complex concepts and language can be unpacked and reiterated in ways that are not possible when content is provided simply as an information source.

On a more practical level, we think there is a high degree of insight in this student’s reason for not accessing the unit site: “It’s easier to go to class at the time in which I enrolled (in the knowledge that I could make it) than bother with it in my own time. Chances are I’ll forget to go” (emphasis in original). Presumably, students who enrol in on-campus units rather than distance units do so for the learning experience it provides. Again, for young people recently out of the highly-organized regimen of secondary school, the flexibility which is a by-word of online delivery can be a test of self-discipline and self-motivation. It also suggests that the virtues that electronic teaching and learning has for those in the work-force, post-graduate, international and remote students, and various equity groups may actually be problematic for on-campus first-year undergraduates.

This tends to be corroborated by responses to questions three and four, which deal with format and mode of electronic content delivery. In question three, we asked students to rank their preference from one to four for a range of content formats: video lectures, audio-streamed lectures, notes and references and a combination. We do not here discuss this data according to campus or analyse the ranking of preferences within each format, since some students selected only one or two preferences. In regard to video lectures, 53% of students ranked it as their fourth and last preference, and 33% as their third preference. Of the 31 students who ranked their preference for audio-streamed lectures, 54% ranked it
as their third preference and 22% as their second. Eighty percent of students ranked notes and references as their first preference and 18% as second. A combination of formats was the first preference for 39% of the 41 respondents, for 36% it was their second preference.

The clearest preference is for notes and references and the lowest preference for audio-streamed and video lectures. There is clearly a difference between committing the time to listening to or viewing 50-minute lectures versus downloading and reading a lecture in print. There is also additional cost for students accessing full lectures from the internet at home if they are not on broadband and infrastructure implications for campus computer pools. This finding may be of relevance to many universities as they move towards e-lecture technology.

Students are more responsive to the option of accessing Pod-cast lectures as they allow students to do other activities while they listen. A combination of formats ranked second. Responses to question five, asking about the effectiveness of online delivery, suggest that students view the posted content as a “back-up” to class-time, a means to save time taking notes in class, and as insurance against absence from class. They value the online presence, but the strong preference for notes and references and the low ranking of audio and video lectures suggests that they do not see the virtual classroom functioning as a platform for delivery of, or as a substitute for, actual lectures. Indeed, 46% of students in the survey said they preferred live lectures and tutorials compared with 26% who preferred the online/seminar format. The remaining 28% selected a combination.

It is in regard to these figures and the insight which students’ comments provide to them that we feel question eight might have been better written. The question asked whether students preferred the delivery of content in online/seminar format versus lecture and tutorial format. While this framing of the question appeared to get to the heart of our inquiry, we feel that a clearer picture would have been possible had we asked students to give their preference for lectures versus online content and tutorial versus seminar. There are two chief reasons for this.

First, it is possible that students preferring a combination of formats may have understood them as mutually exclusive. In other words, they may have thought that a preference for live lectures and tutorials meant no online presence, even if this was not their experience in the first semester unit. We cannot tell from the data whether those students wanting a combination of formats preferred a full lecture program and complementary online material available simultaneously or alternating delivery modes over the course of the semester. Second, the question does not allow us to differentiate between students’ attitudes to online delivery and their attitudes to seminars, the extent to which students’ satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the seminars is linked to their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with online content delivery; or how these responses were affected by campus-specific factors. Once again, we draw on comments in questions five and six to draw some conclusions.

Students were asked to identify the most and least effective aspects of the online/seminar format. Of the rural students, 25% selected online-related reasons for effectiveness (information on assignments, back-up notes and suggestions for further readings). Thus, 75% of students selected features of the seminar classes as the most effective aspect of this combination. Here, the students pointed to the tutor’s clear explanations, textual examples, depth and breadth of knowledge, and most frequently, class discussion. As one student put it, “talking about it [the topic] made it more interesting.” Of those who found the combination ineffective, 84% identified the online component as the cause, for reasons enumerated above.

This pattern is reflected in the responses of metropolitan students, with an even
stronger level of satisfaction with the seminars. According to one respondent: “Nothing about [online delivery was effective for my learning] because I don’t go on there. I loved the enthusiasm of the lecturers and the way [the teachers] explained everything thoroughly in seminars.” Typical reasons why the seminars were regarded as the most effective aspect of the combination for learning include:

- Adequate information and guidelines provided
- Class discussion is more useful for learning
- Teachers motivate learning
- Content and discussion integrated
- Teachers’ explanation of concepts accessible and engaging.

One sense to be taken from these responses is that they foreground the role of personality and performance in teaching. That the students find classes entertaining is of unclear pedagogical merit in terms of their access to relevant information. Of the 38 metropolitan student respondents, 47% identified aspects of the seminars as being most effective for their learning. Of these students, 66% identified the online component as being least effective for their learning, 16% cited aspects of the seminar, and the remaining 18% did not respond to this question. Ineffective aspects of the seminar were the venue and large class size. In response to the question, “What aspects of the online/seminar mode were least effective for your learning?” one student said: “Not really applicable, but I did find that the info [sic] given in class left less time for discussion which is what I find useful for deeper understanding.”

Ten percent of metropolitan students did not answer questions five and six. The remaining 43% did not refer to the seminars. Of these, 37% cited aspects of online delivery as being least effective for their learning. As outlined above, typical aspects of online content cited as most effective related to assignments, back-up notes, and references. Only one student said that the online content allowed him/her to work at their own pace, again suggesting that the flexibility of online delivery is not highly regarded by this group. Disappointingly, only two students gave reasons which suggest they used the online content for higher order learning. Both referred to material on literary theory. Conversely, only one student was explicit in his/her rejection of the online/seminar mode, saying that “Live lectures are much more effective for learning.” Given that 34% of these students ultimately selected live lectures and tutorials over the online mode or a combination, this does raise the possibility that some may have been disposed to respond favorably to the conduct of the unit by the researchers. This cohort gave highly favorable feedback in student evaluations of the teachers and unit. Moreover, because lecture content was delivered in seminars, an absolute distinction between online delivery and live lecture as alternatives is lost.

From a pedagogical perspective, the reasons students gave for the effectiveness of the seminars seem to be much more persuasive than those for the online component. The tenor of the responses suggests that the seminar is an occasion for actual learning – with knowledge transfer and creation in which the students are participants not simply recipients. The responses about the effectiveness of online delivery, on the other hand, suggest that the students use online material as an information resource. In regard to learning, therefore, the elements that the students identified as being most effective reflect the traditional methodology of humanities teaching Chambers (2000) describes.

That said, we can be less definite about our core question: is online delivery a viable alternative to live lectures? In our view, students’ patterns of and purpose for accessing the online classroom and their uneven success in processing the available information suggest that presently it is not. Changing this state of affairs will entail a better understanding of students’ perception of the purpose of the virtual classroom and supporting them in using it effectively. Crucially, it also means modifying our own practice as teachers. It is clear that
lecture content cannot simply be translated into electronic content in an unmediated fashion as if unit resources are a straightforward substitute for live lectures. Finally, our experience also suggests that while the transition to online delivery may need to be made to adapt to the exigencies of the contemporary university, it needs to be informed by sound pedagogy, a re-conceptualization of disciplinary methodologies and careful attention to the needs of students. This clearly takes a lot more time and thought than simply uploading lecture notes, e-readings and references.

**Conclusion**

As is typically the case in assessing students’ educational needs and preferences, student diversity necessarily means that there is no simple solution to any pedagogic problem. In the light of the outcomes of our research, it seems we have some way to go in our use of electronic delivery as an alternative to live lectures. In particular, this research has highlighted that further interrogation of on-campus student expectations are needed, specifically, the belief that online materials are only relevant to the students’ assignments.

There are, however, dimensions to this student expectation about “material for their assignments” that need to be further unpacked, for therein lies an irony. The aspect of literary essays that students find most difficult to come to grips with is the requirement that they devise original interpretations of the texts under examination. Students cannot merely recast their lecturer’s interpretation of the set text into an essay by repeating a set of specific points. In fact, what they require is not information about texts, but knowledge of how to critically examine them. In other words, they need to draw on tacit as well as codified knowledge of critical practice.

By their own acknowledgement, our students were specifically using the online site as a supermarket in which to shop for assignment materials, as opposed to pursuing knowledge for its own sake. Their motivation necessarily recasts the respective roles and expectations of teachers and learners in this next phase of the technology-driven knowledge economy. As teachers, we see our role in traditional, perhaps archaic, terms as broadening students’ minds and increasing their critical acumen, indicating that our expectations sit uneasily with our students’ focus on assessment outcomes. However, as teachers of Children’s Literature, there is very little we can present to students in the form of simple, concrete information, given that literary analysis is process-driven and allows for, even requires, varied and even contradictory responses, provided those responses are well-argued and evidenced. When there is no singular answer to be discovered, inclusive discussion becomes paramount to teaching methodology.

As teachers using online delivery we became something like ghosts in the machine, holograms unable to engage in the two-way exchange that students claimed (and our own experiences confirm) are the most effective modes for their learning. It is, therefore, imperative that we invigorate this mode of delivery. As always, the process of teaching is a constantly shifting dynamic that each semester requires reassessment and imaginative reshaping of concepts and tasks that were problematic. Both teachers and students are part of a larger cultural shift in using these online technologies, and it is via two-way participation that the best ways of using the technology will become apparent.

**References**


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