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We are the Campus: Using the University of Edinburgh's Manifesto for Teaching Online to Provoke Dialogue about Online Learning in the US

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the Manifesto for Teaching Online, a document created through an iterative process by students and teachers in the MScC in E-learning Programme at the University of Edinburgh, is presented. The goal of the Manifesto is to provoke discussion, and to “rethink some of the orthodoxies and unexamined truisms” (Ross, 2012) surrounding the field of online teaching. Written in the style of a manifesto (or even a meme, discussed below) the Scottish document purposefully eschews formal learning theory or traditional research. Each point of the Manifesto is “deliberately interpretable”, underlining its authors’ roles as provocateurs (Ross, 2012). This article discusses both pros and cons of the Manifesto, but ultimately embraces the notion that intellectual activity which prompts questions and illuminates paradigms is a positive good.

Keywords: *Manifesto for Teaching Online, digital education, online learning*

Introduction

In 2016, about 5.8 million U.S. students took college classes offered either partially or fully online. Online education enrollments at universities are growing faster than place-based enrollments, with the likelihood that online students will make up close to 25% of all higher education enrollments by 2020 (WCET, 2016). Kathleen S. Ives, Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director of the Online Learning Consortium, noted that distance education

enrollments are on the rise, whereas overall higher education enrollments are declining. She suggests that this is a “shift in the American higher education landscape” (Online Learning Consortium (OLC), 2016), as learners lean toward online options.

Online education’s rise from obscurity to prominence has been swift, and the medium is no doubt still in its infancy. Internet-based teaching is still for the most part firmly rooted in the models and assumptions of place-based classroom learning. There is usually one

teacher and many students. Instructors deliver content, and students are assessed on their grasp of the material. Even the highly touted Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) preserve the essential elements of traditional education: large classrooms, erudite teachers, and final assignments.

Many educational futurists have attempted to predict what changes are coming in online teaching and learning. A small group of Scottish teachers and students may be on the forefront of not only predicting, but creating that future. At the University of Edinburgh, the faculty and students of the MSc in Digital Education decided to address the issue of what digital education ought to become in the future. Their vision was first published in 2011 as the first *Manifesto for Teaching Online*. The document emphasized the principle that in learning, distance should be perceived as a positive principle, not a deficit. The authors pointed out that digital education is often described as an inadequate replication of offline experiences, or as a second-best approach to teaching and learning (Bayne, 2006). One of the co-authors summarized the work in developing the Manifesto as trying:

... to push at the limits of online pedagogy, and to construct as virtuous those things which are often considered to be deficits. In short, we see no reason to cast technologically mediated learning as being any sort of “poor relation” of the campus-based, face-to-face, programme, but rather that it serves to focus our attention on those things

that are truly important about learning environments, such as relationship and dialogue, by whatever means these are brought about (Macleod, 2014).

The manifesto itself was created using the kind of richness only possible in an online context. Drafts were refined using methods that encouraged interaction among students, colleagues, and other stakeholders in a process the leaders called *remixing*, in concert with the Creative Commons movement and the final document was *assembled*, rather than authored, by the Digital Education group. James Lamb, a student in the MSc in Digital Education program noted that the Manifesto was developed using collaborative processes:

One of the most attention-grabbing propositions within the original 2011 Manifesto was that digital environments offered new ways of constructing and sharing academic knowledge and content. *Text was being toppled*, we were told, and there were *many ways of getting it right*. (Lamb, 2015a)

The Original Project

The first version of the Manifesto was presented by one of its co-authors, Jen Ross, at the Online Learning Consortium conference in Las Vegas in 2012. She noted:

The session was well received. The aim was for the group to discuss and generate new Manifesto points reflecting the perspectives of those in the room, as a way of prompting

critical discussion. People seem to appreciate seeing different ways to be immersed in digital education and technology. (personal communication, October 31, 2016)

In 2015 the original project leaders began the process of refining and updating the Manifesto, bringing the document up to date in a context that had seen the rise and fall of MOOCs, the proliferation (if not embrace) of online education, and the increasing digitization of nearly all aspects of human activity.

The Context

The *Manifesto for Online Learning* bears many of the hallmarks of that Scotland's post-secondary educational system, which differs in important respects from the American experience. Scotland is the most highly educated country in Europe, and among the most educated in the world. In Scotland, there are no tuition fees for undergraduate students from the European Union; fees for students seeking first degrees are paid by the Student Awards Agency of Scotland. Further, the link between Scottish universities and employers is strong, with educa-

tional agencies meeting often with the government to coordinate planning and share information over a range of learning and training issues. The number of Scottish college students (226,919) is dwarfed by the number of American full-time college students (12.7 million full-time, 7.8 million part-time) (Learning House, 2016). Thus the Scottish system avoids some of the issues which plague American higher education. There are no issues of rising tuition or student debt, and the close ties between the educational system and Scottish industry mitigate the concern that students may not be able to find jobs after graduation.

The Manifesto

The *Manifesto for Teaching Online* embodies premises that may jolt many American educators. The 22 tenets of the 2016 Manifesto can serve as provocative conversation starters as U.S. students and teachers struggle to align digital education with its more traditional sister. Several key points from the Manifesto raise discussion about applicability to higher learning in the United States:

Table 1. Manifesto for teaching online—Digital Education, University of Edinburgh, 2016 (Ross & Bayne, 2016)

1. Online can be the privileged mode. Distance is a positive principle, not a deficit.
2. Place is differently, not less, important online.
3. Text has been troubled: many modes matter in representing academic knowledge.

4. We should attend to the materialities of digital education. The social isn't the whole story.
5. Openness is neither neutral nor natural: it creates and depends on closures.
6. Can we stop talking about digital natives?
7. Digital education reshapes its subjects. The possibility of the 'online version' is overstated.
8. There are many ways to get it right online. 'Best practice' neglects context.
9. Distance is temporal, affective, political: not simply spatial.
10. Aesthetics matter: interface design shapes learning.
11. Massiveness is more than learning at scale: it also brings complexity and diversity.
12. Online teaching need not be complicit with the instrumentalisation of education.
13. A digital assignment can live on. It can be iterative, public, risky, and multi-voiced.
14. Remixing digital content redefines authorship.
15. Contact works in multiple ways. Face-time is over-valued.
16. Online teaching should not be downgraded into 'facilita-tion'.
17. Assessment is an act of interpretation, not just measurement.
18. Algorithms and analytics re-code education: pay attention!
19. A routine of plagiarism detection structures in distrust.
20. Online courses are prone to cultures of surveillance. Visibility is a pedagogical and ethical issue.
21. Automation need not impoverish education: we welcome our new robot colleagues.
22. Don't succumb to campus envy: we are the campus.

Online can be the privileged mode. an identity, a person or group automatically defines those not in the group as *other*. Within the sphere of higher education, classroom instruction has

Distance is a positive principle, not a deficit. Sociology has given us the useful concept of *otherness*. By establishing

been seen as the criterion against which all other kinds of education should be measured. The Manifesto proclaims that online education must unburden itself from the yoke of *otherness*, and instead take its place as a wholly legitimate form of delivery.

Text has been troubled: many modes matter in representing academic knowledge. Education has traditionally been focused on words. Those words may be transmitted through text-based artifacts, or uttered by “a sage on the stage” (King, 1993). Universities gained their role as the legitimate keepers of wisdom when there were few other avenues for the transmission of formal knowledge. The internet has reshaped this thinking, as information of all kinds has become dramatically more accessible. As Swanson notes:

Yes, the world is becoming increasingly media-infused. We watch video clips instead of feature films. We read hyperlinked blog posts instead of novels. Giving students opportunities to author in these new mediums is critical. (2012)

The Manifesto urges educators to explore possibilities of knowledge transfer beyond the written or spoken word. It is now possible to use animations, shared electronic space, emojis, and simulations to engage learners.

Digital education reshapes its subjects. The possibility of the “online version” is overstated. Digital education transforms the learner, the teacher, and the material itself. One of the great

est disservices to online education is the tendency to make digital imitations of nondigital experiences. Online education must renounce efforts to replicate classrooms, and focus instead on using the power of the internet to transform how knowledge is transferred and how new work is shared.

Implicit in this transformation is the democratization of learning, with a shift from hierarchical models to processes of collaborative learning. The role of instructor must be transformed as well, since factual information is now universally available. Information, however, is only one piece of the puzzle, as new roles must evolve for “guides on the side” (King, 1993) who structure collaboration, channel discussions, and provide mentorship for learners.

There are many ways to get it right online. “Best practice” neglects context. The education marketplace should be wary of those practitioners claiming to promulgate *best practices*. As in traditional education, online education is not a single entity, but rather an amalgam of varying people, circumstances, goals, and hurdles. The prescriptive nature of *best practices* tends to chill creativity and impose homogeneity.

Distance is temporal, affective, political: not simply spatial. The Manifesto urges us to consider the many kinds of distance which affect learners. Distance education almost always refers to spatial distance, and is thus compared with education in which teachers and learners are more closely confined in space.

But physical proximity still permits great gulfs among those involved in the process. Cultural differences, political antagonisms, and temperamental disparities can intrude in the learning process. Online education is not immune from these obstacles, but is helpful to remember that physical distance is only one of many communication challenges.

Aesthetics matter: interface design shapes learning. Early online courses were mere digitizations of place-based learning materials, and did a disservice to both media. As Wise (2016) notes: **“There’s more to implementing learning technology than plugging traditional classroom practices into a digital platform; that would merely be digitizing content.”** Interface aesthetics in online learning should embrace research-based strategies for layout, navigation, and screen design, which enrich the learner’s experience and create opportunities for collaboration, cooperation, and meaningful feedback (Peters, 2014). These approaches should remain flexible and open to variation, however, in order to avoid the strictures of best practices.

Remixing digital content redefines authorship. One of the most controversial tenets of the Manifesto for American academics may be its challenge to traditional concepts of authorship. Digital content affords authors and readers an unprecedented ability to augment and reshape the work of others. A primary example of this kind of collaboration is

Wikipedia, the largest encyclopedia in history, and the sixth most commonly used website in the world (Simonite, 2013). Another example is fanfiction, in which fans create and post new, unauthorized work about characters or settings from an original work of fiction. The Manifesto embraces and celebrates this culture of remixing, and urges us to reconsider our assumptions about ownership and authorship.

Conclusion

The Scottish **Manifesto for Teaching Online** will leave many US educators scratching their heads, wondering if there is any useful application to the American system. Although Jim Shimabukuro, editor of the *Educational Technology and Change Journal* calls the Manifesto “arguably the most exciting document for discussion to emerge thus far in 2012,” Marostica (2012), derides the Manifesto as a *meme-like document* designed to “make online education cool;” and it was described in *InsideHigherEd* as “an exceptionally wordy bumper sticker,” (Kolowich, 2012). The Manifesto authors welcome these differences of opinion, since their primary goal is to inspire debate and dialogue. Citing James Lamb (2015b), again:

One of the things that I like about the Manifesto is its intention to provoke discussion rather than dictate a set of hard-and-fast rules: we are encouraged to approach and interpret the statements in our own way.

The Manifesto begins and ends with similar sentiments. The first and twenty-second tenets both challenge online educators to see internet-based teaching as a positive good, better suited than older methods to engage modern students in achieving both skills and critical thinking. We have only begun to tap the possibilities of online teaching and learning, but it is clear the future is bright. Critics of online education will soon sound archaic and old-school. Make no mistake: *we are the campus*.

Readers who find that the Manifesto for Teaching Online stimulates their thinking, or engenders anger or delight, are invited by the Manifesto team to add their comments to the ongoing discussion at <http://onlineteachingmanifesto.wordpress.com/>.

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