

# EEI... RIGHT OF REPLY

## The Education Revolution

*Associate Lecturer Kate Davis has been mulling over the EEI column published in the March issue of InCite. Here, she gives a view from the other side of the lectern.*



In the March issue of inCite, Elizabeth Caplice wrote a thoughtful piece on distance learning in library and information science (LIS). As someone who actively sought out a face-to-face course in LIS myself, I read Elizabeth's column with interest, and some of her thoughts really resonated with me.

The face of higher education is changing. Universities are responding to student demand by offering increased flexibility in course delivery – students choose how – and indeed whether they will – engage. Universities are also responding to industry demand for graduates with relevant and current skills and knowledge by embracing blended learning. The traditional lecture and tutorial model that has been the hallmark of university education is no longer considered to be the best way to facilitate learning. Being a face-to-face student no longer means rocking up to class once a week, doing a reading in the interim, and submitting work for assessment.

***"It's just as easy to be disengaged face-to-face as it is to be disengaged online... at a certain point, I have to pass the baton of responsibility to the student."***

I do not doubt that distance learning can be challenging. I'm even willing to admit that I failed at distance learning myself, back when it meant reading and working through a course brick.

Distance learning has changed. It's no longer about working independently through a course brick, submitting assessment, and getting some feedback. Online learning today uses a mix of synchronous and asynchronous methods to maximise student engagement with course content, each other and the teaching staff.

Students have the opportunity to participate in virtual classrooms that offer all the functionality of a well-equipped lecture theatre – application sharing, whiteboards, presentation tools, web cam, breakout spaces and more. Social media provides teaching staff with a barometer to gauge student progress and engagement, and a way to connect informally, allowing a relationship to develop between teacher and student. A real sense of student cohort can be built across geographical and temporal boundaries, with students developing the beginnings of their professional personal learning networks through online interaction with their peers.

I cannot speak for other institutions, and I probably shouldn't assume even to speak for colleagues in my own institution. But I can speak to my own philosophies as an educator who works with a dual mode cohort of internal and online learners.

As an educator, I expect my online students to engage with content at the same level as my internal students. I expect the two groups of students to interact with each other. I expect students who identify as internal to undertake particular components of their learning online, because there are some skills and knowledge that are best

taught in that environment. Internal and online students will never have the same learning experiences, but they can have equitable learning experiences.

It is my job to provide the learning resources, activities and environments to support equity of learning outcomes regardless of mode of study. But there is one factor that is completely outside my control: student engagement.

I can build the sexiest of course sites with the latest and greatest functionality. I can prepare exciting learning resources and activities designed to encourage experimentation and play. I can develop assessment that is practical, interesting and stimulating. But at a certain point, I have to pass the baton of responsibility to the student.

I have learnt from experience that I cannot force engagement. It's just as easy to be a disengaged face-to-face student as it is to be a disengaged online student – you only need to turn up to any lecture theatre, stand up the back, and observe the prevalence of the Facebook logo on students' laptops to understand this. I can't force students to be as excited about libraries as I am, or to invest in themselves and their professional futures by maximising the opportunities the learning environment offers. All I can do is model what it means to be an engaged, passionate professional, and provide every opportunity possible for my students to become engaged, passionate professionals themselves.

Yes, LIS education is changing – and rightly so. We are educating professionals who will enter a dynamic profession, and our courses need to have a similar level of dynamism. But LIS courses are not moving to distance learning across the board. We are responding to student and industry demand, incorporating flexibility and embracing blended learning, but this does not mean we are compromising learning outcomes. Nor does it mean that we are eradicating face-to-face study options. We are simply evolving our courses to produce the best graduates we can.

I encourage you to contact your local LIS education provider and find out about their courses – how they're changing, and how they can offer you a positive experience as an online learner. You just might be surprised at what you find.

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