

Chapter 61

Reflections on the Role of Self-Paced, Online Resources in Higher Education or How YouTube is Teaching Me How to Knit

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ABSTRACT

In higher education sectors around the world, lecturing remains the mainstay of teaching and learning practice (see Bligh, 1998; Jones, 2007). This is despite the fact that countless high-profile and widely read scholars have shown that the pedagogic value of lecturing is questionable (see Bligh, 1998; Gibbs, 1981; Laurillard, 2002). How it has come to be that lecturing persists remains the focus of much speculation (see Jones, 2007). It may be the case, however, that lectures have finally met their match in the form of online, self-paced, on-demand resources. As the availability and number of these resources grows, the viability of face-to-face lecturing as a teaching and learning strategy becomes increasingly tenuous. In this chapter, the authors outline the impact that these resources are having on pedagogy and curriculum design in general and in higher education in particular. They offer a case study of the use of this strategy in a higher education context within an English Literature module. The authors conclude by offering some reflections on their own experiences as on-demand learners and offer some suggestions as to how university teachers and the institutions for which they work may need to rethink the way they operate.

PREAMBLE

I'm learning how to knit. Well, actually, I'm teaching myself how to knit. The majority of novice knitters learn the craft at the knee of someone more accomplished, often their mother or grandmother.

That was initially the case for me. I took my opportunity while my parents were visiting us in the United Kingdom from Australia in the summer of 2010. Mum showed me how to cast on, how to knit and purl, and how to hold the needles and wool to get a consistent tension. Before long I was off. But

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so was she. As she was winging her way back to Australia, I was rapidly running out of wool and I had no idea how to cast off. Instinctively I reached for my smart phone, tapped on the YouTube app and entered the search terms: 'casting off knitting'. Within a few seconds I was listening to and watching a North American woman demonstrating how to cast off, explaining what she was doing as she went. I paused the video, picked up my needles and followed her instructions. When she got ahead of me, I pressed pause. When I needed to watch it again I replayed it. Before long my knitting and my needles were successfully separated and my knitting journey could continue. Since then, as I've tackled more challenging projects, I've turned to YouTube whenever I encounter something I don't know how to do. This has included interpreting patterns, adding new wool, increasing, decreasing, using circular needles and, with unfortunate frequency, how to fix dropped stitches. So, while I'm teaching myself how to knit, it's probably more accurate to say that YouTube is teaching me how to knit.

BACKGROUND

As Steve Jones (2007) has explained, lectures became established in western higher education at the time of the rise of the medieval universities almost certainly abetted 'by the scarcity of books' (Cubberley, 1920; Jones, 2007, p. 399). Understood in this way, lectures offered a kind of transcription technology, ensuring all students had a good set of notes from which to learn in their own time.

Lecturing, however, almost certainly faces its most powerful challenge yet: the information revolution. With the advent of the world-wide-web, information in a wide variety of formats and from an equally wide variety of sources is becoming increasingly available. In recent years we have seen a veritable boom in the development and accessibility of online on-demand, self-paced

learning resources. Sites like YouTube (www.youtube.com), iTunesU (www.apple.com/education/itunes-u/), and Vimeo (vimeo.com) are being constantly populated with 'how-to' films for just about anything you could want to learn. Whether it is using the picture-editing software on your computer, changing a bicycle tire or, as in my case, learning how to do a knit-wise, slipstitch decrease, there are multiple videos and demonstrations already available. These resources are also widely available for more scholarly subjects. To take an example from my own discipline, you can watch Edward Said delivering a keynote address at a conference on Orientalism only a few months before his death in 2003 (Edward Said, 2009). You can also watch Professor Paul Fry from Yale University delivering a lecture on Postcolonial Criticism, as part of his Introduction to the Theory of Literature course (Fry, 2012). This proliferation of resources is leading academics and students alike to question the value of giving up another hour of their time to deliver or engage with yet another lecture. After all, in this information-rich context, lectures and the lecturers who deliver them can only ever be, at best, just another source of information in an overwhelming stream of it. Indeed, where once lecturers were filling students' empty information cups, now these cups are overflowing and lecturers, in the very act of lecturing, could actually be making that problem worse.

This information revolution is also democratising knowledge in interesting and powerful ways. On the one hand, it is widening access to information and knowledge far beyond the bounds inside which it was once tightly held. Now anyone with the ever-cheaper and easier-to-use technology can engage with materials and information previously only available to those with the time, money and ability to access formal education. What remains uncertain is how universities, and university lecturers, respond to this changing information and professional working environment and, more importantly, what role they might play within it. While it is critical that universities adapt to make

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