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A Provocation: Blended learning is dead, long live blended learning!

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Abstract:

Most universities across the world have been offering what has come to be called ‘blended learning’ for a number of years now. However, this has largely been supplementing traditional, face to face, classroom teaching with varying degrees of online elements. The pandemic has done us all a favour by highlighting the fact that what universities have been doing with this ‘blended learning’ is no longer sufficient and arguably already passed its sell-by date. The pandemic has accelerated existing trends. But it has also moved us in new directions.

In the medium term, university teachers know they are going to have to teach some students on campus and others remotely, and both alongside each other. Some have called this ‘dual mode’ or ‘dual track’ teaching. However, for many universities, and countries, this approach may not be feasible for any length of time as it is both resource-intensive and time-consuming. More importantly, it fails to recognise the limitations of our current model of educational provision for high participation societies – which privileges students who can access and afford the face-to-face campus experience and short-changes students with poor or restricted access to WiFi, computers or places to study or whose life circumstances require alternative learning modes. So let’s not waste this opportunity to rethink and redesign our online learning platforms, environments and technologies, and improve them, so that they are fit for purpose.

Ultimately, however, the crises caused by the pandemic should encourage us to look beyond new platforms and technologies to the longer term, and rethink *what* we teach and *what* students learn, as well as *how* we teach and *how* we assess learning. Universities could be preparing students for a longer-term future and to solve some of the urgent global challenges of our time, including climate change and repair, poverty, inequality, poor health, food insecurity and cyber insecurity, to name a few of the most urgent. This should include developing learner’s abilities to manage their lives, careers, work-life balance and physical and mental health and not simply obtain their first graduate job.

By doing so, universities could rediscover the *public* and *collective* purposes of higher education, as well as the private and individual benefits it offers. Universities need to not only help students be lifelong learners but open their doors in genuinely flexible ways to respond to the needs of learners of all ages and abilities. So, alongside the new modes of blended learning – or what might be called *hybrid approaches to facilitating distributed learning communities* – this pandemic-induced crisis is an opportunity for universities to also reconsider *what* is taught as well as *how*, the purposes of education in unpredictable times of rapid change and greater risk, and the new opportunities and broader possibilities opened up by this.

There is a world of difference between remote teaching in an emergency and carefully designed and planned hybrid learning for the future.