

PRESTO! – Comments and questions for digital delerium

In our review of the opening statement by Digital Delerium, Presto! identified several common themes which we believe represent arguments which have not been fully articulated or defended. The common themes are:

- 1) the technology
- 2) the characteristics of a good teacher
- 3) where is the poster child for online failures
- 4) the pressures of preparation
- 5) the affordances of the medium

1) The Technology

- The 2012 Horizon report states that 'people expect to be able to work, learn, and study whenever and wherever they want to'. As technology has supported the democratisation of education throughout history, from the printing press and the ballpoint pen to the overhead projector, do we as educators not have a responsibility to embrace new technological approaches and develop our skills to facilitate learning in this changing environment? In addition, with the ever increasing numbers seeking to educate themselves, do we not have an ethical responsibility to attempt to support this goal?
- Technology, science and education are now, and have always been, intimately connected with one another - technology drives the ability to carry out the science, which leads to new knowledge that must be taught to the next generation. As educators we have always adapted technologies for our own uses - the overhead projector was originally a tool in police forensics, but most would consider it primarily a teaching tool; PointPoint was not developed primarily for educational purposes, but since its launch in 1990 it has been widely adopted by the educational community, despite the relatively steep learning curve required to master the programme. Educators have always been, and will continue to, willing to develop a working knowledge of how to facilitate learning using new approaches - they do not have to be experts, but achieve a level of proficiency adequate for their own teaching needs. The main two determinants of the acceptance of any new technology, as described by the technology acceptance model, are the end users' perceptions of usefulness and ease of use. We agree that there can be technology related anxiety but we do not believe that this should be levelled as an argument against technology per se, rather it is an argument for effective technical support and technology design. Can the group provide evidence of endemic technophobia in an academic context which would support their argument that the technology is, in and of itself, a critically limiting factor in transporting a good teacher from the real world to the online environment?

2) The characteristics of a good teacher

- We struggled to understand the idea that a good online teacher possessed a unique set of characteristics which their face-to-face counterparts do not. In our opinion and experience a good teacher is a good teacher, regardless of the setting, and should possess characteristics and the ability to take on roles such as a facilitator, a mentor, an assistant, a provocateur, an observer and a participant. The ways in which these roles are enacted may be different between the online and the face-to-face setting but the inherent characteristics are the same. We would ask that Digital Delerium would provide us with an example of a characteristic of a good teacher which is authentically unique to an online lecturer?
- Digital Delerium stated that 'to be an effective e-moderator, e-moderators must be confident and competent at using a community's **virtual** learning environment'. We would argue that a virtual learning environment is just one type of a learning environment - if we take out the references to the virtual setting, this statement holds true for any learning environment and speaks more to the competence and (inherent or learned) characteristics of a good teacher: to be an effective moderator, moderators must be confident and competent at using a community's learning environment'. What evidence can they present that confidence and competence are uniquely valuable in the online environment compared to other settings (e.g. in the workplace, in the field, in the laboratory etc).

3) The missing poster child

- 'There are no poster children for failures in e-learning'. This is a provocative quote, but we believe that it is misleading - it directly implies that there *are* 'poster children' for failures in face-to-face settings. Unfortunately, many of us have had bad teaching experiences as students. These experiences are no more publicised than the failures in e-learning. Can Digital Delerium provide us with any direct evidence that the failures in e-learning are more prevalent than other failures in the educational sector?
- We also would like to highlight that there are studies on key criteria for success of a technology which are not related to the technology per se; rather the main factors are stifling organisational culture, a lack of readiness (on the part of both students and educators) and unrealistic expectations of the technology. Can Digital Delerium explain why we should hold the technology itself accountable for the failure of a more complex system?

4) The pressures of preparation

- We do not agree with Digital Delerium's contention that online work consistently demands 40-50% more work than more traditional lecture preparation. While this statement is supported by some research, the evidence indicates that the main factor in the additional

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time requirement is the perceived availability of teachers around the clock. Can they provide any specific evidence that this is an inherent flaw of the online approach, rather than a consequence of insufficiently clear guidelines and explicit statements of the 'contactability' of a lecturer, as a general feature of the online environment?

- The development time is mentioned as a specific limitation and we accept that the initial outlay of time is quite significant. However, the concepts of agile development and an 'ID lite' approach allows the teacher to use thier resouces as effectively as possible. Moreover, many of the resources developed for an online environment are in essence reusable learning objects, which can be applied again and again with minimal outlay of time. For example, while it takes a significant amount of time to develop an online question bank, once the bank is established it can be reused many times. This is directly analgous to drafting a laboratory exercise, problem based scenario or case study in more traditional teaching and learning; these can be used again and again for many years. It is our contention that such reuse effectively flattens out the time cost over a number of years and the overall preparation time (e.g. averaged over 5 or 10 years) for both face-to-face and online may not be significantly different. Can Digital Delerium provide any evidence to refute this?
- Digital delerium also raise the idea of instructor anxiety with an ever changing online environment. While we accept that educators may feel under pressure due to the constant flow of new technologies, we would argue that anxiety also exists in a face-to-face setting e.g. we have all witnessed an educator's frustration with a projector, a whitboard covered in permanent marker, a room that's too hot, cold or noisy. Can they comment on these aspects?

5) the affordances of the medium

- Learning, in the full sense of the word, is usually much richer than what the instructional context provides for; therefore does the online instructor, through the virtue of the wealth of resources used and the connectivity they permit, not provide a better well-rounded education?
- "Education paradigms are shifting to include online learning, hybrid learning and collaborative models" (*Horizon Report 2012*). Institutions are under financial pressures to cut costs and come up with alternatives to traditional methods. Whilst we acknowledge there will be initial set-up costs in an online environment, the benefits of attracting a wider student base can be realised providing possible alternate revenue streams for institutes. How can traditional methods compete with this new approach to teaching and learning, given the current economic climate?