

Online learning is here to stay

By: Gregory Mason

Winnipeg Free Press, Monday, Aug. 16, 2021

FILL in the blank. Virtual learning is to live learning as phone sex is to _____ sex. There you have it ... a question from the 2021 Mensa test.

In the spring of 2020, as the first benign COVID-19 wave came and passed, most teachers, primary, secondary, and post-secondary, hoped that virtual learning would be short-lived. As the summer progressed, my colleagues and I adjusted to the reality that virtual learning would last well into 2021 and maybe 2022.

Working like crazed weasels, we learned how to use Zoom and other virtual platforms that had not been stressed-tested to support the crush of work and study at home.

Students also needed to pivot. I remain impressed and grateful at how my students adapted with good humour, tolerated my fumbling around with the technology and, most importantly, treated each other with respect, patience and civility.

Even if COVID-19 recedes completely, and in-person teaching resumes without restrictions, I plan to continue virtual teaching indefinitely — and this is my conclusion after 40 years spent in the classroom. Also, my view applies to post-secondary teaching — I fully appreciate the importance of in-person instruction for elementary and middle school; I also recognize that many high school and university courses require live labs and the close physical presence of the instructor.

So, is my preference for online learning simply a result of permanent cave mentality induced by 16 months of lockdown? I must confess, my dry-cleaning bill has disappeared and my wardrobe is now best described as "trailer park essential." I also have added some seven kilograms of pandemic "gravitas," so the head shots on Zoom are welcome.

No, my preference for virtual teaching is based simply in the belief that in 2021, I can do a better job using virtual platforms rather than the classroom. Let me explain why:

First, prior to COVID-19, many elements to support independent virtual learning were falling into place. One of my courses, developed in 2014, transitioned to completely virtual in 2017, with no lectures — just a text, examples, and many videos. I still maintained in-person office hours, but few students turned up.

This course uses Excel as the foundation, and new online teaching platforms offer a virtual environment in which students submit assignments and the instructor returns marked work. The entire process is electronic and very efficient.

Second, while I still lecture, students have summaries prior to the class. My lectures are commentaries with animation, embedded videos and other "wake-up" devices. Further, the chat function allows shy students to ask questions that can be seen by the entire class, or just me. Polling software allows me to ask questions that students answer on their phones, with the group results compiled instantly, which supports direct discussion.

Third, in the standard in-person classroom with 100 students, creating teams for collaboration and group learning is logistically impossible. The virtual environment makes this easy. It is especially good at supporting teams spread across the globe. In my typical class, 50 per cent of my students are international and in time zones up to 14 hours ahead of Winnipeg. Such asynchronous learning is becoming the norm.

Fourth, office hours were extremely inefficient in the "old" days. Students would line up outside my office waiting their turn, many just to ask the same question. Now, I schedule virtual office time, where students make 15-minute appointments. We can share screens, work collaboratively and, anytime I see a common problem emerging, I post the answer to the group. This saves everyone's time.

Fifth, artificial intelligence is entering the scene. Socratic software, guided by the instructor, rates student questions and answers, offering immediate scores. This leads to rapid self-improvement and enhanced learning. Students seem to like the quick feedback and reward.

Of course, challenges remain. Cheating skyrocketed in the last academic year. Technology solutions include watching students while they complete exams and collecting the digital footprint left by every computer on documents. It is a bit creepy. Virtual testing remains a work in progress.

Finally, virtual learning confronts middle-rank universities in Canada with two challenges: first, much of the physical infrastructure may become unnecessary and will need to be repurposed; and second, and more ominously, we are now competing with the big-league universities that have huge endowments to throw at dominating the post-secondary virtual learning market.

I am pretty good at creating videos, but I am no Steven Spielberg.

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