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# Challenges for Online Learning and Teaching: A Subjective Academic Narrative

**Dr Josie Arnold**
Professor of Writing
Swinburne University of Technology
Melbourne Australia

**Abstract:** The subject of this paper concerns my reflections upon postgraduate and undergraduate online teaching from 1995 to 2014. At the heart of this paper lies a mystory (Ulmer, 1985) about the pleasure of teaching and the transference of that pleasure from face to face to e-teaching. In this paper, I consider scholarship in online learning and teaching and the early adoption of e-learning and e-teaching. I go on to present a snapshot of asynchronous e-learning and teaching, to look at e-models and e-methods. In critiquing intransigent templates, I refer critically to the work of Gilly Salmon, and propose that the quality of the academic input is the most important element in any e-curricula. Methodologically, I describe this as a subjective academic narrative, and theoretically I place it within narrative qualitative discourses. The brave new world of online teaching has become somewhat tattered as the time has progressed from the heady days of the 1990's when anything seemed possible and a pedagogical revolution seemed certain. Today, those dynamic possibilities are in danger of being replaced by the realities of budgets, of a determination to remain on the campus, and by a distinct feeling that online teaching and learning may be being evaluated and even actually developing as a second rate pedagogy. Unfortunately, some of it is. One way to challenge any second rate online offerings is to submit them to traditional academic guidelines for best practice. Certainly, they should at least meet the bottom line and at best extend it. This paper contributes to this scholarship.

**Keywords:** online teaching; asynchronous; narrative methodology

## Introduction: Scholarship in online learning and teaching

There is no simple formula for online pedagogy; but much of the expertise that we bring to it from our off line teaching remains strategically relevant. It is important that the academy and academics themselves recognise this. Just as it's insufficient to simply put text online with perhaps some talking heads, so it is insufficient to remove tried and true pedagogical practices from our curricula developments. Significantly, much more research is needed to 'find out how

students acquire knowledge outside the formal learning environment in order to tailor online learning at universities to their needs and learning styles' (Christie and Jurado, 2009:276). Just as significantly, I believe that much more critical and insightful research is necessary to develop the best online curriculum materials. The move to technological educational opportunities involving a-synchronous chat, discussion forums, peer interactions, twitter, and the use of the rich WWW materials, for example, should not overwhelm the academic scholarship that the University courses should offer for credentialing. This academic scholarship comes from the 2 complementary research activities academics bring to their students. The first is enabling students to understand the germinal, ongoing and latest materials in the subject area, the second is to add to that area by scholarly research activities.

Critics of online learning note too often that it lacks pedagogical soundness:

'Sound pedagogy supported by strong theoretical foundations is of key importance in online learning…critics of online elearning have argued that student interaction and over-all quality of education suffer in this medium…just as in classroom-based courses, online applications need to be informed by strong theoretical foundations in order to ensure educational excellence' (Herie, 2005:29-30). Others suggest it supports communities of practice (Jones et al 2015) and problem-based learning (Herrell 2015; Forret et al 2015). There is much useful discussion about this (Hrastinski 2008; Wang 2003; Welsh et al 2003).

There is a purpose in rejecting template online curriculum deliveries that do not address the above. For example, Pam Moule identifies Salmon's five stage model as becoming a dominant discourse and warns that 'there is a broad concern that the reification of models of learning and teaching, while meeting organisation needs for transferable, multi-use products, will dominate and stifle professional practice development' (2007:39). This concern deepens when academic scholarship is etiolated in the production of knowledge within this environment.

In bringing together the opportunities of internet information and communication to staff and students, we are in a sense acting as library cataloguers of relevant scholarly information in WWW sites, as well as academics bringing our own knowledge and insights about the academic learning materials. We continue, then, to have responsibilities and duties in developing e-curricula to lead students to the construction of their own learning under our aegis.

Further, in bringing online information and communications systems to the students via such curricula development, academics enact pedagogical research based on making their specialist scholarly material accessible and useful to their students. Such pedagogical research relies upon their own scholarship as well as their interpretive and scholarly teaching skills. I call this enabling the students to learn through co-constructing knowledge with them.

It can be seen, then, that academics bring to e-teaching at least the following insights and abilities as academics:

- Read refereed journal articles to update their knowledge areas
- Suggest areas of knowledge
- Bring together disparate materials so as to form a new whole
- Challenge students to extend their knowledge base
- Enable students to question
- Co-construct with students research capacities and abilities
- Select relevant WWW sites
- Develop quizzes, questions, discussion and debate points so as to build students' knowledge further
- Introduce peer interactions without relying on them as replacements for scholarly excellence
- Tease neural pathways from the given to the possible
- Introduce academic /givens' within subject areas and scholarship generally
- Bring together theory and practice
- Initiate into scholarly and professional standards as appropriate and relevant
- Enter into dialogic communications
- Problematize and critique
- Their own original contributions to the privileged academic discourse

These abilities should be valued in all curriculum developments, but most specially in making e-curriculum as it is far too easy to look at online information as replacing individual academics. The abilities of such scholarly specialist teachers means that we are not taking education to the internet, but are bringing it to the students in much the same way as we would not put our students into a library with a booklist and set of questions to talk about with one another.

Developing e-curricula-indeed all curricula-is not for the fainthearted. There are no viable short cuts or templates that replace scholarship from academics. Although templates may be a useful starting point, they are not the endpoint. My knowledge of this comes from over 50 years of teaching, producing and publishing curricula and from being an early adopter, teaching online since 1997. I offer this as a subjective academic narrative building upon narrativity and autoethnography in scholarship (Arnold 2005; 2012;2008; Gallop; Midgely; Ulmer 1985).

**Early Adoption of e-learning & teaching**

Early adopters became change agents to produce some fascinating insights and capacities. This occurred for me in teaching Media and then Writing at Swinburne Institute of Technology. It also occurred as we offered more and more undergraduate courses through Open Universities Australia's (OUA) online programs. Today my university has many thousand subject enrolees across our online programs delivered through our partners OUA and Swinburne Online (SOL). In 2000 there were 13 online undergraduate students from OUA, by 2010 there were 18,178 OUA students and another cohort from Swinburne direct. In 2006 there were 91 writing students in the MA (Writing), by 2010-12 there were 532 from OUA and another cohort from

Swinburne direct making over 700 subject enrolments per annum. SOL since 2009 has now many thousand students.

As early adoption is not yet hamstrung by 'expert' overviews and/or institutional paradigmatic thinking, our institution gave us a great deal of leeway. This was certainly my experience in undergraduate Media Studies and then the MA (Writing). In developing online Media Studies Units, we were supported by major grants from the then Committee for the Advancement of University Teaching (CAUT) an Australian Federal Government agency. We developed both interactive multimedia game-based lectures and online teaching materials. When the MA (Writing) was called for by our then Deputy Vice Chancellor, I utilised what we had learnt from these projects, and from teaching online subjects in Media Studies, as the basis for the new postgraduate course. This pedagogical innovation stood alone within the university for some time. It involved a number of complementary elements that students could resource a-synchronously:

- the provision of an interactive multi-media game 'G21: Australia's Cultural Dreaming' (Arnold et al 1997-2003)
- dedicated web pages for each subject
- virtual lectures delivered in print enlivened with visual interviews
- weekly questions for discussion with links to relevant expert WWW sites and contacts
- discussion threads as virtual tutorials
- a coffeeshop for students to interact across all subjects
- virtual spaces for students to peer interact with and workshop one another's writing
- An online journal Bukker Tillibul for refereed students and staff publications.

Our basic aim throughout was to provide a high quality e-learning experience through curriculum that utilised the possibilities provided by the e itself. That is, we agreed that the student was always at the centre of the learning process. Taking this as a given, we developed the curriculum in a way that enabled teachers to act as co-constructers of student learning towards a particular goal in a particular subject.

In preparing and delivering this material, we acted in ways that foreshadowed much of what became standard in later e-teaching methodologies, and is recommended by Gilly Salmon in her 'Carpe Diem' and 'Duet' processes (2013). For example:

- We formed a team that included expert online designers and evaluators as well as expert staff who developed curriculum with a view to producing it online in electronic lectures and tutorials.
- We paid particular reference (even reverence) to what facilitated online learning in ways that were different from face to face presentations.
- As a result, we saw that whilst much (too much) of what is on the web is print based, we could bring virtual people in to videos, we could design the screen so that it had its own aesthetics rather than being a tired (exhausted) simulacra for talking heads and receptive (inert) students.
- We were particularly engaged buy what we could do with a CDRom for multimedia interactivity that was games-based, and how we could combine this with online delivery spaces where students could practice interactions with the

materials, with one another, and with relevant expert information/opinions/deliveries from selected sites.

- Our designers made programs that facilitated this, as commercial ones were not yet available
- The excitement of a-synchronous deliveries meant that we exploited fully what was different to time and space regulated face to face delivery: an early recognition of the timeless and non-geographic factors of cyberspace
- We recognised the facility for peer interactions within and across subjects particularly in the Master of Arts (Writing)

Inevitably, the broader community of teachers caught up with our early change as electronic learning became quite every day. There was, then, nothing of what Salmon identifies as a reluctance on the part of some university teachers to embrace pedagogical practices and change to online learning and teaching (2002; 2003). Instead, our early adaptation is now being viewed through the prism of social constructivism and Salmon's work is based upon identifying resources and capabilities and developing these further 'through collaborative effort' (Salmon et al, 2008:96). Both of these are compatible as they were considered in the foundation and implementation of this course. Today the MA (Writing) courses have been rewritten but the basic elements of presentation remain somewhat static.

Electonic asynchronous learning and teaching spaces with access to the WWW and its various social media places interest me both practically and theoretically. This intersection of theory and practice is an important one when we are considering the academic discourse and scholarly conversations about the implementation of e-learning and teaching. It is essential that no one method of developing e-curricula dominates, even those methods such as Salmon's that have the best of intentions can far too easily become one size fits all with a concomitant lack of scrutiny to givens. In her challenge to Salmon's domination of e-curriculum models, Pam Moule et al (2010) note that e-learning and teaching was introduced into many UK institutions by:

'local staff champions…these 'champions' were self-motivated individuals with a passion for technology and a range of skills and expertise, generally self-developed, to draw on. The influences wider institutional adoption of new technologies through working to support local staff development and organisational adoption of technology' (13).

They also note that there was a 'recognition of a student demand for technology'. Hence, 'in these institutions a combination of student expectation and 'champion' leadership was driving the development'. Unlike their observations of the UK experience even as late as 2012, the Australian experience has been of a large and quite enthusiastic take up of online teaching and learning since the late 1990's.

> The shift to online teaching occurs because it can: but it is also more than this. The zeitgeist is one of technological multi-level experiences almost universally as we live on our iphones, itablets and computer screens. Many of us experience talking to people, or even dining out with them, as they are also multi-tasking on their technological cyberspaces. Charlene Dykman and Charles Davis describe this as a 'huge transition' noting that 'the same networking and computing technology that has revolutionized global commerce and many other

facets of modern life, is now being targeted at education' (1:2008). Yet such a target comes from within accepted everyday practices rather than being imposed from outside, so the universities are responding to the cultural lifestyle demands of their students and staff.

For me, the virtual tutorials and lectures offer an e-version that enhances and extends what can be found on campus for best student learning and life experiences. Marilyn Herie notes that 'the internet has been conceptualised as a medium that shares many of the properties of a physical place', and notes that inserting such 'real world' interpretations into cyberspace builds an understanding of it as having 'characteristics of transportation, communication and storage by combining the learning activities of independent research with collaborative discussions and problem-solving' (2008:33). This has resulted in most material being text based and delivered as it might be in geographic learning classrooms. Thus the term 'learning community' has become common descriptor of online groups to describe a space that is not shared physically, but is shared relationally. The enhancement of on campus geographically defined learning and teaching that is offered online includes immediate access to websites that bring the most diverse expert updated information about the subject. This immediacy is valuable to time poor students. It has revolutionised libraries and the book as so much is now electronically available at a screen touch. It has transcended time and space as I now discuss.

**A snapshot of asynchronous eLearning**

The capacity for e-teaching and learning to be asynchronous is one of the most valuable components of e-tutorials and for the delivery of e-lecture materials and interactions. In the MA(Writing), we have been delivering an online tutorial/lecture and extended WWW site references course since 2002. This section looks at asynchronous e-tutorials. By recording and analysing the posting times of students, tutors and of student-responses over the first, fifth and tenth week of a 12 week course, I identify the versatility of asynchronous deliveries of e-tutorials. I go on to practise making a narrative from raw data.

There is much debate about how to best utilise the e-delivery of online courses. Some University programs opt for synchronous deliveries which of course demand that students and tutors be available at a specific time and date. Others have a melded delivery that has both synchronous, asynchronous and real-time on-campus elements. This 'blended' learning has, I believe, many real disadvantages for global deliveries. These include the obvious time difference factor as well as the ability of students to learn in their own chosen times. One of the singular features of digital learning opportunities is that students can choose the best times for themselves to enter into virtual lectures, virtual tutorials and online learning programs with digital information links (Zhang et al 2003). They also provide spaces for peer interactions.

Having (as earlier noted) entered this field early by making online curriculum and games-based CDRom materials 'Oz 21: Australian Cultural Dreaming' and "G21 Global Cultural Dreaming', from 1995 to 2009, we identified early that e-deliveries should enhance what we can already do: not replicate the known. We

asked ourselves: 'what **more** can computers do that face-to-face can't?' Today you might think this old-fashioned and even naïve: however, sadly, much e-curriculum delivery has shied away from the possibilities of interactivity, 3-dimensionality, multi-media productions and a-synchronisity to deliver online a replication of written text and talking heads by not asking and addressing this.

My experience agrees with Gurmak Singh et al (2005) that the 'degree of interaction between lecturers and students is still predominant in eLearning environments'; it adds to this that the formation of learning communities based upon 'critical friendship' has been and remains a significant element in our MA(Writing) online course.

This section reports my looking at 3 years (2009-2011) of asynchronous delivery to establish how real time can be successfully replaced by e-time in virtual tutorials delivered via Blackboard discussion threads. It does so by making a narrative from the data provided by student and staff posting times.

To begin this narrative and to collect data, I went to our Blackboard courses and selected 3 different subjects and 3 different tutors to see what times were recorded for their entries into the e-tutorial. Significantly, these responses are not subjective but arise from reading and analysing both lecture materials in print text of between 3-5 thousand words and extended WWW links that are regularly updated. These responses of about 500 words per week are part of student assessment along with responses to at least 2 other students' postings each week to maintain a learning community that could otherwise be fragmented.

This model of e-tutorial was initially advanced so as to simulate face-to-face tutorials by making a weekly website available that included summary of the cogent discussion point, links to relevant information sites and lecture materials in print. This brought together the elements of people, print and electronic deliveries. For the first eight years (2002-2010) of MA(Writing) it was also extended by a games based interactive CDRom that acted as a model for electronic textuality and discourse. By this I mean that electronic games offer far more ways to develop online discourse than traditional textuality. This includes:

- Multimedia. The possibilities of film, art, design, alone and together are able to be implemented and also explored
- Interactivity: the user is also in charge of the journey in a very direct way so that choices are made and the text is rearranged to choice albeit within a games structure
- Fun: Students are able to play
- Challenge; There are many possibilities and many choices
- Failure as well as success: Often the player is lost and must rearrange their preconceptions
- Choice: the player has a number of possibilities to evaluate

- New visual and verbal possibilities: The lively nature of the screen provides a text unlike any traditional text
- Jumping off points to WWW links: Elements of the full potential of the WWW are made available
- Reference to other e-experiences: games permeate students' lifestyles

Gamesplaying online is a central element of students' lives: in our contemporary e-based society, interactive simulations are a dominant form of leisure. Sara de Freitas and Martin Oliver discuss how this pervasive leisure-based home-based games playing provides a pathway for games based learning to become more wide-spread in e-curricula (2006). 'Games based learning is seen as a highly motivating, engaging form of media and is a rapidly expanding field…applied in a wide variety of different fields' (Hainey et al 2011: 21).

The narrative and the raw data: raw data presents researchers with numerous opportunities. In this case, I have used it to develop and illustrate a narrative about the use of asynchronous online learning spaces. These tables, each of a few weeks of raw data are representative of what I found about the times students and staff chose to enter their electronic communities/classrooms:

**Table 1. Subject 1: Week 1**

| Students' post times | Tutor response times | Students' responses times |
|---|---|---|
| 1/06/09. 11.54.a.m. | 13/06/09 12.13a.m. | 06/09 1.17a.m; 8.15.p.m.; 6.15.p.m. |
| 6/06/09. 1.46.a.m. | 13/06/09. 12.13.a.m. | 6/06/09. 7.15.p.m.; 8.50.p.m.; 10.30. p.m. |
| 6/06/09. 2.21.p.m. | 14/06/09. 10.27.a.m. | 9/06/09. 3.29.p.m. |
| 6/06/09. 7.12.p.m. | 14/06/09. 10.38..a.m. | 6/06/09. 7.42.p.m.; 10.24.p.m.; 10.42.p.m. |

**Table 2. Subject 1: Week 5.**

| Students' Post Times | Tutor response times | Students' responses times |
|---|---|---|
| 3/07/09. 11.15.a.m. | 13/09/09. 11.42.p.m. | 5/07/09. 10.15.p.m.<br>6/07/09. 9.39.p.m.<br>7/07/09. 12.13.p.m. |
| 5/07/09. 10.08.a.m. | 13/09/09. 2.41.p.m. | 6/07/09 9.57.p.m.<br>7/07/09. 12.36.p.m.; 2.23.p.m. |
| 5/07/09. 10.46.a.m. | 13/09/09. 3.18.p.m. | 6/07/09.2.32.p.m.<br>7/07/09.12.51.p.m.; 4.38.p.m. |
| 6/07/09. 9.17.p.m. | 13/09/09. 7.04.p.m. | 7/07/09. 1.48.p.m.; 8.25.p.m.<br>19/07/09. 9.03.p.m. |
| 7/07/09. 9.30.p.m. | 13/09/09. 7.17.p.m. | 7/07/09.12.22.p.m.; 1.39.p.m.; 2.09.p.m. |

**Table 3. Subject 1: Week 10.**

| Students' Post Times | Tutor response times | Students' responses times |
|---|---|---|
| 9/08/09. 11.25.a.m. | 17/08/09. 4.17.p.m. | 11/08/09. 3.27.p.m.; 6.59.p.m.9.35.p.m. |
| 10/08/09.12.09.a.m. | 17/08/09. 4.26.p.m. | 11/08/09. 3.11.p.m; 10.02.p.m. |
| 10/08/09. 8.15.p.m. | 17/08/09. 4.39.p.m. | 11/08/09. 12.48.p.m.; 3.02.p.m. 12/08/09. 8.18.p.m. |
| 11/08/09. 12.02.p.m. | 17/08/09. 7.55.p.m. | 11/08/09. 2.44.p.m.; 5.47.p.m.; 7.41.p.m.; 9.49.p.m.; 12.29.p.m. 12/08/09. 8.48.p.m.; 8.50.p.m. |
| 11/08/09. 2.37.p.m. | 17/08/09. 8.23.p.m. | 12/08/09. 2.25.p.m.; 3.28.p.m.; 8.05.p.m. |

**The narrative arising from the raw data.**

This data tells me that students and staff both fully utilise the time stretch of asynchronous deliveries. The story that data tells is one that can be expressed in many ways within the academy. Increasingly, there is acceptance and use of qualitative methodologies that concentrate upon narrativity as an academic methodology. Storytelling is the most ancient of human discourses. Throughout time all human knowledge, ideas and information have been told as a story. Many such stories have been designated as fictional by Eurowestern knowledge brokers, and this is particularly evidenced in the academy. As such, they have been discredited or even ignored within knowledge structures except as an object of study by credentialed academics. For example, Indigenous Australian beliefs, mores, rules, regulations and societal practices have long been published by white claimants as 'myths and legends'. However, storytelling has now become an acceptable if autoethnographic academic methodology (Ellis 2004) that challenges such scholarly colonisations.

Today much academic writing, particularly in the social sciences, utilises qualitative methodologies and theoretical perspectives replacing more traditional science-based approaches. In stating my own methodological perspectives, I call this methodological approach 'the subjective academic narrative' (Arnold 2010-2012). By this I am signalling that the scholarly conversation about the research topic arises from an individual's experience and hence is involved in that individual's present narrative and arises from their cultural experienced backstory. Hence it is subjective. It also arises from each academic's scholarly training and research, hence it's academic. Finally, it can be seen as the story that the particular academic is telling about her or his observations and experiences, hence it's a narrative.

There are many scholarly reasons for this approach, mostly arising from broadly postmodernist positions that entail a dispersal of certainties. For me, one of the most compelling is a reference to the work of Jacques Derrida who refused to undertake further PhD candidacy as he asked why we should do what has already been done before. He sees Necessity (he gives the noun a capital letter deliberately, of course) as driving us towards 'the risk of never arriving' (1983:37). The personal narrative precludes this stale Enlightenment- driven methodology that may reveal and rearrange the data but also run the risk of never arriving at the dynamic nature of the narrative it reveals. I also see the influence of Roland Barthes, the 'mystory' of Gregory Ulmer, and of Mary Midgley and Jane gallop, about whom I have regularly written when putting forward my idea of the 'subjective academic narrative' as a scholarly methodology and help us to arrive at rather than to miss out on the narrative (Arnold 2010-2013).

**e-Models and e-methods.**

The dominance of a single pedagogical model in e-learning and e-teaching curriculum development and presentation is not healthy. Although Salmon's (2003) early adopter's model of a 5 stage approach to e-moderating has successful elements and remains influential, it should be seen as one of many ways to approach e-learning and teaching rather than what Moule describes as becoming a dominant discourse that is overwhelming alternative and perhaps more dynamic possibilities. Other scholars have also critiqued this model showing concern about its apparent intransigence; and its lack of academic input and encouragement for reflective knowledge processes to occur (See Lisewski & Joyce 2003; Turner 2004). Laudrillard also challenges the peer interactions upon which Salmon's model relies, stating that the claims made about them 'rest on the assumption that students learn effectively through discussion and collaboration…However, this is not a well-tested assumption as far as the research literature is concerned' (2002:147). She avers that university curricula, learning and teaching is defined by the quality of its 'academic conversations'. The evidence is that this quality is not adequately addressed by Salmon.

This is a most significant criticism. Peer interactions are a valuable learning tool within a well-directed e-tutorial, but they are not scholarly in themselves. After all, students undertake tertiary education to develop scholarly knowledge. Of course, this is not held by academics alone. The many sources that are available on the WWW vary from the scholarly to the personal: all have values. In credentialing learning, however, the university is offering something other than and more than what can be found in peer interactions. The rich blend that e-curriculum can resource is one that starts with scholarly curriculum development and continues with such oversight, teaching and assessments so as to co-construct student actions and reactions and peer interactions that lead to new scholarly knowledge acquisition.

## Conclusion: Quality Academic Curricula

As the popularity of e-courses indicates, students are increasingly time poor, and e-education addresses that problem in new and dynamic ways. Indeed the cover story for the University of Melbourne's magazine in August 2013 tackles 'the brave new world of online universities, and the article 'Coursing Ahead' (9-11) describes how the University has developed its first massive open online course or MOOC. 'With a single keystroke, the University of Melbourne, in its 160th year, launched into a world where all that's needed to access one of its prestigious courses is a computer and a curious mind'. The result was a 'tsunami…over the next few days the number of students downloading the videos and participating in the course swelled to more than 26,000'. The courses, of course, were developed by top academics who had shown themselves as early adopters.

The quality of the academic input should be the basis of all models that are proposed for curriculum development and delivery at any University, for without this there is a stale and non-scholarly dominance of models and methods over content and ideas (Laurillard 2002).

Out online students have repeatedly told us of the importance of being able to access material that is interesting, up to date and that involves regular threads of discussion between peers and tutors. They express the importance of meeting people online just as they do in their everyday interactions with online 'friends'. They come from diverse backgrounds and geographical spaces and find that illuminating too (Clowse & Evans 2003). Today, as Germak Sing, John O'Donohue and Harvey Worton stated in 2005: 'The Internet is a technological development that has the potential to change not only the way society retains and accesses knowledge but also to transform and restructure traditional models of higher education, particularly the delivery and interaction in and with course materials and associated resources'.

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