A CLASS WITH NO STUDENTS

Online Learning Environments

James Curtis
OK, the class does actually have students. However this workshop will focus on my experiences using online learning environments and tools to facilitate classes from anywhere there is an internet connection! The increasing need for flexible approaches to learning and on-demand content will require teachers to make use of the tools already available, and be prepared to incorporate the tools yet to come. Luckily, it’s not as hard as you might think!
I teach at Manor Lakes College, a P-12 school in the western suburbs of Melbourne. I have been teaching in Australia and the UK for five years, and have made integrating ICT in my classes a focus of my career.

At present I teach year 10-12 English classes, but have been involved in teaching across all year levels from 7-12 and across various subject areas.

My philosophy of teaching is to be adaptive, flexible and accountable, and to recognise students as individuals. I believe the integration of ICT, and in particular online learning environments, is a major factor in allowing me to fulfill this philosophy.
About Manor Lakes College

The college is situated in the growth corridor of Melbourne’s outer Western suburbs. It currently has an enrollment of around 1900 students from prep to year 12.

The college serves a low to moderate socioeconomic area with a significant immigrant population.

Manor Lakes is an Apple Distinguished School and is committed to responsibly integrating ICT and mobile technologies into the curriculum at all levels.

1:1 device programs run across all levels from 6-12 with plans to roll this out over the entire school in 2015. More information about ICT at MLC can be found here.

Figure 1.1 Shows there is no walking route between Rotorua and Manor Lakes.
I first started using online learning spaces to make my job easier. Student devices were not being used or sometimes not being brought to class in the first place! I saw the use of blogs and wikispaces as a way to easily administer content, and provide a bit of a gimmick for students (this was back in 2010).

Once I started doing this however, I realised that not only were students genuinely engaged in learning, the online learning environments provided easily accessible evidence of student participation and learning! I also realised that students were most engaged when they were actively communicating with others rather than completing set tasks.

From those humble beginnings of running a class blog and wikispace, the tools available to educators for online learning have improved exponentially. Schoology has become my ‘base of operations’ for all my classes. Each class has a schoology space of its own from which students can participate in class activities and discussions, submit homework, or communicate directly with me out of class time. Used in conjunction with other tools such as padlet, todaysmeet and you-tube etc, Schoology has become an indispensable part of my teaching.

Note: Schoology has not paid for any favourable comments made.
The Experiment

Drawing on the idea of increased engagement from earlier years, I wondered if the almost total penetration of social media in adolescent lives would have any effect on this. Would interacting in a similar way at school, as in their wider social lives be seen as lame, exciting, or just another class at school? With this in mind I fell upon the idea of trying to run some classes completely online, with no face to face contact with students.

Being aware of similar things such as distance education and online university courses, I was well aware this was not a groundbreaking concept, but this also gave me hope that it was achievable. I was however, conscious that the approach I used had to be specific and relevant to my students, and I could not simply draw solely on these examples.
The first port of call was to work out how the class would run. In other words, where the students would go to get their information and submit tasks etc. Luckily a discussion thread like the one you find on Schoology works quite well. This also had the added benefit of being something they were familiar with, and works similar to a Facebook wall.

The discussion thread became the base for the online lesson, where students went first to find out what to do. I will stress that a reasonable amount of advance preparation and explanation went in to the first attempt to ensure minimal confusion. As you can see above, there is a short description and a link for students to go to first. This was all explained in advance the first time!
One of the first challenges I ran into was how I was going to communicate with students in real time. I was conscious that I wanted to make this class distinct from situations that go a little something like this: “I’ll be away tomorrow at a PD on ‘how to take the biggest advantage of the catering.’ There will be a substitute and a list of tasks to do, bye!” Therefore I needed secure, real time communication to explain tasks and give feedback.

At first thought, using the Schoology thread was tempting. However it requires constant refreshing to see new posts. The answer lay in a mixture of two platforms. The Schoology thread for providing feedback, and a todaysmeet chat room to explain tasks and immediately answer specific student questions. Todaysmeet.com and similar sites like neatchat.com are totally secure, require no sign up, and are super easy to use. They are not without their pitfalls though, as we will see later.

Figure 1.5 Simple, effective and secure instant communication tools like todaysmeet.com and neatchat.com were critical in running online lessons.
At Manor Lakes College we follow a four-part lesson structure comprised generally of a warm-up, instruction, task, and reflection. The immediate challenge when designing the online lesson was how to follow the structure and come up with tasks that would suit the online format. Generally speaking the tasks had to be quick and simple to explain, relatively quick to complete for students at various levels, and simple to submit. The ability to give immediate feedback also needed to be considered.

The padlet tool has been an invaluable one when completing warm-up tasks and class brainstorms, and once again the Schoology discussion threads provided some good solutions. Strangely enough, using the discussion threads for class discussion worked amazingly well. Students were clearly familiar with the platform of online discussion boards, and were able to reply and debate with each other at a much deeper level than when prompted to do so verbally.
There are some considerations to make when implementing a concept like this in your classes. I have not rolled this out to all my classes because I do not think some are ready or mature enough for it, and certainly not while I myself am still working through the issues. I chose one class that I believed was the most ready for it, and even then I was not above a bit of emotional blackmail. I let them know that they were the ones I trusted most with this concept, and they were not to let me down!

On top of this, I set some very clear and reasonable expectations, many of which mimicked regular classroom rules. For the first lesson it was important to ensure that I knew where each student was, so locations were set where students had to be around the school. Students were also required to ‘check in’ as soon as they logged on to be marked on the roll, and they were required to complete all set tasks or face a make-up session.
Possibly the greatest potential of online learning activities is the participation it can stimulate from students that are reluctant to speak up or share in class situations. One of the most soul-destroying challenges in my own classes is that a vast majority of students lack the confidence to contribute their ideas or work without significant prompting. When many of these students take part in online activities however, the barriers that stand in their way seem to be minimised. Possible reasons for this may include the fact that they are operating in a familiar and comfortable environment, or that online learning is more impersonal than classes where students can fear being centre of attention. Whatever the reason, more students contributing to more classes has been a major success of the experiment.
Your students are the most valuable resource you have when implementing new curriculum and ideas, and this is even more relevant when considering online learning. An obvious reflection activity when first implementing online learning is to get students to give feedback and suggestions on all aspects of the lesson. I have found students will give honest feedback, and in many cases these days, the students themselves have more expertise in what is available online than I do! There are great opportunities to build confidence if you take a student’s good idea on board and use it next time in some form.

As you can see from the above feedback, naturally there are drawbacks to be ironed out. However the positives picked up by the students gave me real confidence that this was a worthwhile exercise. There was no prompting or bribing, honest!

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**Student Feedback**

I enjoyed this session it was really fun and enjoyable and work was easy and understandable to complete. But needs to have way to have faster communication with you, when explaining work.

- Mary

This was good, I actually did work. I am often anxious of criticism from others, but this took that away.

- Abbie

The session was good because we were able to get the work done without as many distractions, but it is harder to keep track with what is going on throughout the lesson.

- Dale

I think this online lesson was a good way to change it up a bit and get us all interacting. I think we should try this again :)

- Maddi

Pros include: - Lesson Flows well - It is a success if you pay attention - Those who choose to ignore lesson don't disturb others. - Clear record of work set and everyone being told.

The cons include: - Poor Internet connection leads to difficulties - The pace of the lesson was too slow - Teacher can't check on students who're away from them.

- Tom

This is productive since you don't have to stop for people talking.

- Kevin
So, is online learning the future of education? I would have to say a resounding and contemplative ‘maybe’. Certainly it opens up a raft of possibilities and carries some very welcome incidental positives. However, I’m also yet to see anything that leads me to believe it should be used exclusively instead of face-to-face teaching in the near future. At this stage, I love the way it engages and builds confidence in lower-achieving students, and the fact that it serves as a repository for evidence of learning is still a major drawcard for me.

All of this means that for me, online learning will be something I will continue to develop as a regular exercise, but it is an approach I will use sparingly. I also feel I should add that, obviously, my approach is not the only way to do things. You know your students better than anyone, and the ever-growing myriad of online tools is at your disposal to tailor a unique 21st century learning environment.

To be honest, I have no bloody idea. Not because I don’t have any options, but because there are so many different tools and possibilities that I want to try! If I had to guess though, here are a few developments that sit high on my list (this week):

- Releasing responsibility and controls on student location
- Testing Skype as a means of more effective communication in lessons
- Publishing content via ebook using iBooks Author (this very document is brought to you by iBooks Author)
- Increasing the regularity of online lessons.

Where To Next?

Figure 1.8 Dramatisation - I am not responsible if you aren’t running classes from the French Riviera by 2015.