

The *Real* vs the *Virtual* University Teacher: An interpretation of contrasts in participant engagement in learning between face-to-face and fully online teaching



Note: This is not concerned with the creative use of ICT and web as part of face-to-face teaching – a different question altogether. It addresses comparisons with fully online teaching.

Summary of key ideas from the main paper

Scheme for analysing student engagement in learning

Point of learning engagement	Brief description
E1	Initial presentation of content
E2	First active signal of comprehension
E3	Sustained class discussion and exchange of views
E4	Informal participant discussion and follow up with teacher
E5	Follow up study of unit materials
E6	Completing the assessment tasks: Written assignments, group projects, etc.
E7	Lecturer assessment feedback to students
E8	Active, unsolicited participant response to lecturer assessment feedback

Desired characteristics of assessment feedback

A *diagnostic, conversational* feedback that is an *ongoing and integral part of the students' learning process*. It draws attention to specific aspects of their work, depending on its quality. Comments are focused directly and constructively on the main points of strength and weakness in their work.

- **Diagnostic.** Lecturer assessment feedback needs to be focused and constructive, and not vague and general.
- **Affirming.** Affirmation and confirmation of ideas can be important in helping students see progression in both their learning and writing.

- **Learning.** Comments are tailored to the perceived learning needs of the student. Feedback should confirm and extend the participants' learning.
- **Interactive and dialogical.** By 'continuing the conversation', students can experience the assessment process as interactive.
- **Extending.** Extension of participants' knowledge and understanding by targeted comments and inclusion of further material for their consideration.
- **Criterion referenced.** CR grading is put into broader perspective with the emphasis placed on the dialogical and interactive commentary on their work. Rubric-focused feedback continues to be found as having little if any use to students.
- **Critical.** An informed, respectful critique encourages students to become more critical and evaluative in their thinking about the topics as well as about their own writing, arguments and expression.
- **Creativity.** Assessment tasks are intended to encourage creativity in thinking and in expression. And so should lecturer feedback – especially in applauding where this has been demonstrated.
- **Engagement.** These approaches can help make the assessment process itself more engaging for students – something look forward to rather than dread. Making the study *relevant to professional practice is a valuable element in this engagement.*
- **Pastoral.** Attentiveness to students' *personal wellbeing context.*

Contrasting the patterns of student engagement in fully online units and face-to-face units

Level of Learning Engagement	Face-to-face teaching	Exclusively online teaching
E1 Presentation	<p>Primarily an interpersonal learning experience. At least an initial exposure to presentation, interpretation and explanation of content. 1st contact with content. Often not processed with conscious thought of E6 assessment.</p> <p>Variation in modes of presentation: lecture, audio, video, digital presentations, and web linked. Multi-sensory. Possible 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim) as a social experience / or individuals triggering social negativity.</p> <p>Open to flexibly addressing student prompted issues.</p>	Use may be made of Adobe Connect for a type of online lecture to a virtual classroom.
E2 Signals of 1 st comprehension	Scanning for signals of comprehension. Facial expressions, comments, questions of clarification or affirmation / disagreement. May lead to automatic review of the teaching/explanation.	
E3 Discussion	Systematic opportunity for instant class feedback on comprehension, application, significance, parallels, disagreement.	Use of Adobe Connect and/or telephone conferences may help make the teacher 'less virtual' But this may follow E5
E4 Informal follow-up	Questions for lecturer during breaks; informal conversation between participants; networking in relation to content and issues.	
E5 Study of resources	A second major incursion into unit content and direct / additional resources for E6 purposes. Audio of lectures, presentations, handouts may be accessed as well as follow-up materials. Assessment focused engagement with content.	<p>Primarily an impersonal learning experience – at least as far as initial study is concerned.</p> <p>First contact with the content. Often the mode of presentation is exclusively 'reading' of texts E.g. large aggregation of academic articles with little interconnecting or perspective-giving explanations. May include powerpoints/video/audio and links to web resources.</p> <p>To varying degrees may be examined through sharp filters applied by requirements of E6 resulting in a more or less strongly assessment-focused engagement. If not assessable, will it be read at all? How learning intensive and effective are blogs.</p>

		Wikis, forums etc. by comparison with informed verbal debate? Is there a tendency to be 'Facebook like' and too descriptive and chatty in these online activities? How prominent can be the dialogue between teacher and student – the main online dialogue for the student?
E6 Work on assessment	Integrated with E5. Depending on whether unit is 4 day intensive or spread over some months, can bring perspective from having covered all the unit content to bear on assessment tasks. Usually focuses on some specific parts of the content rather than the whole content.	Integrated with E5. May be the only form of communication with the lecturer. If only parts of the content are assessable, will that be the only content considered by the student? Can assessment also serve as a process for ensuring that all of the content is read at least once? (E.g. short assessments on all 10 modules). Will writing/reflection/journaling tasks be taken seriously or even completed if this material is not assessable? If only 2 of 6 forum contributions (judged their best) are to be assessed, how will this affect the quality of the other non-assessable responses? Can assessment serve to establish some form of student-teacher relationship?
E7 Assessment feedback	See notes on assessment feedback above	See notes on assessment feedback above
E8 Unsolicited response to feedback	Information about student perception of and valuing of the whole unit experience. Ideas for confirming and modifying content and process.	Information about student perception of and valuing of the whole unit experience. Ideas for confirming and modifying content and process.

Issues for Policy and practice

1. Investigating the level of **student satisfaction** with fully online units by comparison with face-to-face units.
2. Investigating the **quality** of postgraduate learning experiences in the light of the schema for engagement in learning.
3. Calling into question the **policy of replacing face-to-face postgraduate units** with fully online units. (E.g. large numbers in online Graduate Certificate of RE units at Strathfield when units are offered only once – rather than 2-3 times in face-to-face mode.)
4. Questioning the **loss in the range of availability of face-to-face units**, which results in students being required against their wishes to do online units instead. (E.g. in 2012 and 2013 there were no face-to-face theology units at Strathfield campus for Masters of Religious Education students. Fewer Masters of RE units offered than previously even though overall numbers are larger)
5. **Enhancing the quality of fully online units** by trying to address the problem areas identified in contrasts with FTF teaching. E.g. Coherent, integrated 'story line' of main content material rather than a set of loosely connected academic articles; video and audio presentation of material; balancing the real-time value of Adobe Connect sessions with the difficulty of getting an Australia wide cohort to meet at specific times during the week; more, but shorter sharply-focused assessment tasks that cover all or most of the unit content rather than a long essay.

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