

## Permanent Alternatives: Digital Offices and Classrooms?

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The First World War was, amongst many terrible things, an accelerant for the development and wider availability and uptake of advanced technologies – such as motorised vehicles. Nevertheless, an estimated 8 million horses, mules and donkeys died during that conflict and there were calls for mechanised technologies to be developed to replace the use of animals in zones of war. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s technologies to replace horses entirely in the workplace were majorly improved but as observed by Oliver Marks (2008), some 20 years later during World War II over 80% of the German war machine was still being pulled along by an equine workforce. Part of the reason for this related to cost; some to the need for a large supply of skilled, trained drivers and mechanics to operate trucks but also to the fact that the German forces were moving into countries which still sustained horse driven infrastructures. Similarly, today, the march of the electric car draws to a halt where there are no charging stations and the digital nomad stumbles without good internet access.

### Is the Future Here Yet?

Some practices and ways of working, historically, have proven more enduring than others. Digital nomadism actually represents a huge step away from the long-established experiences and traditions of human learning which have customarily relied upon F2F (face to face) human interactions. COVID may have been an accelerant for the uptake of electronically mediated engagement, but will it be an enduring shift into working from anywhere (for students and academics) or will such a transition take much longer – like the move away from horse driven transportation?

We are, arguably, on a COVID accelerated plateau of changes in how we engage with study and work – some of which will be permanent because the changes proposed are logical, practical, sustainable and more affordable. And new insights abound. If, as it indeed appears to be the case, as is argued by Whateley & West, 2022 in this volume, that *there is little relationship between student and staff ratios and excellent student outcomes* (a phenomenon which has been long suspected) then the argument for further extending student learning experiences through online engagement is strengthened. The key, logically, revolves around the quality of the learning engagements being provided rather than solely upon the volume of F2F (in the flesh) teaching contact. And there are many quality points of engagement available in non F2F approaches that are sometimes not properly recognised. For example, the quality and learning impact of the supporting online media and high-grade downloadable podcast, illustrative and written resources made available to students. UBSS' online non F2F student outcomes data (as discussed elsewhere in this volume) demonstrate that quality learning engagements are key – irrespective of whether those learning encounters take place F2F or over the internet.

So, a major question arises, if, technically, we are on the cusp of sufficient infrastructure for digital nomadism and a working from home culture to become standard fare – do we have the right teaching approaches to sustain and operate effectively in such an environment? Or will F2F, classroom based (horse driven?) teaching traditions and practices overwhelm these new approaches? (*There is also a subsidiary question worth considering. To date, universities worldwide have been geolocation driven. They are places, buildings, subsets of business dependencies: Oxford, Harvard, Sydney, Bordeaux, etc. Places you go to and live*

*in carrying high educational real estate values. The rise of digital nomadism may be seen as a threat to this class of business investment.)*

## **Definitions of Teaching**

One of the stumbling blocks of educational change relevant to DN (digital nomadism) relates to our own experiences and understandings of 'teaching.' Whilst the annual teaching survey QILT goes some way towards determining the causes of student failure and non-performance it could go further. One of the un-tackled issues lies in the very definitions and perceptions we all have around the generalised terms 'teaching' and 'teachers.' 'Teaching', often simply defined as a mode of instruction, doesn't always imply 'learning.'

Primary and secondary school teachers have hugely different demands placed upon them compared to university teachers, yet they are all labelled 'teachers.'

Since the late 1800s most state provided school education around the world has become compulsory. Increasingly, in western societies, mandatory schooling has also become a site of contestation and resistance (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) for some sectors of young people attending school – particularly in socially deprived areas or in demographics in which the level of unemployment is high, and predominantly, where racial difference is considered a factor (Carby, 1982). Teaching is not a level playing field for either teachers or students.

Some school teachers have to also overcome student difference and resistance to learning. University students, of course, are there by choice. However, teaching with a clear intent to bring about student success is, perforce, something other than (something more than) passive instruction or lecturing.

University teachers are on an entirely different pedagogic spectrum to school teachers. In 'lecturing' or 'instructing' there resides a strong element of passivity and simple presentation of knowledge and learning transmission as opposed to directly engaging with learners.

## **In Between Eras**

Certain teaching environments are always going to be more demanding of teachers/lecturers than others. Understandably, the teaching approaches required for digital transmission are a skill set and acculturation which many school and university teachers are yet to comfortably master. It is a new mode of student engagement. We are moving between eras in the conception of what teachers must actually do. We need to develop some more nuanced definitions to embrace the new digital arena we find ourselves inhabiting – ones that are different to the current understandings developed under QILT.

## **Essential Student Demographic Knowledge**

However, the QILT reviews over the COVID period have placed UBSS and Bond University (another private university) high in the league table of student focussed, student applauded tertiary delivery. This is because UBSS is evidentially driven to achieve positive outcomes for its students. This is not just the utilisation of sound pedagogic approaches but a prioritisation of ensuring every possible measure is taken to help UBSS students achieve. It is, I believe, the 'extra difference of pursuing positive student outcomes' which matters.

There is clearly no cultural or political contention or resistance amongst UBSS's student cohorts - far from it! But there is difference. Students at UBSS are often studying in English which is a second language for them. They are often studying a long way away from home, family and friends and they frequently need to maintain some form of paid employment as well as study. So, when 96% of UBSS' students say that online engagement fits best with

them studying and also meeting all of their other life requirements, then UBSS does its utmost to support their requirements. Entirely logical and understandable. This is especially the case when the data demonstrates that the quality of non F2F provision given to UBSS students has led to **no drop** in student outcomes and in fact a **continuation of excellence** in student results.

Knowing your student's demographics and how best to support them is fundamental to teaching success.

The teaching difference lies in the determined, overt intent to bring about learning as an outcome of faculty interactions with students – whether the delivery is F2F or over supported electronic interfaces.

Such an intent requires dedication and passion.

### **More of the Same**

Noticeably, it appears that a few larger tertiary institutions have been languishing in a COVID malaise (long COVID?) as their ways of teaching are entrenched and invested in industrialised work practices, comfortable routines and traditions. Changing staffing levels and modes of student engagement become expensive and difficult industrial activities. Big universities also enshrine their work practices in an unwieldy barrage of impenetrable policy bureaucracy - as much ensuring work for administrators as in protecting the values of the institution. Of course, a level of bureaucracy is essential, but overly bureaucratic practices are divisive and toxic to change and, often, stall progress. Consequently, DN exponents are likely to prosper in fields other than higher education for the time being.

There is also a lock-step approach across Australia's public institutions which, in reality, inhibits real change. The recent Universities Australia Conference (2022) was an opportunity for Australian university leaders to seek new directions but, predictably, its keynote address set the tone by congratulating the sector on its achievements and turning to government to fund even more of the same. Change, of course, is unwelcomed by those who prosper under the current circumstances. Ultimately, DN represents a massive disruption in how work has been conceived in those areas of the economy in which DN is a viable practice.

### **Emulative Same Thinking**

Counterintuitively, Finnish educator Pasi Sahlberg actually touches upon the risky urge to be of a collective mind in education by noting that "If we all think the same way, none of us probably thinks very much." Certainly, in higher education we are very prone to 'keeping in line' with the rest of the sector and emulating whatever it is that we see others doing. Career paths, in large universities, are often more secure if the boat is never even 'gently rocked.' Sadly, Sahlberg's main thrust is yet more of 'thinking the same', as in order to achieve his conception of better educational outcomes we need to learn (emulate) the conditions and social culture which have given Finland high standing in PISA results. It is an unworldly and unachievable aspiration, of course. It brings us full circle back to emulation rather than innovation and the adoption of innovative pedagogic technologies.

### **Where Are We Now? *Latent Transition***

A further element relates to the pace of technological change and its uptake in educational settings. I mentioned earlier that delivering effective learning outcomes requires dedication, intention and passion. For DN to be a lasting influence in higher education its exponents need to be appropriately skilled as well as passionate and its technological underpinning needs to be affordable and sustainable.

I suspect that we are currently in an unenviable place of *latent transition*. Populist pressure is mounting for a WFH and DN future as it is similarly for a 4-day working week. There is an apparent will for permanent change amongst the younger workforce but, perhaps, not the means by which it can be sustainably achieved. Sustainability is a major consideration before technological development and progressive change can be implemented securely. Here, lessons from the past show that there are always risks in choosing new technological platforms and ways of doing things. Yes, we are already adopting electric vehicles and they are a great step ahead in technology – but we've been there before. In the late 1950s the milk float daily delivering 2 pints of full cream pasteurised to my front door was electric. It was one of the numerous fleets of electric milk floats used across the entire UK. Then electric vehicles were suddenly forgotten until the current surge in EV development rekindled interest, but that development isn't yet sufficient for 'convenience.'

There are, as yet no EV capabilities for hauling trailers, horse floats or caravans or heavy loads over distance.

Electric long-distance trucks? Not so many, it seems.

And instant recharging? No sign of that coming at all.

Back in the 1920s and 30s steam powered lorries were the big go. Fleets of them pulled heavy loads around Europe for various industries. But you had to fire up the boiler and keep the water levels topped up and it took two people to run one effectively. They ran on coal, wood and water – which were readily available. But they were replaced by faster diesel trucks as soon as sustainable diesel supplies arrived - and there was virtually no second-hand market for used steam technologies.

Turn the page forward to today's classrooms. Electronic 'smart' whiteboards have come and gone. Well, not so much gone as dumped in huge numbers. Not all emerging technologies marketed globally prove to be sustainable or enduring. For example, I once owned an Amstrad computer – now very much a thing of the past; something that was outdated almost the minute I unpacked it and plugged it in. Things change.

Will the attractiveness of DN and WFA approaches in higher education and study also change? Colleagues in France and the UK tell me that, if President Putin cuts off the gas to Europe this winter, they'll be working from their university offices as the universities will be paying the heating bills to keep workers warm! A DN existence would see them also working from shopping malls or wherever heating was not at their own expense! This would be WFA by necessity rather than choice. Conversely, universities might actually encourage DN approaches in order to save on their own heating costs! It is, as yet a great unknown.

One colleague in Australia has questioned whether or not her home insurance and tax situation would be altered by using her home office more frequently to conduct a DN style of work delivery? Pause for thought on that one. Will government legislation and insurance caveats impact the desirability of mobile workplace technologies in the way that Public Holiday Rates are causing hospitality businesses to rethink their operating hours?

Ultimately, will DN and WFH approaches surge ahead or will the power broking of the traditional real estate universities act as a huge anchor stalling the pace of change? Newer, smaller universities – focusing on narrower fields of offer without also investing majorly in research infrastructure (research active but not intensively research focussed) might have a key role to play in promulgating and developing DN and WFH teaching approaches. This is especially the case where students demand such flexibilities and continue to achieve high academic results whilst studying off campus.

UBSS is one such institution with the capability and necessary drive to test the boundaries in this area. Emphatically, change will happen as the entire value premise of physically attending university is very much being brought into question by young people seeking a secure place in the current and future world economies.

Welcome to the cutting edge.

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