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Distance education in Australia around the turn of the 20th century was a distinctly different mode of learning and teaching. And as Colin Latchem points out in his contribution to this volume, it was intended for a distinctly different group of learners who lived very far away from large urban centers and removed from where the bulk of the educational institutions were located. It was an alternative solution to educational opportunity, and as such its learning and teaching methods were different from what was conventional practice in face-to-face campus-based educational contexts at the time, appropriately devoid of the thrills and frills of the campus-based educational experience. This alternative solution to learning and teaching had several remarkable attributes which have, over the years, gradually found their way into campus-based educational practice. Foremost among these attributes is the very public nature of the operation. In this mode, unlike what usually occurs within the four walls of a classroom, all communication between the teachers and the learners is out in the open. And because of this exposure, the distance education course material is subjected to higher standards in terms of the design of the instructional transaction it embodies.

## The Race to the Center, Can the Enter Hold?

It is now not uncommon to see campus-based education in Australia adopting and integrating many of these attributes as part of their armory of learning and teaching strategies and there are many reasons for this. The first is the increasing adoption of technology to mediate the teaching and learning process. If you consider the textbook and the printed resource as a technology, then technology has always been at the

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heart of the distance education transaction, the affordances of which are naturally very appealing to mainstream educational practices.

But it is not technology alone that is driving this convergence among different modes of learning. The composition of the student population in Australia is changing from the traditional urban and rural divide that characterized the learning group a hundred years ago. The student population is now growing exponentially to include mature age students looking for additional qualifications and on the job-training, stay-home parents looking for career change or enhancement, part-time students, as well as a large body of international students. Another factor that is influencing this change in conventional educational practices is the rising cost of education that is increasingly being shifted on to the consumer. And if the user or the consumer must pay for the services then, it forces institutions to become a lot more innovative in their approaches to teaching and learning, and eliminating as much redundancy as is possible.

While such cross-fertilization between modes augurs well for learning and teaching generally, it has its risks, and these have to do with being able to retain the integrity of a mode while adopting it as a part of mainstream processes. Distance education for instance, and as an alternative mode, was always intended for a very unique educational context. Openness in terms of access, and independence, flexibility and self-direction have been its hallmarks, indeed its threshold principles (Naidu 2016). Increasing transformation of distance education with the integration of technologies which are not time, place and pace independent runs the risk of undermining its integrity, threatening its core threshold principles, and thus failing to serve out its mandate. The remotely located distance learner still exists both in the developed and developing contexts. Along with first-time learners, they include professionals such as doctors, nurses, social workers and school teachers who are working in remote locations, living on a farm, and in a small rural town. They need access to educational opportunities, and not every one of them, even in technologically and economically developed social contexts is flush with the latest tools and connectivity. For them distance learning is critical. They want and need distance education, not online education, not blended learning, nor technology-enhanced education. In fact, they would prefer the leanest and meanest version of it, so that they can get on with their jobs and be able to study as well, without the imposition of the need for constant connectivity.

## **The Opportunity and the Challenge**

The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency in Australia takes the view that there is room for a variety of modes of learning. As one size does not, and will not fit all. This may include campus-based face-to-face education, fully online learning, including MOOCs, blended learning and distance learning. In Australia where there are no single mode dedicated distance education institutions, this makes good sense also because not every skill or subject matter can be taught as effectively

and efficiently by any one mode. A wide variety of modes are required to meet the needs of an equally wide variety of learners, skills and subject matter that needs to be learned.

The challenge for Australian educational providers in this space is to be very careful about appropriately matching a mode of learning with the learners it is intended to serve, the skill or subject matter that needs to be learned, while ensuring integrity of practice in terms of its threshold principles. Distance education, flexible learning, and online learning is not business as usual. These alternative modes to teaching and learning require a fundamental shift in perspectives and perceptions about teaching and learning. They require new tools and technologies, and new skill sets across the board. Many of the campus-based providers that are racing to adopt these modes of education, such as in the case of the adoption of MOOCs, do not have these requisite skill sets and resources for effectively engaging in these modes, and falling into the trap of doing a very poor job of it (Baggaley 2016). In this race to the center, adopters of alternative modes of learning and teaching such as distance and online learning are failing to learn from the lessons of their past. Adherence to their threshold principles is important.

## References

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