

The 20 P's of successful e-learning

by

Marius Meyer

It is today 30 days or a full month since Stellenbosch University started with online learning when the second quarter of academic studies resumed on 20 April. Having worked at the University of South Africa (Unisa) for 11 years earlier in my career, online learning was not a new phenomenon for me. At Unisa online learning was the most important form of student teaching and support, given the fact that students studied at Unisa from all 9 provinces and many other countries throughout the world. My own learning about online learning also occurred via the National Association of Distance Education and Open Learning of South Africa (Nadeosa), as well as the Association for Talent Development (ATD) in the USA where I was exposed to some of the top thought leaders in this field. At ATD and in working with Human Resource and Learning and Development Managers at private companies throughout South Africa, it became clear to me that the term electronic learning (e-learning) was preferred in the business world, both globally and locally. I subsequently contributed some of my views and experiences in a book entitled *“Delivering E-learning: A complete strategy for design, application and assessment”* by Kenneth Fee published by Kogan Page.

There are some serious debates about the effectiveness of online learning, and while different schools of thought have emerged over the years, the reality is that schools and universities had no other choice but to use and attempt to leverage e-learning during the lockdown. Many institutions were caught off-guard and unprepared for embarking on e-learning, while others went out of their way to ensure that e-learning is used during the period of lockdown. In general, most e-learning specialists recommend the use of both synchronous (in the same time) and asynchronous (in own time or self-paced) learning. Given the devastating effects of the lockdown, I decided to use asynchronous learning, in other words adapting my approach to e-learning by leading students with the content, and then let them study in their own time, in particular by engaging in online discussion forums and learning journals as part of the process of learning and reflection. In this way, students could manage their own learning, while I am available as their facilitator to answer questions and support them when needed.

It is important to first make the paradigm shift in not trying to behave and act “normal” in “abnormal” circumstances. Trying to act normal in abnormal circumstances would be insensitive and just show that you are not in touch with reality. Values like respect and compassion are more important during a crisis when all people are stressed, including students. The coronavirus situation is a pandemic or global crisis affecting the whole world. Let me do a quick reality check to explain how this affects learning:

- The majority of countries are in lockdown with a significant reduction in economic activity, and devastating socio-economic impact and consequences;

- The lives of students and their parents have been disrupted by being forced to return home to study full-time at home;
- Most people, and therefore most students too, experience increased levels of uncertainty, stress, anxiety and panic worrying about their health, studies, family members, friends and parents;
- Bandwidth and connectivity problems complicates e-learning;
- Students are concerned about the current discomfort, as well as their future studies and careers in a contracted economy where jobs will be scarce;
- Some students were even required to assist their parents or other family members with work;
- It is a traumatic experience to be isolated from the campus, your fellow students, your lecturers and support staff, your friends and other family members, as well as from girlfriends and boyfriends and other partners in your life;
- If several parties (parents, brothers, sisters, friends) are all working and studying from home it becomes crowded and difficult to concentrate when you experience distractions and interruptions during a typical day of studying;
- Students also had to make several other sacrifices during these periods of instability and disruption, such as contributing to chores at home, or to even assist their parents in trying to run a business or doing work from home;
- The fear of infection became a reality in some communities and families when members of family, or their neighbours were infected with the Covid-19 virus, or living in constant fear when family members continued to work in essential services;
- All families experience their own challenges, conflicts and crises, and being under the same roof with the same people for 24 hours a day while trying to study is a tall order for many students, especially if space is limited;
- In many families income has been reduced, and for some students too, especially those who previously had part-time jobs in sectors totally shut down such as restaurants and bars.

In the light of the above realities, I reflected on my previous experience of e-learning, as well the more intensified and stressful period of e-learning over the past 30 days at Stellenbosch University. Using an asynchronous approach to e-learning, I decided to organise my experience into the most important lessons, with a specific focus on what I consider to be the most important critical success factors in making asynchronous e-learning work in practice. I call these lessons the 20 P's of making e-learning work:

1. *People focus:* E-learning is about learning, it is not about the "e" of e-learning. While technology is important, learning is more important, thus a strong people focus is key in making e-learning work.
2. *Purpose:* Despite using e-learning as an alternative to traditional classroom training, the purpose of your learning should still be clear. In fact, given all the distractions in the home learning environment, it is even more important to make the purpose of learning clear to students. In addition, students must understand how different sub-sections, chapters or learning units fit into the bigger picture, so that they will experience a high level of alignment and integration when pulling all the different sections of the module together.
3. *Positivity:* With so much bad news, negativity, uncertainty and anxiety around us, it is even more important for the lecturer to mirror positivity when engaging with students. We are all experiencing increased levels of stress and anxiety, and although it is important to acknowledge the crisis, be positive in all your engagements with students.

4. *Planning:* Lecturers must ensure that they plan their content and sessions in appropriate ways. When you present a face-to-face class in a conventional classroom, you have more freedom to use your own personal style and knowledge throughout the period to share your content with students. E-learning requires more careful planning in terms of how you ensure that you still achieve your learning outcomes in a different way, albeit in a more flexible manner. The right things must still happen at the right times, and you need to be able to make a plan if something goes wrong.
5. *Principles:* Establish clear ground rules in making e-learning work effectively. General principles of net etiquette should be observed, for example, the appropriate use of language and to show respect towards other students and the lecturer.
6. *Partnership:* Make it clear to students that e-learning is a real engaging partnership between the lecturer and students. Both parties need to contribute optimally to make e-learning work effectively. E-learning is two-way communication at several levels of learning.
7. *Professionalism:* Most academic courses prepare students to follow professional careers. E-learning provides an excellent opportunity for students to prepare for the real workplace where they will be expected to conduct themselves as professionals. When the lecturer mirrors the professionalism expected from students, most students will reciprocate in professional conduct throughout the period of online learning.
8. *Prioritise:* Be careful of not over-loading students with too much preparation work and content. This is even more important during the crisis period when students also have other commitments to attend to such as looking after their younger brothers and sisters. Prioritise key content and use smaller chunks of learning to get your message across.
9. *Presence:* Although it is important to encourage students to learn on their own and at their own pace, the lecturer must have a presence, in other words you must stimulate the learning from the start and enter and exit when necessary. This means that there are times when you let discussion forums continue without you, but you need to moderate and intervene to see if students are going in the right direction. Getting the balance right is key, if you are too visible, you dominate the forums too much. On the other hand, if you are invisible, students lose interest. Getting this balance right in terms of your presence is the key to success. Discussion forums can continue if students display self-directed learning, but it can't be leaderless.
10. *Participation:* The success of e-learning depends on student participation. Hence, the need to continuously encouraging students to participate in the discussion forums and their learning during their own time.
11. *Photos:* If the lecturer must have a presence, students must also have a presence. It is therefore important for students to also upload their photos on their online profiles. Not only does it make the student look more "professional" it also assists in creating stronger connections between the lecturer and students, and among the students themselves when they see each other's photos. It gives a "face" to the comment or contribution of each individual, and it reminds us all that learning is about people and the value you bring to the class.
12. *Pictures:* As the old saying goes: "A picture speaks a thousand words." Make your learning content as interesting and attractive as possible for students. Use pictures, diagrams, and figures to explain content in more user-friendly ways.
13. *Presentations or Podcasts:* Lecturers must still share their presentations with students, and using voice overs enables the students to go through the slides in their own time, while the lecturer explains the slides to them. Other forms of content such as podcasts or videos can also be used to enrich the content and learning experience.

14. *Platforms:* It is important to leverage the platforms provided by the institution. At Stellenbosch University we use SUNLearn, while other universities have their own platforms, like myUNISA at Unisa or Blackboard used at many other institutions of higher learning. Most of these platforms have similar functionalities. However, some lecturers use these platforms merely as “dumping” sites, in other words lecturers simply “dump” content for learners to access, read and use. This is one-way communication and therefore an ineffective method of learning. That is the reason why I appreciate the phrase used by Magda Barnard, Curriculum Advisor at the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences at Stellenbosch University, when she states: “You don’t upload documents, you build the site.” This is a profound statement for both lecturers and students: We don’t upload and download content, we engage with it, we build on it, and we leverage all opportunities such as the forums to create a more integrated and engaged approach to learning.
15. *Personal Reflections:* Encouraging students to do personal reflections is a powerful way to let them take full responsibility for their learning. When they reflect on their learning, they internalise the content and it becomes a personal journey of discovery and growth. Not only does it build their confidence, it also provides an opportunity for lecturers to see whether students have managed to master the key aspects of the session or chapter.
16. *Practical application:* After you have covered the theory and provided some practical examples for them, create opportunities for students to apply the theory. Also encourage students to generate practical examples. Use the e-learning platform to stimulate thinking about how the theory can be applied in the real world. Either create practical scenarios such as case studies, or let them work on projects where they can apply their knowledge in practice.
17. *People analytics:* Unfortunately, some e-learning platforms do not provide metrics such as participation rates, or the number of engagements. However, given the power of technology it is possible for all e-learning platforms to provide relevant analytics to inform decision-makers about possible follow-up interventions.
18. *Praise:* Recognise the contributions and achievements of students. I award three prizes, or digital badges per week: Most active student, Best contributor and Best Reflections. Acknowledging the work of students is encouraging them to stay motivated and to continue focusing on their studies.
19. *Pleasure:* Think of ways in which you can make the content more interesting for students. Infuse an element of fun into the learning process. While students should see the seriousness of their studies and deal with the complexity thereof, they must still be able to derive pleasure and satisfaction from their studies. Use a sense of humour, cartoons and create some lighter moments to improve the overall transformative student experience.
20. *Personal touch:* The most important of all these guidelines is to ensure that there is a personal touch used by the lecturer in ensuring that students are motivated to leverage the e-learning opportunity. Stay human and provide a personal touch in your comments and engagements in discussion forums. Use the names of students as much as possible. Students must never feel as if they are only a number, or as if they are accessing an online call centre.

E-learning presents the only opportunity for lecturers and students to continue with some form of facilitated learning during the lockdown. Despite some drawbacks and limitations, most of the typical problems experienced during the transition from traditional face-to-face learning to e-learning can be alleviated by following a more human approach to online learning. E-learning is 80% about people, and only 20% about technology. Most of the 20 P’s presented above are about a people-centred approach to learning. The only difference is that we learn via a human-computer interface, with

people on both sides of the technology. In fact, people are at the centre of the technology. While technology provides the platforms, people make it happen.

Lecturers and students are encouraged to leverage e-learning for the benefit of completing the 2020 academic year. It is indeed possible that we may return to campus in the near future, but optimising e-learning in the meantime, is an excellent opportunity in embracing the power of technology, while empowering students in the process. Moreover, we are preparing students for the future workplace, and most national and international companies are already using e-learning as a form of learning for more than 20 years. Although blended or hybrid approaches to learning have been popular before, all these companies have used e-learning only over the last month while cancelling all forms of face-to-face learning. Let us embrace e-learning as a powerful form of hybrid learning and continue to focus on academic quality and integrity and the achievement of learning outcomes in preparing students for a business world in which technology is one of the top drivers of business success.

Marius Meyer lectures in Strategic HR Management at Stellenbosch University and is Chairperson of the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP). For more information on the Coronavirus, visit www.sacoronavirus.co.za

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