



Data Research Center, Distance Learning: A discussion guide for the academic community May 2020
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The DRC has put together a number of key questions to consider as we create a new normal for university teaching. Feedback and additions welcome, email DRC director Anne Beaulieu j.a.beaulieu@rug.nl

Distance Learning: A discussion guide for the academic community Data Research Centre, Campus Fryslân*

These past weeks have seen an enormous shift in the ways of working for higher education staff and students. Teaching has gone online to an unprecedented extent. The interactions, materials and outcomes of teaching are pursued in a web-based, digital and networked form and context. The use of platforms such as Blackboard, Microsoft teams, Google hangouts have all become essential infrastructures that facilitate nearly every aspect of teaching—in contrast to their limited, supporting role of just a few weeks ago.

Of course, distance education existed long before the covid19 crisis, and it also predates MOOCs. But the current situation is marked by three strong dynamics: (1) the mediation of distance learning through digital platforms that are usually controlled and operated by corporations, (2) the current changes in the scale of online educational materials being produced, coupled to (3) the societal and institutional imperative to make use of distance education.

Fundamental challenge

We have considerable scholarship from STS, media studies, law, data science, and other fields that analyse datafication, platformisation and other dynamics around the intensified use of digital means. Across this work, we have learned that actors, benefits, rights, meanings, distribution of rewards and access can change radically when materials are externalized, mediated and put in a format that allows their decontextualisation and greater travel across time and space.

Given the intensification of digitally-mediated teaching, it is crucial to consider which new practices are becoming dominant in our institutions and to consider which shifts might occur

with regards to the ways we teach and learn. It is urgent to consider these issues, even as we are in the midst of ensuring that learning for our students can go on. In this situation three central questions emerge: What kind of new normal are we creating? Can we be more conscious of and more careful with regards the losers and winners in this process? Can we ensure that the fundamental values of academic freedom and good scholarship prevail?

The wider circulation of educational material and the distributed organisation of learning challenge both the traditional centrality and the control of universities on teaching and assessment. These new practices furthermore raise very fundamental issues about the purpose of institutions of academic education and about the role of universities in providing certification.

Blind spot

We end this brief note with a rather unusual format: rather than conclude with a set of recommendations, we propose a series of questions. Two observations fuel this unconventional move. First, our initial round of consultation revealed a significant lack of awareness of what is at stake. Second, we witnessed counter-currents within single institutions, where for example one part of the university apparatus is developing policy on open education resources, while another department is working on ensuring that the institution retains intellectual property rights to the digital material being produced. This limited and mixed response to the current shifts in teaching and learning points to a blind spot with regards to policy and to a lack of shared understanding of distance learning. At this point in time, we feel that putting forth concrete questions on labour and reification of teaching is an effective way to engage colleagues and students across the academic (and policy) community. Therefore, as a starting point, we propose a series of questions to help articulate the issues, for

- teaching staff
- policy-makers at faculty level
- policy-makers at university level
- professional staff and services
- for ministry of education
- for VSNU
- for students

teaching staff

What happens to the material I produce and put in Nestor/Blackboard collaborate or other university platforms?

Who has access to it?

Who decides whether to reuse it?

Will my material be evaluated? If so, by whom and how, with what consequences?

What kind of quality control should be in place, for example, through peer review?

Can I claim some form of intellectual property for this material (creative commons license)?

What about courses that are collectively developed--how do we attribute or acknowledge group contributions?

What about the university, does it have a claim to this material?

Can I and should I submit my teaching materials to repositories? If so, which ones?

Are there open repositories and how do they work?

policy-makers at faculty level

How will we treat this material if distance learning becomes a structural part of our teaching activities?

How do we credit staff for not only teaching courses but also creating material that can be shared and circulated within the faculty?

Will we evaluate our scientific staff on the basis of the materials they have created?

Can we demand that staff create stand-alone material that is sufficiently documented to be used by other members of the teaching staff?

How do we estimate the effort required to create such standalone material?

Do we need to consider hiring additional professional staff and train all staff (not only in terms of technology but also attitude/behaviour/dynamic)?

Is it possible to estimate the financial impact?

professional staff and support services at university level

What kind of support is needed to address these changing forms of teaching?

How can the university community become aware of the existing politics, platforms and protocols?

Do we need additional training to adapt to these new forms of teaching?

policy-makers at university level

To what extent do we need to incorporate distance learning material in the core activities of the university?

What are the implications for how we both value and support programmes?

How do we maintain a balance between distance learning and co-present learning, especially with an eye to including practical, embodied aspects of scientific knowledge?

How does distance learning affect the university's role in certification and accreditation?

How can distance learning include trustworthy assessments?

for ministry of education

What kind of national infrastructure (networks, repository, etc) is needed to support distance learning?

What should be the requirements for such infrastructures, in terms of privacy, access, accountability and other public values?

Under which conditions should we seek support from third parties? Which policies or requirements need to be in place to delegate such efforts to companies?

How (and to what extent) should we support and/or promote open-source platforms and technologies?

for VSNU

How can such outcomes of scientific work be made visible and valued?

How does this kind of work fit in the new policies and practices we are developing around 'Waarderen en Belonen'?

What do these changes mean for the business model of academic education?

for students

To what extent does distance learning change my educational experience?

What is the changing value of the training programme under these conditions?

How are my interactions with the teaching material being monetized?

Which contributions to teaching from students are becoming part of teaching materials? How are students involved or made aware of this?

How does this mode of teaching affect the degree I will obtain, positively or negatively?

How can I maintain social connections with my fellow students?

*This text is jointly authored by members of the Data Research Centre, University of Groningen. Indira van der Zande and Engelen Reitsma (University of Groningen) and Willem Halfman (Radboud University Nijmegen) kindly commented on an earlier version of this text.