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# Does the age of online education herald the death of academics?

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Human-centred leraning, a thing of the past? Professor via Olly/Shutterstock

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In the mid-1980s as a further education lecturer I was mocked by some more traditional colleagues for using "lantern slides", their term for the then newfangled technology of the overhead projector, or OHP. These Luddites strutted the corridors with coffee-tinted sheaves of notes stuffed untidily under their arms. They would sweep into the classroom, fling their pencil-written papyri on the lectern and, without so much as a glance at their students, commence reading out loud.

They seemed to think that their exegesis of the sacred texts of economics and business studies was blessed with a natural authority. The students concurred. Even when I projected my plastic slides onto the paint-peeling wall in lurid colour, they were inattentive. They took my

colleagues' aural dictation with the utmost seriousness. It was almost as if the ritual enunciation of the notes by the lecturer's voice sanctified them as a legitimate source of learning.

## Digital expectations

Academics today are increasingly expected to embrace all manner of digital media. Instead of sheaves of notes, we carry laptops, tablets or USB sticks to our lectures, to plug into multi-media audio-visual suites.

We might be asked to teach Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS), to use social media for research impact or course delivery, to reach wider audiences through YouTube clips or podcasts of our lectures. We're also encouraged to embrace web-based teaching and assessment, and to offer student support via email, text messaging, or even Facebook.

This digitisation of education makes perfect sense at a time when a huge proportion of under-30s rarely engage with print media, preferring to access their information via internet-connected mobile devices.

But, engaging as digital media may be, is there a risk that the importance of the academic role is being forgotten, to the detriment of the student's education?

## Medium and messenger

No doubt, digital media can make higher education more appealing –

and there is something suspiciously medieval about fetishising the personal authority of the individual scholar. But the foundation of Western education for two and a half thousand years has been not the medium, nor the message, but the messenger who gives physical expression, ritual force and emotional texture to the abstractions of the intellect.

The nuanced intellectual interaction of student and teacher in a shared physical space, stimulated by reading and expressed in voice or writing, is the motif of a higher education. Today, the Oxbridge model of small group tutoring remains the gold standard for higher education, reflecting the importance of proximity and dialogue in the scholarly relationship.

But few academics succeed in avoiding the need to translate their work into the latest communication media. Most universities try to improve the economic efficiency and market attractiveness of their offer by digitising courses to attract audiences that are bigger, more dispersed, and, perhaps, less skilled in the art of listening.

First-year classes numbering in the hundreds are made possible through multimedia course delivery – and the equivalent learners overseas can number in the thousands. At Georgetown University, for example, the chief information officer has explained that students check their mobile devices 43 times a day. In response, the university now has 35,000

students and faculty interacting on a mobile platform.

Which is all very well, but, as the late Canadian philosopher [Marshall McLuhan](#) pointed out: a medium is not merely a means of transmission – it influences the character of the message.

## Rebranded for simplification

There is a risk that academic ideas, adapted for digital presentation, might be reduced to misleading but easily conveyed simplicities. This reductionism lends itself to the commodification of higher education. Digitised courses can be subdivided, rebranded, repackaged, sold on and distributed in different forms as part-time, distance learning, "taster" or self-study units.

As media "content" that can be "delivered", some of the work can be devolved to less-qualified staff, or even to machines (for example, to mark online multiple choice tests). The author of the course, whose curation of ideas and intellectual judgement lie at the core of the entire process, can be reduced to a faint imprint, or even erased altogether.

Even a star academic who earns millions of views for an online lecture is little more than a social media marketing tool. Education, as opposed to entertainment, is inherently incremental and demands a judicious mix of personal and mediated interaction between students and academics.

# Keep the academic authority central

I might be exaggerating the downsides of digitisation. Most universities, I think, are sensible enough to allow the academic author control over, and physical presence in, the courses they create. In any case, there are inbuilt limits to the extent to which higher education can be depersonalised.

For one thing, academics as a species tend to be natural technophobes. Many fully digitised classrooms bear the hallmarks of Ludditism after a class leaves the room – a well-used A3 pad, interactive whiteboards written on in indelible marker, and a unbooted classroom PC. The notoriously [high non-completion rates for MOOCs](#) testify to most students' need for a personal level of engagement.

There is no turning back the tide of digitisation in higher education, but the integrity of the process demands the presence and authority of the academic. The media will obliterate the message, unless there is room in the digital university for the reassuring voice of the academic author and their skills of argument, inspiration, content curation and creation.

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**Jacek Tittenbrun**
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The author has a point. Even more, it is prescient, in all likelihood. Yes, the commodification of higher education is looming on the hoorizon, although its digitalisation is, sure enough, not the only , and even noot the most important cause. I myself have analysed the processes involved in detail in my recent book: "Concept of Capitall. The Commodification of Social Life", New Brunswik, NJ: Transaction Publishers. My name is Jacek Tittenbrun, jacek@amu.edu.pl

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**Chris Hackley**
Professor of Marketing, Royal Holloway

A day after publication my argument warning of the dangers of academic digitisation has been read some 780 times online on The Conversation and shared and republished more than 100 times on social media, neatly illustrating the futility of resistance.

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