

# A road into the unknown

Digitisation is a fundamental social change that we live in the midst of. It will eventually reshape the entire educational system – for better or worse, according to historian Kenneth Nyberg.

The question is, how prepared are we?

“No one who is. Any more than we know what comes next.”

**I**n recent years there has been much talk about how the university faces a big digital challenge, not the least from an educational perspective. E-learning, the Flipped Classroom and blended learning; these are just a few of the new technical concepts.

There is no doubt that the digital tools will fundamentally transform the educational sector, no matter whether one thinks that it is good or bad. I think that history will show that these kinds of fundamental transformations will in the long term have far-reaching consequences. But it takes time and, as always in times of changes, a polarisation of opinions takes place which makes the debate on education and learning so confusing. I think we should be cautious, not the least because it looks so very different in different parts of the higher education sector. My view is that we, especially in the humanities and social sciences, have not yet begun to use digital tools to any great extent. This is in some ways healthy. It is important to recognise the possibilities, but also recognise that technology can not solve all problems.

## Why is this debate so confusing?

There is a tendency towards polarisation between on the one hand, academics who are markedly critical of technology and who take a conservative approach, and on the other hand, uncritical technology enthusiasts. Both groups have a tendency to read the developments from the basis of their inherent “bias” and agendas, and so it is important to see that there may be more nuanced positions. For me, an example of this is the concept “blended learning,” which is simply a mix of old and new methods.

## We thus have different perceptions of what learning is, don't we?

Yes, to think that learning is about transferring a certain factual content is, on one hand, a gross oversimplification, but on the other hand there is clearly an element of

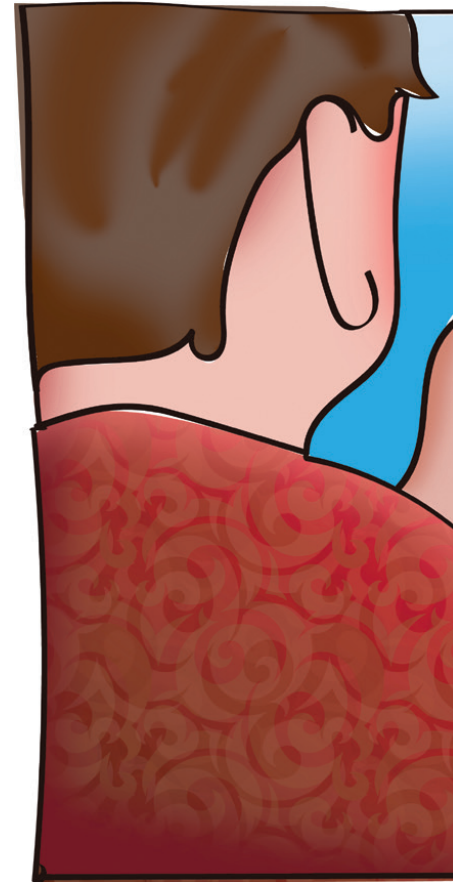
imitation and memorisation in all learning situations. At the other extreme, learning is perceived as a purely social activity, a socialisation of certain values and attitudes, such as about democracy and gender equality – which is true to a large extent, but repetitive rehearsals, is, as I mentioned, also an important feature for many types of learning and therefore such an extreme stance becomes problematic.

The debates between different groups concerning learning and education are frequently focused in the wrong direction. Due to the different positions those involved often don't even realise that they have fundamental different perceptions of what the purpose of learning is, which means



Kenneth Nyberg

that they talk past one another. But this realisation also means for instance that one can not simply dismiss the traditional large lectures, even if research shows that they are relatively ineffective for what many see as their purpose, i.e. to convey a body of knowledge to the students. Perhaps the most important thing with them is not exactly what is said there, but rather simply that a



group of people physically share a common experience of having listened to the lecture and then have something to base their discussions on, which in turn contributes to learning.

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**When the MOOC courses were introduced in 2011, some commentators thought that the massive open online courses would revolutionise higher education, but we haven't seen that yet.**

Interest has waned sharply and changed direction after the euphoric mood that prevailed in the years 2011 to 2012. I do not believe at all that the MOOC will replace what we today call core university education. It has become apparent that MOOC type courses have very low throughput. However, although I am critical of MOOC as an alternative to traditional university courses, I have, especially recently, realised that the companies who were behind the MOOC wave have found a niche that after all will be more and more important. These courses are primarily targeted to the highly educated, who are capable of studying on their own and who are not dependent upon teacher-led

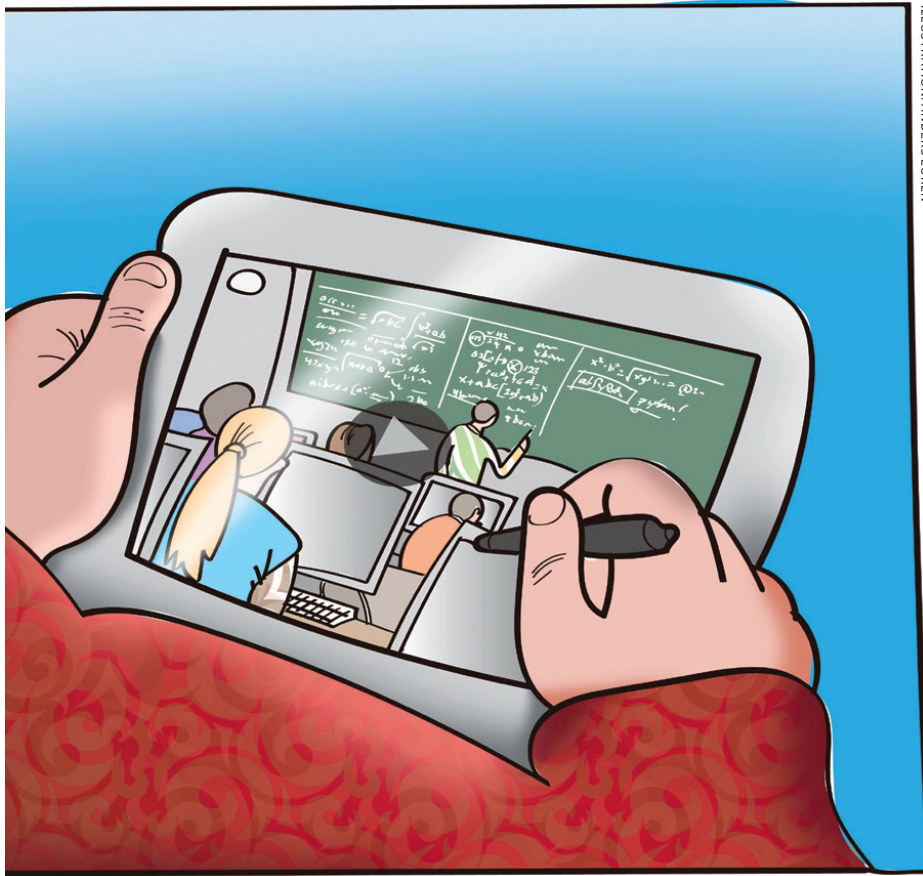


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instruction. But they work less well for individuals unfamiliar with studying.

**In what way have the discussions concerning MOOC changed the climate for distance education in Sweden?**

It is disappointing that participation in distance educational programs has been declining in Sweden. This is partly because sufficient resources have not been provided and digital tools have been neglected. But much of this is changing now. It is positive that many institutions of higher education appear to be increasing their efforts in pedagogic development, especially blended learning. I think the MOOCs have served as a catalyst for renewed pedagogies and new technologies. We can learn things from them. But despite the shortcomings of traditional distance education, they are better than the MOOC courses due to that there is a teacher whom students are able to have direct contact with via channels such e-mail or chat.

A common misconception is that distance learning should be less expensive. But in fact a good distance learning course requires more work for one as a teacher, in the role of coordinator. And to write comments is more demanding than doing it verbally, even if that particular part of the puzzle is changing as feedback via video or over-Internet voice

calls is becoming more and more common. But the technology itself also requires a lot of time by teachers in the distance learning courses, especially if one actually wants to fully utilise the new educational possibilities that the hardware and software offers.

**Nowadays there is much talk about active learning and student-centred learning. In the United States, a campus was built up entirely based on the concept of Active Learning Space: Interactive classrooms and lecture halls, round tables and screens or monitors all around.**

It is an interesting development, but I do not think that it is a panacea, the same as neither traditional classroom teaching or MOOC is. Admittedly, the model certainly works well for some students in certain contexts, but it's far from working for everyone. Student-centred learning has a pretty clear ideological dimension, which is based on that the learning situation should be democratic and equitable, and that both teachers and students are to be actively engaged. Few dare to question such a beautiful idea. But that model works less well for students or courses who, for some particular reason, need more structure or a more active role for teachers. The other extreme position is to stick with classroom lectures and exclusively convey the information from a lecturer, but it is somewhat a caricature that all the "tra-

**"The context and the room does matter. But the power of digital is that you can take a course, independent of time and space,"** observes Kenneth Nyberg, senior lecturer in history, who is working in the autumn with modifying several online courses within the undergraduate program in history.

ditional" teaching today is like that. We do not do that much anymore, at least not in the humanities, which is the area I'm most familiar with. That it is nevertheless so common, is often due to a lack of resources rather than pedagogical conservatism.

**What if it was the case that there actually was a universal model that works for everyone?**

Yes, it's a trap we all fall easily into, the belief that there actually exists one method or one approach that is an overall solution to the challenge all education represents. On the contrary, research shows that different people learn different things in different ways in different situations and therefore there is no method, whether new or old, that can be applied overall. Instead, teaching methods must be varied in nature and preferably individualised; but with limited resources this is simply impossible. Therefore, teaching is always a matter of compromises where one must find suitable forms which are as good as possible for as many as possible.

**Do you think that the changed media habits affect young people's ability to make good use of an academic education?**

People of all ages are consuming more and more media at an accelerating pace today, and without doubt there may be a risk that things become more difficult, for instance that it becomes harder to read long texts. The new media habits are partly changing how we think. In many ways the academic world and university environment is antithetical to the rapid flow: it is about drilling deeply, to be thoughtful and to be reflective into the slow sense of the word. How are we, as university teachers, to relate to this and how can we portray traditional academic values in a radically different reality? I myself do not have the answer, but we need to start thinking along these lines. If we teachers appear to be completely unaware of the digital world our students live in, we lose our credibility.

**Are university educators prepared for or do they have sufficient knowledge and skills to manage with the digital transition?**

The question is, how prepared any of us are. Do we know what comes next? The only thing we know for certain is that there will be something new. And if we are to adapt and learn new tools, it requires immense resources, particularly in a situation where there is already stinginess with resources for teaching. But one must not forget that it should be in addition to what we now have. Not something that will replace anything overnight, but we need to examine whether and in what context the new tools are working or not.

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