

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) presents
Rethinking higher ed: Beyond {the buzzwords}
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Session 3B | Tech in the classroom: Friend or foe?
The pros and cons of teaching with technology

Facilitator: Joe Kim, McMaster University
Umer Noor, Humber College
Tanner Mirrlees and Shahid Alvi, UOIT
Nancy Walton, Ryerson University

Joe Kim facilitated a discussion panel comprising Umer Noor, a professor of game and physics programming from Humber College; Tanner Mirrlees and Shahid Alvi, professors of media and technology from UOIT; and Nancy Walton, director of e-learning at Ryerson.

Kim began by asking about the costs and benefits of technology in the classroom. For Alvi, the balance frequently lies in the material being taught. If you're doing lots of stats and graphs, those tools can be very helpful, whereas they are less useful with topics like theory. Mirrlees tries to find out how students are responding to the technology, and the results are mixed. Some love the blended, hybrid model, while others would prefer less tech in the classroom. They say that the classroom is a special place: everywhere else in their lives they are hyper-connected and overwhelmed, whereas in class they can concentrate. Walton had a more positive reaction, stating that, especially with difficult material like a fully online ethics course, some students prefer talking about university material online. They can say things they would be uncomfortable saying face-to-face, trying things out before using them in a public space.

The panel was then asked whether technology increases the workload on already stressed instructors. Alvi said yes, especially with the concurrent demand for more original content. Walton also gave an emphatic yes. She does extensive consultation with faculty as director of e-learning, and said this comes up often. The online material has to be updated several times a year, and there's also the question of how far we are redefining the workspace and working hours. Noor emphasized that there are some incredibly exciting tools out there like Questspace, which allows faculty to turn courses into online adventures, but frequently the most exciting ones require the most work. Mirrlees then refocused the conversation onto older faculty, for whom tech can be seen not as a tool but as something that makes demands on their time and teaching approach. They are also rightly suspicious of the efficiency model: does technology merely mean we have to do more work with fewer resources? Kim ended on a more positive note, saying that the use of Google Hangouts has significantly increased attendance at his office hours.

Kim ended with a truism: "If you can be replaced by a video then you probably should be." He asked the panel whether technology changed the way they teach. Alvi replied that technology can't make you

laugh, cry, or make you passionate about your subject. A human being can. Mirrlees pointed out that the chalkboard didn't change the fundamentals of grammar. For him it will be an administrative decision whether teachers are replaced by videos. Walton reminisced that 10 years ago she didn't have to teach nursing students how to manage their online profile, but they're online professionals now so she has to teach it. Technology also means she doesn't have to repeat material that is easily found by the students elsewhere: she can focus on the real gaps in their knowledge.