



12 August 2010

## Students 'let down' by the academic Luddites

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By [Sarah Cunnane](#)

Survey finds that academy is failing to capitalise on new technology. Sarah Cunnane reports

Research from the US Department of Education suggests that students studying online tend to outperform those receiving face-to-face tuition; The Open University in the UK has topped 20 million downloads on iTunes U; and, worldwide, social media has overtaken pornography as the number one activity on the web.

However, recent statistics from the US show that the academy may be failing to capitalise on the potential offered by new technology.

The *Faculty Survey of Student Engagement*, conducted annually by academics at [Indiana University, Bloomington](#), last year included questions on the use of technology by lecturers for the first time.

The results show that while 72 per cent of respondents used course- management systems such as Blackboard, many did not use any other technology in their academic lives.

Some 70 per cent did not use plagiarism-detection software and 84 per cent did not use blogs. In each case, a small percentage claimed not to know that such things existed (see graphic, below).

The use of technology in higher education is becoming a political as well as an academic issue in the US; the Office of Educational Technology, part of the Department of Education, has published a draft of its [National Educational Technology Plan 2010](#) calling for "revolutionary transformation rather than evolutionary tinkering" in the field.

Mark Greenfield, director of web services at the University of Buffalo and a higher education web consultant, said that although the Indiana survey took responses from a small sample of universities, the findings were an accurate reflection of the sector as a whole.

"I think there is a faction of faculty that is resistant to this kind of change," he said. "There is a sense that students need to adapt to their style rather than vice versa."

Writing for *Times Higher Education* in 2006, Terry Eagleton, distinguished professor of English literature at Lancaster University and visiting professor at the National University of Ireland, Galway, championed Luddite attitudes in the academy and said that an excess of information had led to academics "being robbed of the most precious medium of reflection, which is time".

Edward Tenner, author of *Why Things Bite Back* (1997) and *Our Own Devices* (2003) and a visiting scholar at Rutgers and Princeton universities, said it was "very possible" that teaching or scholarship would improve if more academics used technology. However, he agreed with Professor Eagleton that the time it took to learn about technological advances could impinge on other areas of scholarly life.

"If an academic invests their time in mastering this or that computer program, they are spending less time on something else," he said. "So many are sceptical that these particular things are worth their while when they could just do their research instead."

Professor Tenner added that researchers will often be so immersed in their field that they will not feel the need to use technological tools to help them find academics and papers in areas related to their own, but he questioned whether this was a sensible attitude to adopt.

"If someone isn't making full use of a tool, even if they don't need to in their work, is it really fair to students if they can't help them learn to use something that, for the students, is essential?" he asked.

Mr Greenfield said faculty should be more willing to "move outside their comfort zone", but added that universities had responsibilities, too.

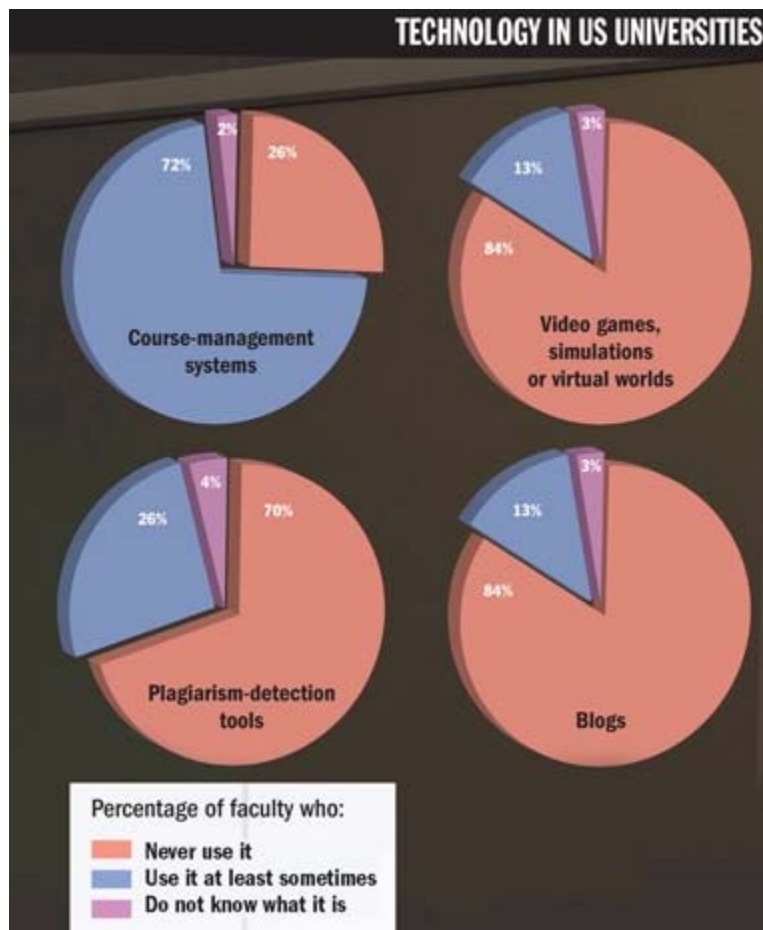
"I am always amazed when I talk to faculty about how antiquated some of their computing equipment is," he said. "On some campuses, there are programmes that help faculty to use technology, but they are too small. There needs to be a lot more support and resource in this area."

Professor Tenner said the "mental effort" required by staff who had been "educated in an age of information scarcity" and who were now "adapting to an age of information abundance" made the adoption of technology in the academy difficult.

However, Mr Greenfield said it was essential that this was overcome before countries such as the US slipped behind their more technologically savvy rivals.

"We need to do a better job of educating our students," he argued, "and one of the best ways we can do that is by embracing new technology."

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## Readers' comments

- **Carrie Rostron** 12 August, 2010

Interesting pie charts. I see there are two options for not knowing about it, and one for using it.

There are no options for I've looked at it, considered how it will help students to learn about my subject and rejected it as being a gimmick or having nothing to offer beyond my current methods.

- **con murphy** 12 August, 2010

With all such articles, ultimately championing technology, we receive an inordinate amount of 'opinion' and suitably massaged statistics about the benefits of technology in education, and the apparent caveman-like positioning of anyone who holds a different position. This is both intellectual bullying and ironic in that it essentially offers up a poor intellectual process - i.e. there is a heavy emphasis on one particular perspective, supported by 'experts' whose opinions are clearly based on self-interest. Technology in education is a method, not a god-like solution to the development of mankind. This article is written in the same tired pattern.

- **Bee** 12 August, 2010

They're resistant using new technologies because they don't know what it's good for and don't know how to use them. You gotta tell them what a blog is and what it's good for, how else can you expect them to see the benefit?

- **JustAnotherComment** 12 August, 2010

I'm sure I'm just being a bit thick, but can someone explain to me the connection between the statements

"social media has overtaken pornography as the number one activity on the internet"

and

"However... the academy may be failing to capitalise on the potential offered by new technology".

To illustrate the problem I'm having, I offer the following alternatives:

"Hammers: the number one tool in DIY, but are academic utilizing hammers and hammer related paraphernalia to their full potential?"

"Drinking white lightning in a windswept bus shelter has overtaken Morris Dancing as the social activity of choice for a large proportion of teenagers. However, is academia using cider to its full potential?"

- **Bee** 12 August, 2010

Actually: In the text you write 84% of do not use blogs, but in the figure caption it says 84% have never seen a blog, which one is the right one?

- **Our Eli** 12 August, 2010

Yet another piece of silly season 'filler' concocted out of headline results from some 'survey' or another (cf the PA Consulting 'survey' of VCs a week back). Have the people at THE nothing better to do with their time? Are there not pressing issues in UK academia rather more important than this one?

- **THE** 12 August, 2010

Bee - 'never use' is correct. The key in the graphic is being changed forthwith. Apologies for the error.

- **Bland Tomkinson** 12 August, 2010

The evidence so far is that gains from the introduction of technology tend to be associated with a complete revision of thinking about the teaching and learning involved. It is not the simple act of introducing e-learning that produces the benefits, it is the act of reviewing and reflecting on what needs to be learned and how. When academics are already hard pressed to teach much larger classes and provide meaningful individual feedback to every student it is little wonder that the reviewing and reflexion tends to get put on a back burner. It isn't that we are Luddites, its simply that we don't have the time to work on making effective change.

- **Emma** 12 August, 2010

I'm generally the sort of person who does use technology; and have used all of the above & more with students. However, I also agree with Carrie's point that they didn't also ask those who don't use them what their reasons were.

(I'd also love to know how many of the bloggers/virtual world users are using them, and \*not\* the institutional VLE - as they find that the former let them do much more of what they want with their students than the constraints that some VLEs put on users.

I'd like to see a time, hopefully in the not too distant future, where using a blog / whatever (not plagiarism detection software, as I think that's a different matter) - is seen as just part of the range of things available - along with the books / videos / images / models the lecturer is using - they're picking the best thing for the aspect they're teaching at the time. Next week, it might be something different to meet the needs of different students/ a different aspect of the subject / etc.

- **Our Eli** 12 August, 2010

What I'd like to see is some randomised controlled trials to see whether or not any of this stuff actually makes a real difference. Some hope there.

- **Emma** 12 August, 2010

Agree with our Eli - though, of course, the difficulty of doing any randomised controlled trials is ensuring that the lecturers don't change anything else & also exhibit the same level of enthusiasm for all the different approaches; it's so easy when you introduce one new thing to get increased motivation for the whole course & change quite a few things at the same time.

- **Conversely...** 12 August, 2010

While I agree with Emma's statement, it's also easy, when forced to do something you don't want to do, to lose enthusiasm in a lot of different ways.

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