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From Disruption to Recovery: A Global Perspective

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ABSTRACT

There is no doubt that the Covid-19 Pandemic has disrupted many aspects of life, including higher education and its complex and rigid structures. The disruption of university functions and the transition from in person to virtual instruction has revealed deficiencies and posed logistical and pedagogical challenges. However, the Pandemic has also led to popular and scholarly discussions about innovation and ways of reimagining the university of the future. This short essay, provides a global perspective on the Pandemic 's disruption and sheds light on the role of IT in creating space for resilience and innovation and, more broadly, in reimagining the university.

Keywords: Higher Education; Global Pandemic; Information Technology; Teaching Innovation; Microteaching.

Ready or not, the Covid-19 Pandemic forced colleges and universities worldwide to transition abruptly from face-to-face to online instruction. While that emergency transition was not permanent, it disrupted critical structures and processes, teaching many lessons for those who want to seriously reflect on the Pandemic 's effect on higher education and what we might do with those lessons moving forward. Online and distance education have been around for some time, but no one would have predicted that it would become the primary platform for learning and collaboration. Depending on the subject matter and nature of interactions in the classroom, the usefulness and efficacy of remote instruction have been the focus of many scholarly discussions (Guth, 2020; Linde, Clay & Johnson, 2021; Mian & Khan, 2020 & Thornton, 2020). More broadly, what systems and processes were able to adapt to modern technology, and what broke down in the face of the crisis? How could a global disruption become a sprinting board for innovation and reimagining a university of the future?

The global Pandemic's impact has become a catchphrase in popular and scholarly discussions (Bayliss & Kletter, 2020; Feldman, 2021). In a recent study about Canadian higher education and the impacts of the Pandemic, Martinec (2020) acknowledged the importance of technology in helping the academic community cope and stay connected but described the approach as a Band-Aid solution, particularly for ensembles and music education. In the United Kingdom, numerous medical schools have suspended all clinical placements and classes, threatening medical education in the country (Mian & Khan, 2020). COVID-19 has also significantly disrupted all systems of education in the United States (Kuhfeld, Soland, Tarasawa, Johnson, Ruzek & Liu, 2020a). In modern U.S. history, Hurricane Katrina was the only other disruption to higher education, but the interruption was limited to 20 colleges in the South (Lorenzo, 2008; SchWeber, 2008). In the United

States, online learning has traditionally been geared toward adult learners who have daytime jobs but look for opportunities to build professional capital through the convenience of online programs (Lohr & Haley, 2018). However, due, in part, to limitations in State and Federal funding for higher education, coupled with the decrease in enrollment numbers, more and more universities have joined the competitive race for offering online education.

According to the 2017 distance enrollment report by the Digital Learning Compass, the number of students enrolled in online courses has surpassed six million nationally, continuing a growth trend that has been consistent for 13 years (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Additionally, more than a quarter of higher education students (29.7 percent) in the United States have enrolled in at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2017). The agility and efficacy of moving from face-to-face to online instruction were not unique to American institutions.

In the Middle East and within the Gulf Cooperating Countries (GCC), Qatar University and Khalifa University are considered leading examples of public research institutions in the MENA region that responded adequately and effectively to the disruption. For example, in the spring of 2020, Khalifa University shifted from in-person to synchronous online learning using blackboard collaborate as the platform for videoconferencing and instructional continuity. The shift from face-to-face to online was abrupt, but the transition for faculty and students was less disruptive for institutions with reputable online programs like Purdue University, the University of London, and the University of Southern California.

Overall, the transition has allowed instructional continuity during the spring semester of 2020. However, it was evident that interaction within the virtual spaces has limitations for some fields, such as the arts, athletics, and experimental inquiries. For example, during the Spring 2020

semester, the University College London suspended all in-person classes and clinical trials (Thornton, 2020). Additionally, the transition from face-to-face to online instruction during the COVID-19 Pandemic forced students, instructors, and college administrators to adapt to a new ecology of communication and teaching (Linde, Clay & Johnson, 2021). Colleges and universities across the world have turned into platforms like Google Classroom, Zoom, Kaltura, and other video conferencing tools as a new method of teaching and collaboration. Software companies like Adobe, Google, and Microsoft are rendering free services to support the needs of academic institutions and businesses during these unforeseen disruptions (Bayliss & Kletter, 2020).

Educators around the world sought to identify a variety of platforms for maintaining instructional continuity. One such platform is Blackboard Collaborate, a video conferencing tool within the learning management system Moodle (a Blackboard product), allowing instructors to record lectures and conduct administrative meetings. This tool is much like Adobe Connect and Google Hangout, enabling users to switch from moderator to presenter to participant instantaneously. Blackboard Collaborate allows presenters and moderators to place participants into groups, share files and videos, and conduct audience polls. This tool allows for up to 250 participants. However, for optimum user experience, everyone should switch to the muting mode except for the moderator, which was ideal for conducting faculty meetings and workshops. Other faculty members have used Zoom for group projects and other academic functions (Guth, 2020; Feldman, 2021; Linde, Clay & Johnson, 2021).

The Disruption

Given these pre-Pandemic teaching and learning experiences, social interactions bound in the physical space, particularly within the academic spheres, had redefined the roles and behaviors of learners and educators alike. However, virtual learning spaces offer a new platform for envisioning a different ecology of cognitive development. But a measure of cognitive development ought to consider the students' views, satisfactions, and dissatisfactions with the remote learning modality. For example, a study about student satisfaction with course delivery and assessment methods in the pre-Pandemic era revealed similarities and differences across modalities of instruction (Dziuban et al., 2015). Students in the general satisfaction category identify essential differences in engaged learning and agency but not so much with the assessment method (Dziuban et al., 2015). The findings of Dzubin et al. (2015) echo those of earlier studies, and that students' satisfaction levels with online instruction, feedback, and assessment are linked to a predetermined instructor and student expectations (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Ke & Kwak, 2013). For now, the virtual learning spaces have ensured a relative continuity to academic and administrative functions, but there is more room for customization. For example, Just-In-Time learning using Artificial Intelligence offers a unique approach to catalyzing collaboration while simultaneously rendering individualized, engaging, and practical learning experiences (Sattar, 2017; Vrba & Mitchell, 2019).

To this end, a reasonable assessment of the usefulness and efficacy of virtual learning spaces should consider the cognitive dimension of student learning instead of focusing solely on its social and spatial constructs. The cognitive-behavioral theory explains human behavior as the individuals' views of themselves, the world around them, and their perceptions of the future. Cognitive development is then associated with and dependent on events and changes

within the learner's social spheres. To this end, the human mind is one of the most sophisticated devices there is. It can gather new information, process it, analyze it, and make decisions based on such analysis. Through experience and formal training, the human brain transitions from learning through social cognition to learning through cognitive behavior (Mayer, 2019). Over the past 24 months, we have witnessed how the academic community has come together to carry out its intellectual mission outside the boundaries of the physical classroom. The transition from face-to-face to online delivery was neither new nor perfect but reflects, yet again, the resilient and adaptable nature of human aptitude.

The Pandemic has also unveiled other deeply rooted issues within the systems of higher education, particularly in the United States. For example, the cost of higher education is not a new debate, but the pandemic's disruptive nature has shown the current educational model's vulnerability and unsustainable nature. For example, virtual simulation labs provide students with easy and unlimited accessibility, which could offer a reduction in logistical costs, and ultimately, a reduction in tuitions and fees. Besides, remote operations reduce commuting time to and from campus, increasing productivity and overall work-life balance for faculty and students. Additionally, the effective use of office and classroom space through hybrid and online teaching becomes an excellent incentive for reducing energy consumption and other related services.

For students who enjoy the in-person learning and those who lack the intrinsic motivation to work independently, the transition from face-to-face to hybrid or fully online instruction was depressing and far from what they signed up for. Some students have gone as far as suing their colleges and universities and demanded a full refund for tuition and fees for moving to online instruction. However, change is inevitable, and in the case of the global Pandemic, change has created a new and innovative

mindset that defies physical proximity in all aspects of human connections.

The Innovation

The academic community has diverted from its traditional functions and operations to adopt a semi-irreversible structure of a flexible and innovative ecosystem. The Pandemic has reduced the level of social interactions inside and outside the classroom, but the availability of digital resources like Google Classroom, Zoom, Kaltura, and other Screen casting and video conferencing tools has created a new ecology of learning and interaction (Guth, 2020; Feldman, 2021; Linde, Clay & Johnson, 2021). Emergency response teaching, which aimed at maintaining instructional and administrative continuity, has redefined the university's role towards the learner and the larger community It has also generated an authentic assessment of a college degree's perceived and actual values, given the increase in tuition cost and, ultimately, the accumulation of student loan debt.

In mitigating the transition from in-person to online instruction during the Pandemic, information technology services (ITS) have played an indispensable role in providing training for stakeholders, diversifying instructional delivery methods, and enhancing the overall student experience (Feldman, 2021; Linde, Clay & Johnson, 2021). And while IT services and roles within academic spheres have often been reduced to technical support and troubleshooting, the role has now grown to encompass and intertwine with other academic and non-academic departments. The transition from in-person to hybrid and/or online instruction required collaboration with digital librarians, instructional designers, the office of communication, and the office of disability and accessibility (Linde et al., 2021). Working collectively in coordination with ITS, these cross-institutional departments

have created a culture of proactive planning and agility in decision-making that was conducive to instructional continuity and the campus community's safety (Filomena, Palompon, Garcia, & Michelle Olvido, 2021; Guth, 2020). To this end, the Pandemic has brought about a new structure of collaboration and synchrony between university functions and departments like never before.

The alliance between ITS and other academic units, including the library, office of disability, and other student support services, has created a culture of collaboration and bridged the gap between the operational and instructional functions of the university (Bayliss & Kletter, 2020; Guth, 2020; Linde et al., 2021). To this end, ITS has created a new ecology of institutional collaboration and delivery of course content. As the global community moves through and beyond the Pandemic, colleges and universities will continue the path of rediscovery and searching for efficient, cost-effective, and flexible degree and program offerings.

However, the strategic and procedural reimagination of a university of the future extends beyond the scope of ITS and online learning. What lies ahead should be a period of teaching and learning innovation that enhances the notion that university education produces knowledgeable, adaptable, skilled, sensitive, and socially-engaged citizens rooted in their locality but thinking and able to act globally (Filomena et al., 2021; Linde et al., 2021). Additionally, research training requires careful calibration of processes and procedures that stretches from doing disciplinary-based research to multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary research aimed at addressing the complex challenges caused by the age of disruptions and crises (Reimers, 2021).

Conclusion

Recent scholarly discussions call for reimagining the university of the future and reforming education in the post global Pandemic (Reimers, 2021). In a similar study, Taberski (2020) argued that the Pandemic should prompt the global community to reimagine education not relocating it. For example, by virtue of emergency response to the Pandemic, the academic community around the world has transitioned into a culture of teaching and learning that sets the foundation for a new path to virtual presence and collaboration (Filomena, Daisy, Garcia, & Olvido, 2021; Reimers, 2021). It is a call for imagining institutions of higher learning where faculty and administrators function in structures that are less bureaucratic and managerialists, and more adaptable, flexible and enabling.

Based on recent scholarly discussions, it is evident that digital technology has made possible what was deemed impossible, and while the Pandemic has been disruptive to higher education, it created pathways for innovation and the restructuring of outdated and inefficient educational practices (Taberski, 2020; Feldman, 2021). For example, the instructional and disruption caused by the global Pandemic has provided university stakeholders with an opportunity to narrow the digital divide that once existed between those who preferred in person interactions and those who saw the advantages of operating in virtual spaces (Correia, 2020). In many ways, the global Pandemic has exposed the digital divide and inequalities in educational accessibility, thus compelling the education community to reimagine how teachers and educators teach and support students regardless of their physical location and the tools they can access.

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