

Working with Uncertainty

It has been three full years since the Covid-19 pandemic started spreading, halting or seriously disrupting travel and trade, healthcare and education alike across the world. Especially in societies that did not have the technological and educational infrastructure for online learning, students lost many months of learning, not to mention the more serious impacts of the socioeconomic inequities that the pandemic further aggravated. While the world celebrated the rapid development of vaccines and started resuming social life after two years, including education, this global crisis continues. Disruptions, death and illness, and the aggravation of inequality continue. We continue to live in the shadows of uncertainty.

It is uncertain how this virus will further evolve and how it will impact the world and for how long. It is uncertain how the world will deal if new variants and waves kill and sicken millions more, how the public and public institutions will pay the necessary attention in the face of growing complacency, and how a frayed international order will manage a protracted crisis. Given that the pandemic “is over” in the minds of too many, it is uncertain what the future holds for the health and wellbeing of the world. We cannot say with certainty that this will be the century’s only pandemic, or even of the first half. It is difficult to expect that the underlying conditions of human disruption of the environment, aggravated by necessary but risky human mobility, will change for the better; nor can we be certain that nations will learn lessons, get together, and prepare for the next pandemic.

Tragically, a pandemic that refuses to go away is only one of the crises of our time. There is the shocking reality of sovereign nations being

invaded, which we hoped wouldn't happen in the twenty-first century. There is the high possibility that there will be no significant collaboration or collective action to halt or slow human impact of the climate and vital ecological systems; the increasing population and its accelerating burden are not likely to be matched by commensurate global action to preserve the planet as we know it. Then there are other persistent or recurrent emergencies, ranging from alarming economic inequalities to the rise of authoritarian regimes undermining democracy, religious fundamentalism taking over politics and policy, the spread of disinformation and propaganda aggravating civic disorder, to the normalization of technological determinism and technologically enhanced neocolonial and neoliberal global orders.

All of the above crises shroud higher education with uncertainty. As educators, can we continue to focus on their core mission of preparing new generations for successful lives and careers? Can we be effective in creating and applying knowledge for greater human good? Our task of shedding light and paving way for social progress and common human good may need to be pursued increasingly under the clouds of uncertainty.

A reflection on the crises and the uncertainties they cause, however, also leads us to realize that uncertainty is a part and parcel of educating and learning, of knowledge-making and application—of scholars' role in society. It is our job to figure things out, to grapple with uncertainty. It is our responsibility to prepare future generations to navigate uncertainty, or navigate the world in the face of uncertainty. It is in the very nature of knowing and sharing knowledge to deal with uncertainty, to entertain ambiguity, to explore possibilities, to be open minded. Asking questions, posing hypotheses, engaging diverse perspectives, even tolerating contradictions—these are all tools of our trade. It is also part of our profession to do what we can when we do not know about every aspect of a situation, to contribute our bit even when we know it means little, and to hold judgment when we seem to be right.

Certitude is comforting, often necessary or desirable. But how are we to learn and teach, create and lead if a crisis won't go away? What are the skills we need, the mindset we must develop, the tools and approaches we must add to our repertoire when we become aware of layers of crises in our pathway? How can we learn to accept that dealing with uncertainty is part of our mission? How can we develop the toolset that we need to help ourselves and others deal well with uncertainty?

Certainty is an ideal, uncertainty more often the reality of life and society. The privileged could afford more certainty than those who are left behind or marginalized—as we see when crises like pandemics and wars refuse to spare the privileged entirely. Certitude borders on arrogance, while uncertainty-tolerance reflects humility. While the certainty of science and the uncertainty of philosophy can complement each other, objective reality itself must make way for the objectively unknown for knowledge to advance. Certainty is fixed but fickle, uncertainty fluid but permanent. Thus, the uncertainties of our time—caused by crises—are a call to action for educators and scholars. They are a call for us to recognize and respond to uncertainty as part of our role and responsibility.

It is for us as scholars and educators to guide the world through uncertainty, to help others to navigate uncertain terrains of time and reality—not to mention the inherent uncertainty of the future.

The articles in this issue deal with the conditions of uncertainty and challenges brought about the pandemic. They reflect upon, in diverse ways, the crisis of the pandemic, the fault lines that the crisis has exposed, and the challenges of our uncertain and difficult times. Writing from across the world, the authors try to grapple with a piece of the broader context of uncertainty—chipping away at it, recognizing its scale and preponderance.

We hope that as a reader, you will find articles that will inspire thought and action toward contributing to higher education—and through it to the world—in a world of uncertainty and its attendant anxieties. We hope that you will share the materials and consider submitting your own work for future issues of the journal.

Editors

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