Online, Open, and Equitable Education

Lessons from Teaching and Learning during the Global Pandemic

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CHAPTER 12

Conclusion and a Call to Action

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The massive disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic forced instructors, students, and administrators alike to re-evaluate what was most important in the learning environment and what was critical to success in achieving learning goals across the curriculum. This volume has explored the lived experience of a diverse array of educators as they grappled with these challenges. That diversity extended into the range of methodological approaches they took to address the questions the pandemic raised for each of them as it challenged what they thought they knew about pedagogy and learning. The personal narratives of these educators reveal patterns of research and meaning-making that can and should be extended into post-pandemic SoTL work.

Authors in this volume addressed two key foci through the lens of openness and equity in online learning: student learning and faculty development. In supporting the former, instructors encountered challenges with learners who had limited access to digital resources, including reliable high-speed internet and even appropriate hardware. They struggled to maintain contact, community, and connection with learners who were forced to share network connections, devices, and physical space, raising questions of whether asynchronous or synchronous learning approaches were more equitable and effective in the situation. Instructors were faced with stark evidence that the digital divide was a reality that many face, and for some, this would be the first time they would be required to not only acknowledge the often invisible systemic inequity in access, but

also to try and anticipate its impact and account for it through their pedagogical approaches. Many of the authors in this volume were working with students whose first experience of higher education, including as the first in their family to experience it, was during the pandemic, compounding the challenges these students normally face in engaging and developing a sense of belonging in the institution. These issues were further complicated for international students who found themselves either suddenly trapped in a foreign country, or unable to reach their intended learning destination. In all these cases, pedagogies of compassion and care, along with flexibility and adaptability to the complex and evolving situation, were critical.

The experience of educators and academic developers tasked with implementing interventions at the program and institutional levels are also captured in the preceding pages by authors whose lived experience tells a rich story of the impact of these necessary actions on students and colleagues. Some authors were focused on looking ahead to a future informed by the experiences of navigating the pandemic, recognising that this future must be informed by equity and accessibility-focused practice, offering inclusive learning environments that acknowledge the messiness of the lives of modern students and the exclusion of many qualified students that a return to past practices would inevitably cause. Others focused on the challenges of building community and effectiveness in remote teams, imagining a world where remote and hybrid work is the norm and how to best utilise those approaches. All these authors had an eye towards the future and how lessons learned could be applied to a better future in a post-COVID world where higher education may finally start to address the systemic equity issues in practice that have previously disabled and excluded many people from accessing education. At least some of the answers for how that future is achieved lay in open and online education as practices that have a long history in equity-informed practice.

While the authors in this volume have demonstrated through lived experience and research that achieving the goals of online, open, and equitable higher education are entirely within our reach,

it remains to be seen whether the higher education community at large, and particularly their leadership, have the willingness to maintain and further the work that was started during the pandemic. Translating the laudable individual practices captured here to embedded and systemic cultural change is a challenge we put out to colleagues across the higher education sector. It may seem that an ethic of care and use of compassionate pedagogies should naturally be our approach to all education, but these values require nurturing and encouragement, with space to explore, support resources, and commitment as a community if they are to be sustained. The COVID-19 pandemic has dragged the world through the greatest disruption of the modern era, and as a result, compassion and change fatigue threaten our ability as a society to continuing doing work that, while important and valuable, is hard. We must consider though that continuing that work while not also battling a global pandemic should be a different, and hopefully more positive, experience.

Our collective call to action for higher education is to not lose the momentum we have gained in transforming one of the most resilient, and concomitantly change-resistant, institutions of humanity into a more inclusive and flexible space. This is necessary not only to preserve the academy's unique and privileged position in society, but also to serve an increasingly diverse student body that looks less and less like the notion of "traditional" learners. Beyond this, the ability to be flexible and nimble, responding positively to significant disruptions on a regular basis, is increasingly important in a world where resilience to multiple threats—from global pandemics, to climate change, artificial intelligence, and cybersecurity breaches—have become the norm. Education is critical to the global recovery from the pandemic, and many industries have learned how to do things differently that our students will now need to be able to navigate in their careers.

Insights from the authors in this volume contribute rich, multi-faceted evidence to a potential path forward towards a higher education system that critically uses the tools of online and open learning, but at its core seeks to provide equitable educational

opportunities for all learners. Whichever path we take, we urge our leaders to ensure that it is intentional (preferably transformative), and not a rudderless drift back towards the safe shores of the past, as we cannot ignore the reality that this past worked well only for a privileged few.