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Going online: Life in the online fast lane or so the story goes

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Abstract: The Covid-19 pandemic has been an unprecedented catalyst for the scaling up from f2f to online teaching and learning. This editorial suggests that the post-pandemic period will be dominated by three primary groups – The New Kids in Town, The Savvy Shifty Shifters, and the Retrenchment Innovators. Leaders in these groups will need to make major organizational decisions about their future in the online learning market. Leaders will need to lead their organizations through three main phases – Phase 1 - emergency response; Phase 2 – decision matrix; and 3) embedding the new organizational culture. Leadership will be crucial to navigating a highly competitive higher education landscape where more providers in online learning will create more options for students to pursue their higher education goals.   Competition will be fierce and intense in higher education. Leaders will need to differentiate their organization from competitors and ensure that culture and context are considered in their vision. The game changer in this new normalcy will be visionary and transformational leadership.

Keywords: Leadership, transformational change, disruption, empowering, planning

Introduction

Indeed, there is nothing like kicking off your virtual happy hour with The Eagles *Life in the Fast Lane* to relax and clear the mind. After all, now that the global online revolution has arrived and that brave new world that seemed so elusive for so long is here, it's time to celebrate… or so the story goes.

The collegial response and collaboration of educational institutions, associations and global aid organisations across the world has been nothing short of remarkable. The spirit and commitment by educators worldwide to keep the engines of learning running are a credit to our entire global educational community. A virtual shout out for this continuous collegial collaboration is warranted and most deserving.

As we nestle into our protective quarantined lockdowns, many questions linger about this alleged online revolution or evolution in teaching and learning. The history of distance education over the past thirty-five years has usually been one of revolutionary rhetoric and evolutionary implementation. This was accentuated recently in an article by Bozkurt & Sharma (2020). The authors suggested that perhaps once again what appears to be a revolutionary response to the Covid-19 pandemic is not a brave new world (Huxley, 1932). One almost comes away current from the flurry of recommendations from futurists and experts with the feeling that everything should be easy from here on out. Today's generation of distance education practitioners often equate online and distance education as synonymous having little understanding of this profession from the early 20th century.

We have heard this call to digital arms before that the distance education evolution-revolution had arrived only to the sound fading trumpets in the distance. The rhetoric did not match expectations nor reality. The futurists and enlightened experts will tell us this time is different… or so the story goes.

Perhaps the most disconcerting aspect in the current flurry of un-planned, un-prepared scale-up is there appears to be this carte blanche assumption that the online revolution is over, mass adoption will occur

across the world by autumn, and this will be but one embedded shift in the new normalcy predicted post-crisis. The mass predictions and rhetoric are deafening and leave one exhausted trying to transverse what decisions and actions to take next. First things first right… or so the story goes.

Each year the world's greatest mountain climbers descend upon the Swiss Alps in their quest to stand atop the Eiger. First things first in this quest is which path will one take to reach the top? There are many. Climbers new to the Eiger will opt for less hazardous and difficult paths. And, for the best of the best there is only one option –the North Face.

The analogy here of the Eiger quest and the current online scale-up, scale-out, re-scale, scale somewhere becomes rather obvious. Which path are leaders going to take and why? The paths up the Eiger are well known in the climbing community so let's review what are reasonable choices leaders of different organisations can take up the online education mountain over the next few months.

Path 1: The New Kids in Town

These are universities, K-12 schools, technical colleges, public agencies, etc., that have about 3-6 weeks experience in online education. These organisations may have sporadic users but in the main these organisations have stayed off the online playing field. In the current Covid-19 pandemic crisis, these organisations have responded, trained faculty quickly, and are ready to go . . . or so their story goes. Although the scorecard on quality on these scale-ups will not be available for some time, we should expect the good, the bad and the ugly.

The New Kids on the Block may be up and running but their leaders sooner or later, preferably sooner, will have to engage in the big decision. Are we really going online? This is their vision for the future and the stakes are high and the challenges immense.

Here's just an ad hoc sample of what leaders coming on the playing field must address: accreditation, infrastructure and technology planning; faculty/staff training, visioning and strategic planning; environment scanning and competition; market differentiation; budgeting, choosing technologies, policy development, OERs, quality assurance, support services, research, marketing, and communication. I'm tired just writing these let alone thinking about doing them. Leaders have big decisions for their organisations about the long-term efficacy of an online transformation.

Path 2: The Savvy Shifty Shifters

These are current organisations, often dual-mode institutions, that offer both f2f and online learning. These institutions started as f2f organisations and added distance education to their outreach arsenal. Indeed, somewhat disconcerting is many young professionals are surprised to learn there was, in fact, a world of distance education prior to online learning. The 20th century began with print-based correspondence study, progressed to radio broadcasting, television and right up the present through a whole range of delivery technologies from satellite broadcasting, audio teleconferencing, instructional television, and online delivery. Go figure, who would have known or so the story goes.

What is the path or decision option for these institutions? These organisations may rebalance their f2f and online capacities. This group includes nearly all the higher education institutions in the U.S., Canada, Europe, Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin and South America. Most would likely be weighted heavily on the f2f side although this is deceptive given many campus courses are loaded with technology because of Smart classrooms and the ubiquitous use of digital tools; meaning on the face of it these f2f courses (subjects) may look very digital. Also, I haven't excluded blended subjects (courses) here but they are similar to the f2f smart classrooms with strong technology capacity.

The real question for The Savvy Shifty Shifters is at what level to scale-up in online delivery? This is the logical choice given that the Covid-19 crisis has been the catalyst for many new providers, resulting in a very competitive landscape emerging over the next decade in online learning. Indeed, you may relish telling your stakeholders and Board members that you are going to protect the traditional f2f heritage at all costs; but future students have choices and shifts in the market may come back knocking on your door asking if you aren't going to offer programs online, we will go to your competitors. Welcome to new world post-pandemic competitive landscape. What will differentiate your institution in the market from your competitors? Stated more succinctly, why should students take your online courses?

Once the leader chooses scale-up the question becomes scale-up in what? Single-mode distance learning organisations offer all their programmes via technology and/or print. Leaders must differentiate their offerings and select their most competitive online programs. The decision-making matrix of these leaders is all about positioning their organisations to be competitive in the future. Leaders must get aboard or get out of the way.

Path 3: The Retrenchment Innovators

These organisations have geared-up for the current crisis. However, some leaders will regress to the status quo and choose retrenchment to the organisation's pre-crisis – f2f focus. Viewed through their lens, the current gear-up is reactive and the only option available. Many of these leaders may have decided to join the current scale-up because any decision is better than no decision or doing nothing or so the story goes.

The advocates in the global online choir will not understand the Retrenchment Innovators and their deliberate regression to the status quo of yesteryear. The truth is the choir is often blinded by their own rhetoric and absorption in digital anything. They fail to notice or choose to ignore that not everyone is aboard the online digital train of adoption. Even in 2020, there are many faculty members, presidents, deans, principals and rectors, headmasters, etc. that are not convinced that online is the one and only option.

The Leader's Lens

Indeed, whether we pursue the Eiger or the quest to transform our organisations with online teaching and learning, planning is key. Organisations are different and there is no silver bullet, single way to plan or lead change in organisations. Context, culture, communications, and collaboration all impact the decision matrix. I will leave you with three possible planning phases (Olcott, 2020).

Phase 1: Emergency Response: We are in it – it's a reactive quasi-emergency response. Timeframe: 6 months. Extended Honeymoon Period: Any response is better than no response; critics will be most forgiving of failures, but this doesn't mean future decisions won't be influenced by these failures. All over the world tonight there is a lot of great f2f and online instruction occurring; there is also a lot of very poor f2f and online instruction taking place.

Phase 2: Organization Decision Matrix – Are we in this for the short-term, long-term, or zero-sum game. Duration: 3-6 months for decision and 2 years for development. The three decision groups are discussed above: *1) The New Kids in Town; 2) The Savvy Shifty Shifters; & 3) The Retrenchment Innovators.*

Phase 3: - Embedding the New Organization Culture - Phase 3 is the longer-term infusion and embedding a new normalcy of values, mission, and vision for the organization into the culture. Visionary leaders will be thinking and planning around all three of these phases in tandem. We know from experience and research that organisational transformations or leaders' capacity to lead change fail during the implementation stages (2 and 3) (Kotter, 2012). Leaders fail because they are not willing to go the distance and stay the course… or so the story has gone.

The Extended Online Forecast 2021: **-** Projections of outstanding and creative f2f and online instruction across the world. Storm warnings suggest existing and new pockets of poor and un-original instruction gathering in global f2f classrooms and online courses. Sunny skies and cool breezes will prevail due to innovative educators and digital collaboration for f2f and online to be mutually reinforcing and improve quality across the entire field

Overall, the extended forecast looks promising so the story must go. Are you a visionary leader for your organization's future? Almost all leaders say yes or so the story goes. Time will tell.

Towards a New Normalcy of Online Education

Indeed, communication, culture and context are all important in this online evolution. As online learning travels across continents and nations it ultimately is not just a technology question. It is a question of leadership, respect and empowering a unique blend, mosaic and tapestry of cultures, traditions, educational approaches, and the values and social norms of these cultures. (Evans, 2002).

Assuming what works in online learning in New York and rural Kenya will work in Shanghai and Sydney is simply a failure to respect context and culture. Assuming what works in the developing world and what works in the developed world or what works in major cities compared to isolated, remote rural communities is naïve. The digital divide is real and without visionary planning and resources, online education, in fact, could accentuate entrenched inequities that already exist in developing contexts and increase the digital divide between rich and poor, urban and rural, and young and old (Hülsmann, 2016).

As educational leaders contemplate their options for going online long-term, other leaders have already made the decision to go. Does this mean every organization will gear-up 100% for total online operations? No. In fact, the real push will come first in higher education by virtue of an exponentially competitive market where positioning one's university for the future is critical for financial success. Moreover, this university transformation will not necessarily be global, it will more likely exhibit the new global regionalism where institutions compete more readily in their regions (S.E. Asia, Australia, Southern Africa, etc.).

The long-term scale-up in primary, middle and high schools will be less competitive and urgent. Leaders in 6-12 will seriously look at expanded operations but this response will be an integrated approach to expand online options with existing f2f curriculum. Few schools will push online in primary K-6 because students need time for maturation, social and intellectual development – they need time to be kids. We will see more activity in middle and secondary schools but nowhere near the competitive landscape that is emerging in higher education. The Covid-19 pandemic is not simply a catalyst for online education; it is a reminder that education's most important role is to preserve, protect, and celebrate the human condition. Indeed, we are all in this together.

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