Editorial Comments

Digital Learning: Evolution to Revolution

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It goes without saying that we are living in strange, if not surreal times. The impact of a microscopic virus is difficult to underestimate, and it has affected nearly every facet of our lives; teaching and learning in almost every sense, will be affected, too. The magnitude of those changes in the short term are considerable but what is less clear and less easy to predict is how those changes will manifest themselves in the future. One thing is for sure: nothing will ever be quite the same again and the shape of the new normal is yet to be drawn. The effects of COVID-19 on education may be as profound as the effects of World War I on aviation.

In this issue of the *Journal of Teaching and Learning (JTL)*, there are a range of articles. Some of the articles are reflections on practice, others are proposals for theoretical frameworks and still others examine the potential of virtual reality platforms and social media in teaching. The role of synchronous and asynchronous teaching platforms is examined in the context of student persistence (Gilpin, this issue) but several of this issue's papers consider the effect that COVID-19 has had on teaching and learning. While this issue is not COVID-19 themed, the impact of COVID-19 is discussed by several contributors. All the articles, however, are digitally themed. Most of the articles are from authors working in the higher education sector and is perhaps indicative of this sector leading the way in the digital delivery of teaching and learning. Other sectors are now being compelled to catch up and adapt their delivery models. Digital learning, in some sense, has influenced nearly every facet of teaching at some level. Online teaching through a virtual learning environment is perhaps the most obvious example, but more subtly, digital learning and teaching can be found in the face-to-face environment in schools, right through to universities. Simply using a digital projector to display images from the teacher's computer is using digital technology. Projecting digital learning technologies beyond the classroom is more complex and requires an adaptation of pedagogical practice.

We cannot escape the enormous changes that are currently taking place in education. We are witnessing a change in the way we deliver teaching and the way students and pupils engage with learning opportunities. As a consequence of COVID-19, there has been a rush—a stampede even—to deliver learning through online mechanisms, and like all things that are rushed, mistakes will be made, and lessons will be learned. However, online and digital teaching and learning is not

new. The University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) delivered its first wholly online degree programme in 1993, which saw the first graduates in 1998 with a Bachelor of Science in Rural Development Studies. Since then, UHI and others have developed multiple online programmes at various. Innovation and development have continued but COVID-19 has forced a rapid acceleration of the pace of that change. Schools, colleges, and universities are moving from the face to face delivery of programmes to online delivery in a matter of a few short months. Some of the UK's most prestigious universities have announced that all their courses will be delivered online. Clearly, this is essential given the current need for social distancing, but this will undoubtedly have long term consequences. Institutions that are currently facing financial challenges will see a money-saving opportunity, but this might be misunderstanding the nature of online delivery. Online or face-to-face, teaching at all levels will require teachers with subject expertise. Effective teaching also requires teaching expertise, and this is different in the digital learning space. Learning too, is subtly different in the online space. Making the change from face-to-face to online or digitally based learning requires careful thought and planning, and an understanding of what is required from teachers and what is required of learners.

In this issue, we see reflections on the process of making this change and we need to understand how this change affects us as teachers. Also, in this issue, we see that digital learning need not be online. The application of innovative technology such as VR into the classroom is tested and reported. However, when we consider online learning, we need to understand that what the teacher does is in many respects the same, but it is also very different. As teachers in a face-to-face environment, we create much of the teaching material. This might be in the form of lecture notes, PowerPoint slides, or simply our own presence and voice. In the online environment, we can seek out material that has already been created. After all, there is little point in us creating material if that material already exists and is of high quality. In this sense, we are no longer the creators of material, but the curators of it, examining it for quality and relevance and weaving it into a form that provides a high-quality learning experience for our pupils and students. Digital learning and teaching then can take place in many, if not all, learning and teaching contexts, some of which are taking shape as a consequence of COVID-19. Our challenge as contemporary digital educators is to ensure that our schools, colleges, and universities have coherent and complementary strategies that utilize the benefits of digital learning in all its contexts, and carefully capitalize on the opportunity of rapid evolution and development that COVID-19 forces upon us.