Editorial Comments

Introduction to the JTL Special Issue on Digital Learning in Higher Education

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When the advisory board of the *Journal of Teaching and Learning* approached me to guest edit an issue on digital learning in higher education for the spring/summer 2020 edition, I jumped at the chance. It seemed like great timing with so much happening in the world of digital learning, from open educational resource development and sharing, to innovative uses of augmented and virtual reality, development of microcredentials and digital credentials, to digitally supported experiential learning. None of us could have predicted just how perfect the timing would end up being, with the emergence of the novel corona virus and COVID-19 leading to global-stay-at-home orders and the sudden need for emergency online learning to see out the term in early 2020 (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020).

Never has the spotlight on digital and online learning shone more intensely, and for those of us who have spent decades working in this field, never has there been a greater challenge for our profession. Many of our practices as educational developers and educational technologists are built around working with the “coalition of the willing,” early adopters and highly student-centred educators looking to thoughtfully integrate technology into their curriculum to enhance it or to solve a very specific problem. With the overnight massification of online learning being the only feasible and safe response to continuing with teaching through this emergency, educational technologists have suddenly had to work out how to scale support, professional development, instructional design, and technology systems to meet the demands they were never designed for.

The rapid move to online teaching has created an opportunity to re-examine curricula and pedagogies that have long been entrenched in our institutions and programs. Identifying when and how to use synchronous (which can be more familiar and have a lower learning curve for faculty used to lecturing), vs asynchronous teaching, and the associated equity and logistical challenges of those approaches are topics of much debate at present. Instructors are also being required to find alternative ways to support learning in disciplines that have sound pedagogical reasons for instruction in a physical space, such as STEM labs, field trips, fine arts, drama, and music where

there is a strong kinetic connection to the learning outcomes. Fortunately, the global higher education community has come together to try and work through these challenges, with many sharing openly the existing resources they have, as well as those they are rapidly creating on an unprecedented scale.

Other challenges that are emerging with the mass move to online learning include how to convince students that they will be supported in what is, for many, a very unfamiliar and daunting endeavour. Convincing students, parents, and instructors of equivalence of quality in online education is a challenge at this scale. While the concept of No Significant Difference between well-designed and supported online and on-campus education is long established in the empirical literature (e.g., Bandara & Wijekularathna, 2017; Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010; Nguyen, 2015) most instructors and students are unaware of this evidence and remain suspicious. There are valid concerns about persistence and success of online students (e.g., Kauffman, 2015), especially in the era of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which mostly have low completion rates, and which are regularly and incorrectly conflated with well-designed online education (Veletsianos, 2013). Concerns about academic misconduct in online courses are also often touted as reasons to avoid online learning, even though the empirical evidence shows that incidences of misconduct or ‘cheating’ are similar in online and on-campus courses and in some cases are lower in online courses (e.g., Watson & Sottile, 2010).

What we have been able to do in this special issue of the *JTL* is bring together a collection of papers that address many of these issues from diverse international perspectives. We have papers that touch on a diverse range of topics from virtual reality for learning biochemistry, to use of social media in higher education, student co-creation of Open Educational Resources (OERs) and reflections on transitioning to emergency remote teaching.

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