The Future Revisited: Can Global Learning Still Save the World?

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Abstract

This article provides a twelve-year review of my OJDLA article (Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, University of West Georgia) on the future of global learning, and updates related issues such as societal need, technologies, course design, administration affairs, faculty support, and student service.

Introduction

It was a dozen years ago when the OJDLA published my article titled, *Universal learning at a distance: Can we plug it in?* (Van Hook, 2005). Now 12-years hence, it's a worthy waypoint to revisit our progress toward global learning, both the promises fulfilled, and the dreams yet deferred.

The year 2005 was a heady time for dreamers of universal learning. My earlier article began with a quote from the imperative report, *A Nation at Risk*:

"All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost" (NCEE, 1983).

And the article ended with another exhortation, borrowed from the well-intentioned Farm Aid project and another decade:

Now that we can, we must.

Some were hopeful that simply having the means to provide universal learning was motive enough to get it plugged in. It wasn't.

Perhaps there is a revised flip more practical to current times:

Now that we must, we can.

The news horrifies us daily with problems that most certainly *must* be solved. The good news is we *can* craft solutions with emergent know-how and technologies.

Education Leads

Education is frequently touted as the fix-all to just about any social problem. There are plenty of urgent and deadly problems to address: Global unemployment, international refugees, income disparity, national unrest, drug abuse; the numbers over the years aren't getting better.

Global unemployment is at a record – 200-million out of work, and climbing as the workforce grows faster than jobs are created (Kottasova, 2017). By the year 2050, artificial intelligence and robots

replacing workers may well entrench a new breed of people – a 'useless class' of those not just unemployed, but unemployable (Harari, 2017).

Over the last year, 1.3-million Americans were hospitalized due to a record opioid epidemic (Achenbach & Keating, 2017), and the suicide rate has reached a record high (Curtin, Warner, & Hedegaard, 2016).

The world's displaced population hit a post-war high in 2016 with nearly 67-million refugees, asylum seekers, and others displaced from their homes (Gladstone, 2017).

It's a familiar question thru most any decade: What then must we do? Education, as a global social solution, leads the list.

Over the last twelve years, the ideals of universal learning have gone from fringe, to core. In 2005, little better than 17 percent of the world's population had access to higher education, and academic leaders were just beginning to glimpse the promise of distance learning technologies that could equal or even excel face-to-face instruction (Van Hook, 2005).

Now a dozen years since, a recent survey by the American Council on Education's Center for Internationalization and Global Engagement shows that nearly 75% of responding colleges and universities place internationalization efforts as their top two priorities: sending students abroad, and recruiting international students (Redden, 2017). These goals have been served well by evolving technologies, from emergent tools to those now ubiquitous.

As we see below, technology has empowered us in ways that would have the 2005 world spinning in its heady times.

Many other obstacles that may have seemed quaint a dozen years ago are now mission-critical: Online and international faculty need to be engaged and nurtured, even as they work from afar. Courses need to be modified and expanded for a global audience. Equitable ownership solutions need to be found for viable content. Technologies need tapping for what good they might provide, yet within appropriate limits.

Administration Worries

Early in the new century, Arthur Levine (2001), president of Teachers College at Columbia University, had warned that the current design and structure of American higher education could not be sustained. The "radically different environment" education administrators must tackle includes the nation's transition to an information society, shifting demographics, downward pressures on the cost of higher education, emerging technologies, and a "legion of new competitors" (p. 57).

Current-day academia knows how well these predictions hit home.

Programs face pressures to reduce costs while becoming more inclusive. Educators must expand the relevancy and reach of their materials, while accommodating a greater diversity of student performance. Campus PR reps strive for positive perceptions of the institution, to help ensure public support for the tax dollars and alumni contributions that flow (Van Hook, 2011b).

Society has a right to expect that higher education is accountable for fulfilling its purpose, especially through its expenditures of public funds. Even for-profit colleges benefit handsomely from tax-supported financial aid programs. If higher education is to become fragmented and misdirected in its social mission, the loss of public support could well cost all academic institutions, for-profit or not.

Some of those long-held social missions include:

- Improve the quality of learning so as to reflect the skills, knowledge, and commitment required for active participation in the workforce, civic and social life of the community.
- Serve as an avenue of social mobility for lower-income and minority citizens.
- Bring the benefit of the knowledge and skills accumulated in colleges and universities to the benefit of the community through outreach and service.
  (Newman, Couturier, & Scurry, 2004, pp. 83-84)

It's worth noting the top social mission commits to a quality of learning that serves the skills and knowledge that are necessary for participation in the economic, civil, and social life of a community. This is especially challenging given the world's shifting technological, social, and economic conditions touched on earlier.

Under pressure to control tuition costs, administrators will become ever more dependent on public goodwill and support. After a nearly 400 percent rise in college tuition over the last 30 years fueling middle class anxiety and student debt, U.S. tuition costs are now growing at the slowest rates in decades (Mitchell, 2017). Cash from tuition is further hit by high competition for enrollments, lower birthrates reducing the college-age pool, government clampdowns on financial aid, and the discounts colleges must often offer to remain competitive (ibid).

Former U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, currently president of the University of North Carolina, says that colleges have for too long remained aloof, enjoying a "sort of send-us-the-money, leave-us-alone luxury" that is not the case anymore (Bruni, 2017). "We've got to prove what we do."

Real change in academia may most likely be forced from outside its own "lumbering inertia" – a process that will not be pretty nor a happy self-correction, says Christian Smith (2018), a professor of sociology at the University of Notre Dame. If positive changes do ever happen, they "will have to combine some forms of visionary traditionalism and organizational radicalism," needing reformers with the capacity to revitalize the best of higher education's past and restructure it with more effective organizational ways (ibid).

Unfortunately, the demand for innovation in education comes at a time when true visionaries and reformers are often buried from view in an avalanche of data. "There is simply too much noise. Too many conferences. Too many tweets. Too many white papers. Too many blogs" (Kim, 2017).

Faculty Demands

Finding faculty suited to teach in global education programs can be a challenge; those who can design courses tapping new technologies to serve a culturally diverse worldwide student body. This has been one of the primary factors shying instructors away from new platforms and pedagogies: They simply don't feel prepared (Adair, Blumenstyk, & Udermann, 2017).

Online faculty may need additional training, though still can push back against the instruction as yet one more thing on their plate; and resent the increased scrutiny of their work as programs strive to prove themselves as a quality way to deliver education (ibid). Rather than directives, administrators might do better to enhance front-end relationships, demonstrate utility for buy-in, and offer equitable compensation and ownership rights for instructor-developed materials – such as co-ownership agreements becoming more common, where both the institution and instructor retain rights to the content (ibid).

Relations between online adjunct faculty and administration – often rarely meeting one another in person – may be improved with an appropriately selected ombud; a liaison between administration and teachers. Administrators need to hear the unvarnished concerns of their faculty – even and especially as those teachers become ever more disjoined and adjuncted. And the faculty needs to hear the organizational concerns, without suspicions of nonrepresentation and exploitation.

For a few years, I was the 'faculty ombud' for an online university (my colleagues called me 'bud') charged with advocating on behalf of other educators; providing a voice, protections and anonymity for instructor concerns. I was a voting member of the faculty senate, and of the administration executive committee. It was challenging, yet I found the faculty perspective was not only appreciated, but typically approved in executive committee votes.

Online faculty wary of time demands may expect administrators to provide the same level of support to their online students as on-campus students might receive. Regional accreditors may also be looking for online student support services in technology assistance, financial aid, library access, writing and math centers, counseling, tutoring, career services, and such. These same services may well influence student decisions as they choose between a vast array of educational options (Adair, Blumenstyk, & Udermann, 2017).

Student Needs and Content Design

As programs develop content, it's crucial to consider demands and needs of students and greater society – the top expectation (as mentioned earlier) is a quality of learning that serves for participation in the economic, civil, and social life of a community. More demand will be placed on courses simply improving the quality of individual life.

Furthermore, the content must be globally accessible: technologically, linguistically, culturally (Van Hook, 2012). The good news (especially for U.S. course designers) is some 25 percent of the world is conversational in English. Materials for these courses may not best be traditionally academic tomes, but shorter and simplified readings, though not dumbed down. Shorter words, shorter sentences, shorter paragraphs, written at an 8th grade reading level. Globally relevant case studies. Transcultural themes and images that resonate beyond cultural differences (Van Hook, 2011).

Greater emphasis could be placed on earned certificates, upgraded skills, and simply quality-of-life talents developed through continuing education and extension programs; and everyone may become a student for good, as ever-shifting economic changes require lifelong learning (Carlson, Gallaher, & Savoca, 2017). Picky employers are moving towards competency-based hiring, pre-employment assessments, even completion of a real-world task as part of the interview process; programs that can tie academic oversight to work-based learning experiences such as campus jobs and internships will have "the most exciting opportunity" to develop student workplace skills (ibid).

More skills-based programs – nonprofit, governmental, and corporate – are teaching hard and soft skills (Lohr, 2017). Hard skills in the tech industry, for example, might include data mining, smartphone app development, and user interface design. Soft skills for social engagement might include communication, teamwork, empathy, time management, open-mindedness (ibid).

Some propose that government departments of labor and education might create competitive grants encouraging universities to deliver training programs to those hardest hit by "economic tumult brought about by globalization and technological change" (Levine & Stevens, 2017).

Beyond the course design, programs need to provide other venues and niches to keep students engaged with a sense of belonging and place – even as they live in different states, countries, and dimensions of time (synchronous and asynchronous). How might distant students be made to feel connected to greater community? Programs can create institutional social media and alumni groups, stream live events of distinguished lecturers, musical events, theater events, athletic events (Adair, Blumenstyk, & Udermann, 2017).

For about a decade, I've been providing international students in virtual learning centers with a streaming radio station broadcasting content such as expert interviews and primers on world affairs,

communication skills, and self-improvement:
http://cent5.serverhostingcenter.com:2199/start/svanho00/

Studies show there is a wide mortality disparity between those with college degrees and those without, including deaths by drugs, alcohol, or suicide, where the "relationship between education and health is significant and independent of socioeconomic status" (Fischer, 2017). Students may also be turning to education to provide meaning and context to their lives. Research shows that for Millenials, what they are looking for in their lifestyle and career is a sense of inspiration and passion rather than a huge stash of money, and "companies may find those young people will walk if they don't see meaning in it – no matter how much they are paid" (Bahney, 2017).

Very Cool Tech

Slightly more than a dozen years ago, a challenge was put forth for the e-learning industry: expand and scale higher education opportunities to the large percentage of the precluded population, combining resources to serve a world of need in all its cultural diversity (Irvine, 2003, p. 78).

The drive to tap and scale learning technologies has been inexorable. MOOCs (massive open online courses) surfed a wave of hype in 2012, programs entirely free for massive numbers – sometimes as many as 100,000 students in some courses (Sandeen, 2017).

University partnerships created three powerful MOOC platforms (Coursera, Udacity, and edX), mostly funded by venture capital, and offering free courses while generating no discernible revenue stream; though they have since started charging fees for nanodegrees, specializations, certificates, and badges. While the MOOC experiment has provided some positives, it may still be left to traditional institutions to go about the business of degree completion (ibid).

One nonprofit institution, Saylor Academy, has been offering fully developed courses for free to a worldwide student body. All of the nearly 100 openly-licensed courses have no tuition or textbook costs, and 31 of those courses can earn students up to 91 hours of transferable credits from partner colleges.

In full disclosure, I have designed three courses for Saylor including Customer Service (https://learn.saylor.org/course/cust105), Public Relations (hhttps://learn.saylor.org/course/comm411), and Principles of Marketing (https://learn.saylor.org/course/bus203).

Many potential but precluded students live in developing nations, not a fully wired world. The World Bank has found that out of 6-billion mobile phones worldwide, 5-billion were used as the primary internet connection in countries short on bandwidth (Van Hook, 2013).

I've modified my course in Customer Service for access through cellphones, including videos, read-along materials and accompanying audio files. WordPress provides a platform that makes it work well enough for access-challenged African students taking the course:
http://wwmr.us/wp/courses/customerservice

The most immediate breaking technology impacting academia may well (and finally) be virtually immersive campuses.

CEO Philip Rosedale of High Fidelity and founder of Linden Labs, and tech evangelist Robert Scoble, recently previewed some of the emerging technologies. Scoble and Rosedale (2017) predict that in just four years, we'll be able to watch a virtual football game on our kitchen table. Students already use augmented reality and virtual reality glasses to learn repair of million-dollar Caterpillar tractors and Boeing jet engines with virtual overlays; may study principles of gravity between

planets by flying through the universe; and visualize complex equations in math, physics, chemistry with 3D models (ibid).

The costs of virtual-world design may not come cheap. The budget for the game Grand Theft Auto 5 was $400-million, for the detail and quality and experience of it; but the costs for virtual-world teaching, and hanging out and giving talks on stage … those simple and inexpensive ideas are going to carry the day, where the physicality of place and manipulating with your hands is just "magical" (Scoble & Rosedale, 2017).

The promise of virtual and augmented realities in education could have profound impacts on social class and discrimination, where people may be judged by the content of their character rather than the hidden intangibles of race, gender, geography, or tax bracket; and even isolated regions may receive bandwidth distributed from balloons and drones by companies such as Google and Facebook, accessing virtual world campuses through communities such as Second Life, Sansar, and High Fidelity (ibid).

Some predict the future of higher education is comparatively bright heading further towards the year of 2030, with the educational experience for the "most wealthy and the lucky talented few" improving with exponential development of learning science, technological advances, and market forces (Kim, 2017).
However, for those not so wealthy or lucky, by 2030 advances in artificial intelligence and virtual reality may still provide options for lower-cost and lower-human-touch courses providing high-quality digital learning (ibid).

Unfortunately for some, artificial intelligence threatens to eliminate countless occupations such as bank tellers, stock and bond traders, telemarketers, paralegals, radiologists, factory workers, construction workers, drivers, delivery workers (Lee, 2017). However, AI may also become more effective at differentiated education with lower-cost programs combatting poverty, while teaching students with individualized tactics to match how they might learn best – whether by listening, visualizing, or doing (Mason, 2018).

This is the technological challenge: to expand access to quality courses, while ensuring authentic learning experiences and credibility of credentials.

Our Mission

Researchers and analysts say there has never been a more important time for serving the purposes of global higher education (Van Hook, 2011). Societies around the world need to address problems such as economic revitalization, growing income disparities, enhanced social mobility, health care provision, and ensuring the needs of an engaged and safe civilization.

Data show that where education is strong, people become better (Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2017). Countries with higher education attainment are more likely to have political regimes grounded in democracy and a sense of civic duty. Adults with higher education are also more likely to trust others, benefit from good health, volunteer, and feel political efficacy – regardless of gender, age, and earnings (ibid).

Countries are made more prominent by a commitment to education (Morche, 2017). India is developing 20 world-class universities with a focus on STEM subjects. Brazil's University of São Paulo is the only Latin American university in the Times Higher Education World Reputation Rankings 2017.

Both India and Brazil are climbing in ranks of scientific articles their researchers publish. Brazil produces 54 percent of Latin American scientific articles; and India has climbed to 5th place in the world for scholarly publications, rising from 11th place a dozen years ago (ibid).

Simply put, where education is strong, people do better, academia does better, nations do better, and the world becomes a healthier, more engaging and trusting home for us all.

In Conclusion

There is still much to overcome in bringing global learning about. We no longer have the luxury of wondering what we *can* or *should* do, but must focus on the 'must' of it.

As we look toward the next dozen years, we shouldn't be too discouraged by the slow pace of reforms usurping our aspirations. Instead we should keep our visions fixed on the horizon. In the advice of superstar hockey player Wayne Gretzky: *Don't skate to where the puck is … skate to where the puck will be*.

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