April 2023

Navigating the Turbulence into Calmer Waters in Higher Education Digital Learning

Amanda E. Major EdD, PMP, CPTD
University of Central Florida, amanda.major@ucf.edu

Josh Strigle
Central Florida College, striglej@cf.edu

Melanie Jackson
Palm Beach Atlantic University, jacksonteacher@hotmail.com

Willie Freeman
Florida Atlantic University, wfreeman@fau.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://nsuworks.nova.edu/fdla-journal

Part of the Higher Education Commons, and the Online and Distance Education Commons

Navigating the Turbulence into Calmer Waters in Higher Education Digital Learning

The conference theme for the Florida Distance Learning Association (FDLA) this year was "Navigating through the Chaos to the New Normal in Higher Education." This elusive theme prompted questions like, "What is the chaos that needs navigating through?," "When will we ever arrive at the new normal?," and "What even is the new normal?" The intention of asking these questions is not to deliver concrete answers, but instead to illuminate our current climate in higher education digital learning.

While March 13, 2020, will be forever ingrained in the minds of many higher education professionals, perhaps the current context reflects the 1973 Jim Croce song "Time in a Bottle." Many higher education professionals reflect fondly on the times prior to the pandemic. If the perceived tranquility and peace of that time could blend with the lessons learned from the pandemic, then higher education would be well equipped to face the uncertainty in the future.

Dedicated to the positive outcomes of digital learning, many professionals currently remain in this field to make a difference. They are taking a reflective moment after the pandemic and re-assessing their needs as well as those they serve in higher education. Perhaps the Michael Jackson classic 1988 song "Man in the Mirror" best depicts this reflective moment. Professionals are beginning to take some action to make the change they see as needed.

Rather than making huge sweeping changes, the small actions one takes can have a ripple effect and significant difference in people's lives (e.g., students and faculty). This advice is reflected in the Newsboys 2013 hit "That's How You Change the World." No matter how small the gesture, embracing meaningful change inspires others to want to change the world as well.

Many external factors, including legislation, regulation, public opinion, and projection of potential future "black swan" events have affected the current contextual times. The Chattooga River, most associated with the song "Dueling Banjos" (Reno & Smith, 1955), from the film "Deliverance," represents what it is like to navigate these times. The white water takes tumultuous turns that can be jolting. Hidden dangers are everywhere. After finishing the last rapid, you enter a calm reservoir lake and can sit back and relax. The associated memories coinciding with this song reminds digital learning professionals that this too shall pass.

Professionals within digital learning in higher education tend to experience the navigation as though on that white water rafting trip. Taking a moment to review a benchmark, some themes of these tumultuous times can shed light on common experiences across higher education. According to the *Educause Horizon Report*, organizations in higher education are experiencing:
- Declines in funding,
- Rising political divisiveness,
- Scrutiny about the value of academic degrees and social justice efforts,
- Rising demands for non-traditional or skills-based learning,
- Emerging modalities of learning and redefining those,
- Growing need for sustainability to protect the environment and adjust physical spaces,

- Expectations for flexible work arrangements from employees coinciding the Great Resignation, and
- Cybersecurity concerns (Pelletier et al., 2022).

In the current climate, higher education's figurative waters are choppy, yet virtual spaces often shine like a guiding beacon to show the way. Leaders can use virtual spaces as a solution for each of the thematic concerns revealed by the *Horizon Report*.

Climate for Digital Learning Professionals

Faculty, instructional designers, technologists, as well as other digital learning experts worked from home during the pandemic, they had time to reflect and gained the courage to face the unknown. People began wanting to do work that mattered or that provided more adequate compensation, and they were not afraid to venture into the unknown. Others who already had meaningful jobs worked too hard, especially those in caring or support roles. Many experienced burnout. People began to search and quit their jobs en masse. During this Great Resignation, companies like Target and Disney raised their company's minimum wage while offering other extraordinary employment benefits (i.e. educational funding, additional paid days off, health insurance) (AP/CBS News Miami, 2022). Other companies ramped up recruiting.

Quiet quitting has become a phenomenon. Like those who resign, quitters become "less psychologically invested in their work" (Klotz & Boino, 2022, para. 1). Many have decided to stop going above and beyond and only do the work they were hired to do, within the hours they were assigned to do it.

Simultaneously, the competition for those with digital learning design experience has increased. Higher education is having difficulty competing with industry on several factors: recruiting, salary, and work arrangement flexibility (i.e., hybrid or fully virtual work from home). Many digital learning professionals have reached retirement age. While the churn of people leaving higher education is occurring, knowledge management practices have not happened. Consequently, professionals with years of experience leave their universities and colleges without creating or sharing much information about their roles or operations to those who persist, creating a proverbial *brain drain*.

Strategies for these human resource concerns (i.e, the Great Resignation, quiet quitting, and the lack of knowledge management) include teamwork, transparency, culture building, proactive interviews by leaders to understand and address concerns of digital learning professionals, and other efforts to retain digital learning professionals, like offering flexibility in work arrangements, demonstrating appreciation, and normalizing healthy work-life balance practices.

With the stressors outlined in the Horizon report, Great Resignation, expanded private sector opportunities in digital learning, quiet quitting, increasing retirements, fewer and fewer highly inspired digital learning champions remain in higher education. Digital learning enthusiasts are challenged to stay engaged, lead the way, and show results. They need some encouragement, some inspiration to keep the momentum of their work going. Many digital learning and higher education professionals need to be reminded of the impact of their efforts toward improving the lives of their

students through knowledge gained. Employees need to feel a sense that their efforts hold importance and offer deep, meaningful contributions to others.

Motivation for these Times

Times may seem like turbulent white-water rapids. In hopes of calmer waters up ahead, consider just hanging loose, refraining from putting too much pressure on colleagues or oneself. Times will get better, as they always do get better in higher education. In the meantime, work hard, stay humble, and be kind.

Another metaphor for the way we are navigating the unseen obstacles we currently face in digital learning higher education is the *stingray shuffle*. This is the practice of shuffling one's feet in the shallow waters of Florida's beaches, to avoid a painful step onto a stingray. Right now, in Florida, and nationally, the legislative and governing currents are changing. Professionals need to keep moving and to remain vigilant of obstacles that lurk right under the surface. Rather than assuming that faculty, students, and staff will readily accept the changing tides, leaders must be proactive in their messaging and efforts to reassure faculty and staff. They should remain aware of the legislation and regulations, as well as the ways it affects the goals and efforts of digital learning professionals.

With all that is occurring external to our higher education institutions, some may feel challenged to stay focused. Adhering to our main mission of access, affordability, and quality will help us avoid unnecessary distractions. We are here to support faculty, provide students with high quality education, and care for students so that they may achieve success. The goals have not changed. The train has not jumped the rails to the degree that it feels like it has. Right now, we are challenged to remember our goals despite the apparent obstacles.

Focus Areas for Digital Learning Higher Education

In light of the current context, some pressing areas for focus in digital learning could raise the profession to higher tides. Staying current with regulations, technologies for learning, innovations, and research can serve to bolster best practices, buffer concerns from our stakeholders, and frame the conversation aligned with our main goals.

Policies: Regular and Substantive Interactions

Another topic of interest is the Department of Education regulation changes, especially for regular and substantive interactions. This regulation is not only important because interaction is a critical component of student success but because it addresses eligibility for Title IV financial aid. The types of interaction addressed in the regulation are supported by the research and tied to student satisfaction and success in online courses. These interactions are teaching behaviors that digital learning experts have known benefit students and that are consistently encouraged among faculty member's design and facilitation practices. Many faculty have a knack for teaching, but as experts, they may overlook touting their facilitative skills, or be unaware of the need to frame them in a compliance context. Highlighting the efforts of those faculty who achieve regular and substantive interactions incredibly well could illuminate best practices to the larger faculty body. Celebrating successes also helps bring this to light.

Other regulatory changes are likely on the horizon. One reason many expect further changes can be traced back to the pandemic onset and the shift to emergency remote instruction rather than thoughtfully, well-designed online courses. As distance learning practitioners, we had an opportunity to shine in that spotlight and be seen, at least by our institutions, as the heroes of the day. With the shift away from emergency remote instruction, that spotlight has not turned off. Everyone began to look at distance learning, publicly and politically. As is always the case in the public square, opinions differ as to the efficacy of online instruction; therefore, expect continued scrutiny as policy makers attempt to refine our practices.

Modalities

Modalities, a hot topic of conversation, may play a part in the success of regular and substantive interactions, as some live modalities facilitate conversational exchanges and students can feel like they are on an island when enrolled in certain modalities. The types of interactions counted by the regulations, the ones measurable toward compliance, only apply to online, asynchronous courses. Nevertheless, higher education must offer intentional methods for creating opportunities to interact across modalities.

Targeting your students with the right mix of modalities really depends on their needs. Whether students' work schedules require 30 days on and 30 days off, must relocate frequently, or work/live in different time zones, their access to education depends on the flexibility built into the course modality. The asynchronous online course offers first responders and military populations the most flexibility. Families in the military as well as first responders may not be in the same place at the same time. Hyflex, providing students' agency and flexibility with their learning experience, face-to-face or online (Beatty, 2019), offers an appeal for continuity of education during extenuating circumstances for many students and higher education organizations. Synchronous live classes on video conferencing platforms, such as Zoom, in which meeting at the same time is required, offers excellent access to education for those living at a distance but who need the added structure of a live lecture and exchanges that mimic the face-to-face classroom environment. Those who are just entering into higher education from their high school experiences and desire the traditional college life may prefer the residential, face-to-face classroom over other modalities. Those living locally who are in the workforce, may prefer a hybrid approach to learning to balance work, school, and life. People have different life circumstances for which different learning modalities address.

If higher education organizations refuse to design learning experiences for students who cannot attend at a certain time due to life circumstances or obligations, then higher education is losing sight of the goal of how its community's citizens may best be served. Faculty and instructional designers have put forth great effort to learn innovative educational technologies and employ best pedagogical practices in several modalities that will enable our students to academically succeed.

Access to Higher Education

Another more timeless topic is reaching all students regardless of their backgrounds, accessibility needs, and life situations. Digital learning is uniquely positioned to do this well. Some ways to reach students are:

- Point students to the Florida Shines website with a career inventory so students may determine fields/professions where their career interests lie.
- Encourage students to pursue academic careers that interest them, that holds meaning for them. The goal is for students to pick a path that leads them into a career field that they enjoy so that it does not feel like work.
- Design courses with UDL and Accessibility in mind, thus creating an engaging learning opportunity for all students.
- Ensure learning is available 24/7 to students during a term. Students today do not want to be pinned to a specific date and time, as many have varied personal schedules keeping up with life, family, and work.

Many students focus on attaining academic degrees to further or change their careers or to serve as a role model for their family members, but they cannot stop working to complete school. Public higher education was originally intended to level the playing field so that not just the wealthy and elite were served with an education. When we are developing our courses, supporting our faculty, and talking to our administration, keeping the student at the forefront of our conversations. This helps everyone get back on the same page, focused on the purpose of higher education.

Early Alert Systems

In particular, early alert systems combined with interventions to foster students' success. Many students start their higher education journey unprepared for the academic rigor and life demands that they actually face. Higher education professionals desire for students to progress through the right academic pathway for them, earn acceptable grades, and complete courses and programs which lead to gainful employment. Should students fall behind, student support can quickly intervene with an early alert system triggered by assessment and activity data from the learning management system. Higher education professionals can then reach out to students personally or via text messaging to help them succeed. The younger generation of students are accustomed to TikTok and other social media platforms that use triggers to instantly send updates. Higher education organizations can respond to their communication preferences with alerts like these about academic work.

Other Topics That Digital Learning Advocates Champion

Digital learning professionals are in a position to advocate for open educational resources, work with faculty so that they adopt accessible technology, and serve students and faculty with the same access that occurred during the pandemic. Digital learning is uniquely positioned to employ Universal Design for Learning via engagement, representation, and action and expression guidelines rooted in the science of learning, applicable to any discipline (CAST, 2018). Educators can apply these instruction improvement techniques to reach the needs of all learners, not just those with accessibility accommodations and special needs.

Catch a Wave to *Surf On* in Digital Learning

Professionals in higher education are best situated to give people access to learning, to open doors into higher education. During these times of rough waters, remembering the purpose of digital learning in higher education is paramount.

Few would refute that the state of Florida is healthier when it has a healthy tax base, when Floridians are gainfully employed. Few would refute that if people go into a degree field or job and decide they need change, higher education can support their goals, with open arms. If someone is ready to learn, higher education faculty are ready to teach, and digital learning professionals are ready to collaborate to create engaging courses.

In reflecting on the preceding discussion, we may have created more questions than provided answers. The turbulent waters have not yet calmed. The good news is that digital learning, as a whole, is still atop the wave, still in the raft, still serving the students that we have the pleasure to assist. We look forward to a calmer time we can call normal, but it is still unclear when that will come and what it will look like. We know policy makers will have a say, both students and professionals will demand more flexibility, and that technology will continue flowing like white-water rapids, disrupting the educational landscape.

As distance learning professionals, adapting to disruption is our wheelhouse. We have found pedagogically beneficial ways to incorporate technology into learning. We have adapted to public policy changes time and again. We are among the visionary leaders in providing flexible access to instruction and leveraging technology to fulfill our higher education organization's mission. Adapting is not just part of the plan; change managers are who we are. Catch the wave and enjoy the ride to *surf on* in digital learning. We may get the opportunity to relax on the beach soon but not yet.

References

AP/CBS News Miami. (2022, March 3). *Target increasing minimum wage up to $24 an hour in it's most competitive markets.* CBS Miami. https://www.cbsnews.com/miami/news/target-minimum-wage-competitive-markets/

Beatty, B. J. (2019). *Hybrid-flexible course design* (1st Ed.). EdTech Books. https://edtechbooks.org/hyflex

CAST (2018). *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.2.* UDL Guidelines. http://udlguidelines.cast.org

Croce, J. (1973). Time in a bottle [Song]. *You don't mess around with Jim* [Album]. ABC.

Jackson, M. (1988). Man in the mirror' [Song]. *Bad* [Album]. Epic.

Klotz, A. C., & Bolino, M. C. (2022, September 15). *When quiet quitting is worse than the real thing.* Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2022/09/when-quiet-quitting-is-worse-than-the-real-thing

Newsboys. (2013). That's how you change the world [Song]. Sparrow Records.

Pelletier, K., McCormack, M., Reeves, J., Robert, J., & Arbino, N. with Al-Freih, M., Dickson-Deane, C., Guevara, C., Koster, L., Sánchez-Mendiola, M., Bessette, L. S., & Stine, J. (2022.) *EDUCAUSE Horizon Report, Teaching and Learning Edition*. EDUCAUSE. https://library.educause.edu/resources/2022/4/2022-educause-horizon-report-teaching-and-learning-edition

Reno, D., & Smith, A. (1954). Feudin banjos [Song]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZ7IYL0qzrM&t=634s