Letter from the Editors

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Abstract
15 Years of Predictions and Realities

With this issue we begin our fifteenth year of publication. This decade and a half has certainly seen a number of changes to the field, and to the academy in general. If we compare the present state of the field, and higher education in general, to what was predicted for us 15 years ago, we can get a 30,000-foot view on some interesting advancements and disappointing stalls. We'd like to look at just two of those predictions, where the current state of affairs illustrates just how fluid and nuanced higher education is as we crawl out of the global pandemic. Parsing the field in any way we choose, via institutions, or disciplines, or geographic regions, or modes of instruction, etc., we can see but one commonality: we are not monolithic, and do not move in lockstep.

Online / Digital / Remote instruction

Perhaps the most ubiquitous and incessant prediction, one that began in the mid-1990s and which we are still working hard to manifest, is that online education will conquer the digital divide and democratize higher education. We can all point to successful online programs, degrees, and even entire universities. However, as we have learned in the past year, the potential for remote instruction is still high, but other factors, unanticipated fifteen years ago, mitigate against it becoming the panacea for all the ills of higher education. ZOOM fatigue is real, and a student's success in an online environment relies heavily on their internal locus of control. Remote instruction, we have learned, requires students to be far more responsible for their own time and effort than any face-to-face instruction ever required. We're not sure if this is the reason why students dislike remote instruction, but the fact is that they do, or at least they did. A survey of undergraduates conducted by SimpsonScarborough in March of 2020 (at the beginning of the lockdown of higher ed here in the US) revealed that 63% of the respondents said that online instruction was worse than the in-person instruction they received at their school. When SimpsonScarborough repeated the same survey just a month later, than number had risen to 70%.[1]

But, oh, what a difference a year makes. The Digital Learning Pulse survey of undergraduates in the US, published in April of 2021 by Bay View Analytics (in partnership with a number of entities heavily invested in the use of technology in education), notes that 73% of their respondents either somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that they would like to take some fully online courses in the future.[2] Maybe we got better at remote instruction once we had a chance to breathe after the mad scramble to jump online in the spring of 2020. Maybe students rose to the occasion and remained persistent in their coursework. Or maybe the real explanation here is the distinction between being forced to have all your courses online and choosing to take some fully online courses.

And there are other reasons why we are not all teaching MOOCs as we sit poolside, relying on ZOOM to make us look engaged with a nicely academic virtual background. Even before the pandemic, the rise (and subsequent fall) of many for-profit online universities painted online instruction with a broad brush, and soured many on it as just a cash grab. Some not-for-profit institutions, looking to cut instructional expenses and get good returns on their investments in large Learning Management Systems, played fast and loose with intellectual property rights, and the professoriate (whom those institutions saw as merely content providers) balked at having their instructional designs and course materials co-opted into turnkey courses that could be taught by adjuncts or teaching assistants. Fortunately, the tide has turned in this matter at least, as many institutions have articulated IP policies that benefit greatly from faculty input. Other enhancements or appendages to online instruction, things like the gamification of learning or the use of virtual reality, have sputtered and seen little penetration in the culture.

Big Data

Another prediction that has been proven true, but in unexpected ways, is one bruited about for decades. Decisions in higher education, this prediction states, will rely less on historical models, institutional or disciplinary inertia, and the vagaries of theoretical models. Rather, these decisions will be driven by data. And those data sets are overwhelmingly numerical rather than verbal. Everything from student ratings of instruction to annual reviews of faculty members, from your methodology for evaluating student performance to Comprehensive Administrative Review dashboards, relies on numbers. While the distinction between, say, a score of 4.6 and a score of 4.7 out of 5 may be minute, for many faculty members such fine distinctions matter a great deal, because they are tied to their compensation packages. We can, in good faith, argue both sides of the tendency to boil our professional lives down to a series of numbers, but the movement away from anecdotal evidence and the "it works for me" mentality has, in large part, improved both curricula and instruction. The SoTL field, more than almost any other discipline in higher education, has sorted itself over the period of the last fifteen years, demonstrating a strong preference for data-driven decision-making. IJSoTL itself illustrates this point. If you look at the articles from our first year of publication, you see a far wider variety of article types. There are some articles that follow the social science model--where data is generated then analyzed, but there are a number of other forms, like essays, reflections, and personal narratives. Our most recent issues are almost completely filled with articles that follow the social science model, since what it offers is reliability and repeatability.

In other areas, however, this drive toward data has moved in fits and starts. Predictive analytics, where instructors can drill down into huge data sets to predict the success or failure of individual students, has been one of the largest carrots dangled in front of us in recent years. It represents the most enticing promise of data, yet it still cannot offer the level of certainty that the big data sales teams continue to claim.

But the efficacy and the possibility of data for transforming higher education is seen at its most engaging in what we might call the rise of assessment culture. As we employ the Continuous Quality Improvement or Total Quality Management cycles first used in the US in the 1950s, honed to their streamlined perfection in Japan in the 1970s, then rediscovered in the west in the 1980s, we participate in the "plan-do-study-act" process that is the foundation for any sound and lasting change in a culture or institution. And the grist for this mill, the fuel for this engine, is the data we generate then analyze. We think we can say with certainty that nothing in higher education has had such a positive impact, or possesses such still-untapped potential, as the data generated through program assessment.

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