Disruptor or Savior? A Centennial College COVID-19 Academic Case Study

The world of academia as we know it has been turned upside down in a hurry due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Educational institutions continue to respond to what the virus has done to their current establishments and explore what this means for the future of education. Many colleges and universities were already in the process of turning some of their courses and programs into online formats, but were now tasked with accelerating this process.

Many new buzzwords and notions are in the fray: HyFlex, microcredentials, mastery-driven grading, self-paced classrooms, and more. Several questions have also arisen: What does online learning look like? How d0 access, equity, and workload compare for educators and learners (Seale, 2020)? Is the pandemic a true catalyst for improving technology tools, instructional design, engagement, and assessment (Trust, 2020), or could it in fact infringe upon privacy and permanently scar classroom-related emotional labor and wellbeing (Flaherty, 2020)? The renewed focus on teaching practice has never been more in the spotlight (Miyagawa & Perdue, 2021), yet keeping this focus learner-centric while embracing individual social, cognitive, and facilitatory needs remains a huge and real hurdle in the virtual world (Rapanta et al, 2020).

In this article, we take a closer look at the disruption COVID-19 caused to the faculty status quo at Centennial College, including the strain put on mental and emotional resources. We also investigate if disruption proved to be a savior for the college as it forced individuals who were slow to embrace technological change and online learning to wake up and adapt. Additionally, the study considers how COVID-19 pushed the college to move away from the stagnancy of the walled classrooms and focus on flexible, sustained learning. Finally, we explore the part this disruption has played as it pertains to academic integrity, enrollment, jobs, access, and equity.

Research Methodology

Qualitative Study

This project is akin to a case study that probes individuals and reports their lived experience in relation to the delivery of education during the pandemic. It is an up-close, in-depth examination of faculty on the front lines of the transition to online learning. While it is not plausible to generalize the findings of a case study, it can shed light on otherwise hard-to-see social relations, structures, and processes, thus stimulating further research (Gomm, Hammersley & Foster, 2000). A total of 32 participants from across Centennial College took part in three focus groups conducted over a period of two weeks in the winter 2021 term. All participants had continually taught since the onset of remote delivery (winter, summer, and fall 2020 terms).

Research Tools

Focus group discussions were the primary research instrument employed. Focus groups allow researchers to uncover the underlying thought processes of the target group and better understand ideas and issues that merit a deeper investigation. Another advantage of focus groups is that they limit participation to purposefully selected respondents, which helps to streamline the data garnered and reduce any information that could be considered an outlier to the purpose of the study (Crossman, 2020).

A guiding questionnaire was used to conduct an in-depth, semi-structured focus group using a virtual platform. A research assistant was present at all sessions to assist in taking notes, observation, and compiling responses.

Recruitment

A pre-approved broadcast invitation was sent by the chairs of different departments to their respective faculty, encouraging them to participate in the focus groups. The research assistant followed up with interested faculty and sent them a consent form to confirm their participation in one of three sessions per their availability and preference. Recruitment was on a first-come, first-served basis. Every effort was made to ensure diverse representation based on the department, role, and status (full-time or adjunct) of the participants.

Data Analysis

The focus group sessions were recorded, and the research assistant transcribed these discussions. All identities were left anonymous to make the data anonymous, confidential, and de-identified.

The research team analyzed the data using an iterative process with several brainstorming sessions to discuss and debate the findings from the focus groups. From this interpretative analysis, the team was able to compile relevant and emerging themes. Strands of repetitive or exclusive information were arranged and

grouped thematically for richer content analysis (Sage Publications, 2020). Subsequently, the notes were re-arranged to align with various data categories, as per the analytical framework of the study. The data analysis process also accounted for data collected in a previously conducted secondary literature review.

Study Limitations and Constraints:

- Many faculty members were previously acquainted with each other and some of them were from the same departments. Some respondents may have restrained from expressing themselves more candidly.

- Many participants were also acquainted with the moderators and may have been less candid when expressing their opinions.

- Only faculty participated in the focus groups.

RESULTS
Faculty Workload
At the beginning of the move to online learning, it was apparent the workload was daunting and at times overwhelming for many faculty members. However, as the semester progressed, it seemed everyone learned to cope and navigate their workload. While this process has somewhat leveled off and some of the content is now reusable, it is still a challenge to meet the needs and expectations of learners in this new normal.

Increased workload: The need to develop customized content, along with the time spent to get acquainted with various online tools, proved to be exceptionally challenging.

- Time spent on addressing emails and getting students acquainted with the use of technology to attend classes was very burdensome for the faculty.

- Workload doubled trying to figure out what worked and what didn't, especially in courses that didn't translate easily to an online format.

- Some faculty went beyond their work hours and conducted office hours at night to accommodate students in different time zones.

Lack of effective communication and digital literacy: A lot of time was invested in teaching students about technology and learning how to navigate the online course.

- There was poor communication from the college to students of when and how courses were shifting to an asynchronous/synchronous format for the fall 2020 semester. Many students did not know the difference between the two learning modalities.

- Colleges had not done enough to prepare students for the transition and much of the burden fell onto faculty.

Support: Management and College Infrastructure
This area of discussion highlighted how faculty navigated the pandemic with or without institutional support. While the response of "receiving support" or lack thereof from respective participants seemed evenly distributed, there was much talk surrounding systems and processes that felt time-consuming and onerous.

Course development: The bulk of course materials were developed externally without the input of the faculty who would ultimately be teaching the course. Faculty had to manage what was given to them even if there were errors.

- Some faculty spent hours developing asynchronous materials for the fall 2020 term only to be told that the college was moving to synchronous courses, causing disappointment and frustration.

Technological support: Several faculty were in favor of better systems, processes, and potential grants to finance hardware, software, and content purchases to facilitate better teaching.

- Many shared they were just about to or had already purchased a Zoom license because it was not clear if the college would provide this tool.

- To ensure prompt IT support, some faculty befriended institutional IT support personnel. One participant even went to the residence of an IT support staff member to get urgent troubleshooting help.

Central repository: Many faculty members commented on the lack of a "single platform" to access the various tools and software.

Student support: The college administration did not communicate well with students regarding a fee reduction due to online learning. Confused students emailed their instructors for clarification, resulting in an increased volume of emails that faculty had to address.

Beyond token gratitude: Most faculty felt that, while the college acknowledged their extra effort during transition verbally or through email, more was needed in return for the enormous effort and time they put in throughout the transition.

Issues With Student Management
Student motivation to learn was a concern for faculty before the transition, but it became a bigger issue in the online environment.

Working full-time: Many students put their work ahead of school, leaving them scrambling to squeeze the course material in when they had spare time.

Interruptions: Numerous students had children to look after or lived in a cramped apartment with other housemates sharing the same space.

Disturbing Student Behavior: Students participated in more unusual behavior in the online classroom, including vaping during class and making derogatory comments about other students and faculty in the chat.

- Most students opted to turn off their cameras, and often faculty received no answer when a student was called on or asked a question.
- Diligent students were likely to show up for a class on time, but many students decided not to attend classes just because they did not feel like it.

Going Online: Value Additions and Disadvantages

Faculty willingly acknowledged some of the notable silver linings of teaching online, such as their own improved technological proficiency and the ease of online assignment submission.

- *Flexibility and access:* Students appreciated being able to attend classes from any given time zone and the affordable online resources.
- *Voices:* Students who were otherwise introverted or quiet during in-person lectures were suddenly very social in the chat.
- *Scheduling*: Since lectures could be pre-recorded and posted online, students had easy access to any materials they may have missed.

Some of the disadvantages of moving online were a lack of hands-on, experiential learning opportunities and increased administrative workload for faculty who were now accessible around the clock on multiple platforms.

- *Plagiarism and academic integrity:* Cheating seemed to be on the rise with issues in administering and monitoring online exams.
- *Disabilities and discomfort with technology:* The switch to online modalities was difficult for adult and elderly students, as well as some students with disabilities.
- *Information overload:* Learners were flooded with a plethora of resources and reading materials, oftentimes more than they would have been assigned in an in-person class.
- *Employability and experience:* Many instructors felt prospective employers would be less inclined to hire recent graduates from online practical and lab courses owing to a lack of hands-on experience.

Implications on Rights and Privacy of Students and Faculty

Although online learning has been around for decades, the issue of rights and privacy have not gone away. Some faculty worried that the curricula they posted online would be shared without their consent. Most participants worried that students could take screenshots of class videos, homework, and exams and post them online. Some faculty mentioned they feel uncomfortable talking freely during a Zoom class because a comment or joke made during the class could be posted somewhere and be taken out of context.

COVID-19: Disruptor or Savior?

While it might have occurred earlier than planned, there is no doubt that the future of postsecondary education was on the verge of a reset. Ultimately, the shift to online learning will create more options for students, as new and more creative ways to learn will become the norm.

Disruptor

- *The rebirth or the end of community college:* If postsecondary education were to move fully online, it could prove to be problematic in the long run, forcing the extinction of higher education in its current form and potentially causing a reduction in the number of colleges altogether.
- *Practical lab courses:* Can these types of courses survive online? It is difficult to imagine fully online courses for hands-on learning being in high demand. While it has been proven that a hybrid approach can be successful, can online learning ever replace experiential learning and result in the successful employment of graduates in jobs that are typically hands-on and involve meaningful customer interaction?
- *Competition:* The education sector will become much more competitive if business models emphasize online learning. Existing and reputed third-party content and learning platforms will become direct competitors to colleges and universities.
- *AI and robotics:* One faculty member expressed concerns about the introduction of Artificial Intelligence and robotics in the education field, which might remove the human element involved in teaching.

Savior

- *Comfort with technology:* COVID has accelerated faculty members' comfort with technology. The pandemic has shown that education and learning can function quite well in an online setting.
- *Enormous takeaways:* Some faculty said the amount they learned during the transition has been enormous and will benefit their pedagogy in-person and online.

Recommendations

The highlights from the focus group discussions and debates have allowed this study to take into consideration existing resources, challenges, and future goals while simultaneously taking stock of what education looks like after living one complete year (and counting) in the pandemic. The following are some of the recommendations

that emerged directly from faculty who have been at the frontline of education throughout this journey.

- *Central repository:* Colleges should take concrete steps to create and make accessible a central repository of information where all software and associated licenses can easily be accessed by faculty. A one-stop-shop and helpline can also be set up to guide and assist faculty who are trying to access required software, hardware, and other IT-related needs.

- *Consistency in course design and expertise:* If some courses move into a fully online mode, then course design must be better formulated and implemented. It is not enough to simply convert previously developed material meant for an in-person classroom environment into a "quickly deliverable" online format. Wholesale changes are recommended to make courses align more with the requirements and expectations of a fully online class.

- *Faculty voices from the frontlines:* During the transition to online learning, faculty were bombarded with new tasks, new ideas, and new software to learn. Sometimes faculty felt that too much had been heaped onto them and they had maxed out their bandwidth. Some of the decisions made by colleges during this disruptive time were top-down and faculty on the frontlines were not consulted. The general opinion was that faculty who are the face of the college to students should be involved in the decision-making processes that affect them.

- *Student voice:* Colleges implemented many changes during the transition that affected thousands of students who were enrolled across different courses. Students' opinions should be considered for decisions that directly affect them. It is important to factor in what students want for themselves as the future business model goes through significant changes to cope with unprecedented times.

- *Moving appropriate programs:* Colleges that are determining which programs should stay online, which should move back to the classroom, and which can be taught in a hybrid form must consult with faculty.

Conclusion

In keeping with the tenets of the "fourth industrial revolution" (Schwab & Davis, 2018), technology has been embedded within our society in entirely new ways and at lightning speed since the onset of the pandemic. Furthermore, for several institutions, a Matthew Effect in Ed Tech is evident, where "those who are best placed to benefit from the introduction of a new technology tool or innovation are the ones who indeed benefit from it the most" (Trucano, 2014). The shift to virtual learning is no doubt here to stay for a while, so we had better learn to do it properly (Dans, 2020). While this certainly implies increased dependency and load on technology (Hill, 2020) it also means ongoing and subsequent impacts on mental health and wellbeing for learners and educators (Flaherty, 2020), with an estimated five years needed to return to normalcy predicted by some experts (Mitchell, 2020).

It is apparent that COVID-19 was a big disruptor in how a college education was and is delivered. Now that we know online learning can be done successfully on a large scale, will online classes permanently remain a core learning platform? While some institutions may choose to go back to their pre-COVID-19 days, for those that do not, the strength and flexibility of their course offerings will continue to grow as they embrace the non-traditional format that soon might become the more viable alternative.

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