

Chapter 16

The University of Panic: Leadership in the Post- Learning COVID Campus

Tara Brabazon

Flinders University, Australia

ABSTRACT

A pandemic crushes assumptions and inherited narratives of higher education. This chapter explores how COVID-19 tested the parameters of teaching and learning and how universities failed this test. Through the panic of shutdowns, lockdowns, economic restructures, social distancing, and closures, the speed of change and decision making was profound and under public scrutiny. Online learning has been a panacea for economic and social problems for 20 years. To manage a crisis the scale of COVID-19, online learning would be the obvious solution. However, the pandemic showed the flaws in this strategy and the toxic reality of quick fixes to higher education. Students were short changed and academics pushed to exhaustion. After COVID-19, higher education is in shreds. The visions and futures of universities are blurred. Using the theories of Paul Virilio, particularly his University of Disaster, this chapter probes how higher education unravels and dissociates teaching and research. When time is short and risks are high, what mode of leadership will survive in the post-pandemic university?

INTRODUCTION: FROM PANDEMIC TO PLANDEMIC

Perhaps appropriately, this chapter commences with a tweet. More unusually, it is a tweet about death and higher education. On January 21, 2021, a Canadian graduate student posted the following message.

*HI EXCUSE ME, I just found out the (sic) prof for this online course I'm taking *died in 2019* and he's technically still giving classes since he's *literally my prof for this course* and I'm learning from lectures recorded before his passing it's a great class but WHAT (Linguini 2021)*

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8279-4.ch016

The university had not informed the class of the academic's death. This student only discovered the reality when googling the scholar's email address and found – instead – an obituary. In the online university, it seems that death is no excuse to stop teaching. Dying is not antithetical to working.

Online teaching and learning – through its history – has been haunted by ghosts and trailed by zombies (Brabazon 2016). Obsolete platforms and interfaces were managed by under-trained academics. A characteristic of university academics is that a Doctor of Philosophy is the terminating degree. Teaching is a hobby, an accidental activity that is the mortgage paid on a research career. But it is teaching conducted without qualifications or training. Learning may result. It may not. Without curricula expertise and an understanding of literacy theory, teaching and learning remains a hope rather than a planned activity.

Online learning proliferated through higher education in the late 1990s during the period of neoliberal, globalized managerialism. As this neoliberalism failed in an array of industries, confirmed most effectively through the Global Financial Crisis (Tett 2009), it continued to dominate leadership in higher education. This meant that online learning was welcomed with evangelical relish to deliver cheap content, delivered by contract or casual staff. University leadership could focus on the budget savings gained through the decline of full time and tenured academics, as casualized, precariat scholars 'delivered' content, rather than knowledge, and facilitated rather than taught. Quality was monitored through often inelegant proxies, such as student reviews or Rate My Professor. This new normal was based on high numbers of international students, academically mobile staff, and a separation of teaching and research. However, any change or interruption to this system where international students and industry-fuelled research funding subsidized the public university would deliver a fatal blow to the business model. This Russian Roulette leadership and budgetary protocol fired its deadly bullet in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic summoned the panic, the fear, the errors and the lies of the online university. Through COVID-19, higher education – like Dorian Gray – suddenly found its portrait in the attic. Students transformed into the "neoliberal subject" (Chandler and Reid 2016), taught by dead professors and using social media to complain about it.

Digital culture and higher education have danced for decades. Frequently the choreography is under-rehearsed, the set is cheaply constructed and the dancers are under-motivated. Online learning is crushed by cliches: from Star Trek's Final Frontier to digital natives and silver surfers. It jumps from new media to old media, and a futurism that would make Alvin Toffler blush. Digitization has promised much. It has delivered online shopping and Instagram 'influencers.'

Online learning has never been fit for purpose, because the imperatives, the goal, the rationale for higher education in neoliberalism has never been clearly specified. Teaching and learning are rarely efficient. The market duels with notions of the 'public good' of universities. Time, care, respect and expertise are required to enable a diversity of students to reach academic standards, particularly after the widening participation agenda emerged in many nations through the late 1990s.

From the under-resourced higher education sector, searching for a purpose through the cliches of the fourth industrial revolution, COVID-19 emerged. Killing millions of people, it commenced in Wuhan, China. The virus was spread through touch and the transfer of fluids. For just under a year, this was a pandemic without a vaccine, only medicated through social distancing. Social measures were required, while medical science attempted to discover a vaccine. Social and institutional structures had to manage and medicate an infection of the body politic. Space became more important than science. Through this change, universities started to close, alongside an array of other community organizations and businesses. Schools and universities moved classes online. Corporeal conferences ceased. International partnerships

11 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

www.igi-global.com/chapter/the-university-of-panic/288211

Related Content

Gender and Culture Shock at University: Perspectives of First-Year Male Students From a Public University in South Africa

Kealeboga Aiseng (2023). *Handbook of Research on Coping Mechanisms for First-Year Students Transitioning to Higher Education* (pp. 84-103).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/gender-and-culture-shock-at-university/319248

Examining the Benefits of Teaching Active Study Strategies as a Part of Classroom Instruction

Melissa McConnell Rogers (2020). *International Journal of Innovative Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (pp. 41-55).

www.irma-international.org/article/examining-the-benefits-of-teaching-active-study-strategies-as-a-part-of-classroom-instruction/260948

Silent Observation

Mohd Javed Khan (2020). *ICT-Based Assessment, Methods, and Programs in Tertiary Education* (pp. 336-362).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/silent-observation/255268

Integrative Learning toward Social Responsibility in Teaching Engineering

Domingo A. Martín-Sánchez, Ana García-Laso, Ana Muñoz-van den Eynde, Emilia H. Lopera-Pareja, María Cornejo-Cañamares and Emilio Muñoz-Ruiz (2016). *Handbook of Research on Quality Assurance and Value Management in Higher Education* (pp. 279-302).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/integrative-learning-toward-social-responsibility-in-teaching-engineering/148194

"The Fact That the Author Was Male Instead of Female Provided for an Objective Opinion": Implicit Bias in the Classroom

Julia Ferrara Waity, Jennifer Vanderminden and Kristin Robeson (2020). *International Journal of Innovative Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (pp. 44-60).

www.irma-international.org/article/the-fact-that-the-author-was-male-instead-of-female-provided-for-an-objective-opinion/265506