

## **Educational Disruption and Responses: Rethinking Learning Post COVID-19**

John Daniel & Neil Mort  
Acsenda School of Management, Vancouver

### Introduction

Thank you for the invitation to address the Scholars Ivory Tower through this webinar.

The authors are, respectively, the Chancellor and the President of the Acsenda School of Management, Vancouver. Acsenda is a small higher education business school with some 1,000 students from 40 countries. Our topic is topical: *Educational Disruption and Responses: Rethinking Learning Post COVID-19*. We shall use Acsenda as our example today because, like higher education institutions around the world, it had to close its campus and arrange for professors and students to teach and learn online from home – all within a few weeks. What were the lessons we learned?

### Plan

Here is what we are going to talk about.

- First, some introductory remarks about the impact of COVID-19 on education systems and economies.
- Second, a closer look at the impacts of COVID-19 on education. Professor Ogunsan asked us to talk about the negative impacts, but there may also be positive impacts. The best way to come through a crisis well is to look for benefits that it might bring, as well as dealing with the immediate problems.
- Third, we shall address the very practical issues of responding to the pandemic. This is where we shall examine the experience of the Acsenda School of Management and the evolving need for change management.
- Fourth, we shall ask how educational institutions and governments can build resilience to address future disruptions? We must not let this COVID-19 crisis go to waste. We live in turbulent times. Future threats like political unrest and climate change will require education systems to make adjustments again. We must get better at coping with disruptions.
- Fifth, and finally, we shall end on a practical note by asking how we should blend the media of learning post COVID-19. How should we think about blending online learning and face-to-face teaching?

## Coronavirus

We do not need to say much about the coronavirus. It has attracted daily news coverage and commentary worldwide for months. So we make just two points.

- First, COVID-19 is a very infectious and lethal disease, especially for older people and those with other illnesses. It is in all countries of the world, has been caught by over 7.5 million people and more than 400,000 have already died from it. The number of new cases per day is still rising.
- Second, in order to try to slow and limit the spread of the disease, most countries have imposed restrictions on movement and economic activity. This has imposed great hardship, so governments are now trying to strike a balance between lifting these restrictions and containing the disease. COVID-19's incubation period is up to 14 days, so today, for example, we are seeing the impact of the days of protest in the USA following the killing of George Floyd, when there was less physical distancing among people than medical advice recommended.

## Impact

What about the impact on education systems?

The impact of COVID-19 has caused difficulty. According to UNESCO, 90% of students were out of school by the end of April including 574 million across the Commonwealth.

This created huge uncertainty for students and parents about how education would continue and for teachers about how they would provide it. Students were torn suddenly from their friends and social groups, reminding us how important schools and colleges are as social units. Because the change was sudden, teachers had very little time to train and prepare for a new way of teaching.

But, looking on the positive side:

We can be sure that there will be global and local upheavals of various kinds in the future. This is a chance to create resilience so that our education systems can cope better with sudden change. During the pandemic everyone had to rush into distance teaching and learning and most did not do it very well. Now is our chance to integrate elements of open, distance, online learning into whole education system so that we can perform better next time.

We must also develop national coordination mechanisms for the use of telecommunications and media. Some countries already had portals with educational materials for the schools and/or educational television or radio channels that could be used intensively. In other countries, however, the response was a free for all: each institution, or indeed each teacher, did their own thing.

## The Response

We ask now how higher education institutions responded to the pandemic, taking our own Ascenda School of Management as an example. How did it face this challenge to change?

Higher education is made up of complex organizations. They have highly educated work forces, whose members usually know something of the concepts of organizational design, leadership and change. But despite their commitment to ideas, learning and innovation higher education institutions are not always amenable to change. Their decision making reflects the collegial tradition of academia, which values discourse and dialogue. Often this does not sit easily with the bureaucratic approaches of traditional theories of change management.

Higher education institutions are influenced by many factors: political, economic, social, technical and environmental. Organizational cultures engrain values which affect how an institution functions and how it approaches change. Therefore, embarking on a change process normally requires a thought-out plan which considers these factors and decides on an appropriate leadership approach for preparing the organization for change.

Kurt Lewin refers to a three-step process of “unfreezing” the organization before it can change, and then re-freezing it after the change is made (Cawsey et al., 2012). People often react negatively to change. Indeed, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross compares their reactions to change to the five-step process of grieving at the prospect of death, where individuals go through stages of denial, anger, bargaining and depression before they reach a point of acceptance (Kubler-Ross, 2005).

But these attitudes change in a crisis. Systems then become permeable. Crises bring opportunities for change but nevertheless, if the change is to be deep and long lasting, it must win acceptance within the underlying organizational culture.

The hard challenge for institutional leaders is to keep the organization ready for change at all times. Safi Bahcall, in his book *Loonshots*, applies concepts from physics to organizational change, concluding that a leader's role is maintain a state of agitation so that things can easily be reconfigured (Bahcall, 2019). Whereas Lewin suggests that organizations must unfreeze, change and refreeze, Bahcall might say that they should remain in a constant state of slush.

How did Acsenda rise to the challenge of change successfully? Key elements were:

- Good leadership at all levels of the organisation, with a senior team that met daily and made decisions quickly, benefiting from some previous planning for going online;
- There was effective communication across the organisation;
- The School has a collegial, caring and collaborative work environment with a strong focus on individual support and care for students;
- The professional staff are competent and well-networked;
- The owner, EduCo International Group, has given consistent support and encouragement.

### Resilience

What can we learn from this for the future? The Acsenda experience has been a good case study in how a higher education institution responds to and prepares for change. What began as a gradual change management process quickly changed to crisis management and is now an opportunity for change leadership as the institution moves forward. How do we embed change leadership in the way that we run the institution?

Acsenda has responded effectively and minimized the financial and organizational impact of what could have been a disaster for a small private-for-profit degree granting institution. It began its technology-enhanced learning initiative in 2019, adopting a traditional change management process similar to John Kotter's Eight step model. This is: 1. Create Urgency; 2. Form a Powerful Coalition. 3. Create a Vision for Change. 4. Communicate the Vision; 5. Remove Obstacles; 6. Create Short-Term Wins; 7. Build on the Change; and 8. Anchor the Changes in the Corporate Culture (Kotter, 2012).

The main aim of Acsenda's technology-enhanced learning initiative was to introduce a blended learning model, possibly with the prospect of delivering some fully online courses in the future. The changes were inspired by pedagogical principles and the desired student outcomes but had also to have a business rationale. Although the process was collaborative and responsibility for implementation was vested in the academic and administrative teams, key decisions came from the top.

When COVID-19 struck, Acsenda's two-year plan for change became a two-day plan. We had to transform completely our methods of instruction as well as our administrative, student and support services. Change management became crisis management. A collaborative, distributed approach promoted engagement in the process and ensured that processes and changes occurred quickly.

Today, as it looks to the future, Acsenda's focus is on leadership for change. Unlike a process change, which can be done with a management approach, leadership of change means modifying the organization's underlying principles. This transformation can be profound and involve fundamental changes to the organization, to its culture, to its beliefs, and in the basics of what it does and how it does it. The distinction between leading change and managing change is that leading is about the 'how' of change more than about the 'what'.

In contrast to a management approach, "change leaders have to see themselves as part of the system being changed, not as controlling it from on high" (Buller, 2015). Leading change means understanding the organization and its people, nurturing the institutional culture to accept change, building a 'coalition' for it and support around it, and helping people make sense of what they are experiencing so they can develop meaning from it (Buller, 2015; Kezar, 2018).

Acsenda introduced an evaluation component early in the process and collected data on different aspects of its response to COVID-19. This included feedback from various stakeholders: returning students, new students, faculty and staff, information which is helping to guide decisions and provide a basis for future change. It allowed Acsenda to identify what it has done well, which is an important guide both in the short term, with the prospect of another term of online learning, and in the longer term with a return to on-campus delivery of courses and services.

A resilient education system must be able to change whenever teaching and learning has to be carried out in new ways. Teaching and learning have two essential components. The first is an interactive component where teacher and student communicate directly and

simultaneously. In such exchanges, whether on campus or online, students' questions can be addressed immediately.

But, second, there is also an independent component. Here students study or prepare material in their own time. All approaches to education have these two components, whether the framework around them is a campus or students studying at home. This distinction between interactive and independent learning can be more useful for framing policy than the more common distinction that is made between classroom and online learning.

A resilient system must be able to blend the interactive and independent components of education to suit the circumstances. This is easier if teachers understand the strengths and weaknesses of each component. In COVID-19, when institutions had to change quickly to online operation, most had no time to prepare materials for independent learning. They simply aimed to move the interactive classroom experience onto online technology. Preparing for resilience means investing in quality learning materials, either developed in-house or chosen from among the great variety of OER readily available. Having such materials ready has two great advantages.

- First, learners and teachers do not always have to communicate simultaneously. Asynchronous working gives teachers time to prepare or find quality learning materials and enables students to juggle the demands of home and study. Material can be posted online for on-demand access and students can engage with it to suit their schedules. Teachers can check on students' participation periodically and make appointments for students with particular needs. Asynchronous learning materials give both teachers and students more room to breathe. They work best if prepared in digital formats, even if some learners use printed versions of the material.
- Second, an education system with materials for asynchronous use also has an economic advantage, because such materials can be reproduced at low cost and used many times. These economies of scale explain why open universities can handle very large enrolments. Once learning materials are available, the cost per additional student for the independent component of their studies is low. While the cost of providing the interactive component of education through telecommunications or local study centres is more sensitive to student numbers than the independent component, the combination of the two is cost-effective. It is also educationally effective.

### Media

Finally, you asked us to address the future use media in higher learning after COVID-19: in particular the use of digital technology. In helping us make choices for the future the COVID-19 scramble was both bad and good. Bad; because thousands of institutions tried to use the interactive online platforms like Zoom at the same time, so they crashed, making an already difficult situation for teachers and students even worse. But also good; because we found out a lot about what works well and what doesn't. At Acsenda we encouraged faculty to become familiar with two systems as a precaution against the system outages. Zoom emerged as the preferred system for both faculty and students.

However, our most important point is that we must not let the emergency demands of COVID-19 lead us to thinking that the most important media for distance learning are those which allow live video interaction. This is only a small part of an effective teaching system. As we have said, institutions and governments should also have in place good reservoirs of digitally supported learning materials that can be accessed asynchronously.

Another fundamental point is that governments and institutions should standardize on a limited number of technologies and platforms. In some countries and institutions, the technological response to going online for COVID-19 was a free for all. If you are asking students to use new media for learning they do like to have consistency in the platforms that they are asked to use so that they can become proficient at operating in them.

There is much more to say but we can come back to that in our question and discussion session, which President Mort will lead. Thank you for listening. We offer our greetings from British Columbia and Canada.

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