The Future of Global Online Learning Revisited

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Abstract: This article provides a twelve-year review of an OJDLA article on the future of global learning, and updates related issues such as societal need, technologies, course design, administration affairs, faculty support, and student access.

Bio: Since writing his original OJDLA article in 2005, Steven R. Van Hook has received a PhD specializing in transcultural distance learning; designed online and mixed courses for programs at several California universities serving substantial numbers of international students; published and presented extensively on global education issues. His research website is at http://wwmr.us

So, how are we doing?

It's asked for those of us working in global online learning over the past decade-plus.

Are all the big dreams about to boom, or finally bust?

It was a dozen years ago when the OJDLA published my article titled, *Universal learning at a distance: Can we plug it in?* (Van Hook, 2005).

Twelve is one of the most ancient of measures: Segmenting a year into full moons. Numbering the Tribes of Israel and the Days of Christmas. Tastily doling out eggs and donuts. There are a dozen stars on the flag of the European Union – not meant for any count of nations, but because it is considered a perfect number.

And now 12-years hence, it's a worthy waypoint to revisit our progress toward universal learning: the promises fulfilled and dreams deferred; the challenges overcome and obstacles yet surmounted.

The year 2005 was a heady time for dreamers of universal learning. My earlier article began with a quote from the imperative report, *A Nation at Risk*:

"All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost" (NCEE, 1983).

I offered my own assessment of promise and perils:

> We are truly living in a time when no child need live an entire life in ignorance; no inquiring soul need go uninformed. The calling of our age is to engage the will to make it so. We must first advance through many challenging social, political, and economic spheres. Each of these challenges may prove terminally problematic. The fiscal tyrannies of a competitive market may well deny the commodity of knowledge to those people living beyond the margins of a profitable business plan. Despotic governments may inhibit information flow to their peoples under the guise of national security. However, the greatest hurdle could well be within the social sphere: do we truly believe that universal

education for its own sake is a worthy aim and a fundamental right, and are we willing to pay the costs? (Van Hook, 2005).

And the article ended with another exhortation, borrowed from the well-intentioned Farm Aid project and another decade:

Now that we can, we must.

Some were hopeful that simply having the means to provide universal learning was enough motive to get it plugged in. It wasn't.

Now, twelve years forward in the waning months of 2017, there is a revised flip for a fix more practical to the times:

Now that we must, we can.

The news horrifies us daily with problems that most certainly *must* be solved. The good news is we *can* craft solutions. We just need to engage a suitable perspective and tap pervasive technologies.

Education Rules

Education is frequently touted as the fix-all to just about any social problem. For fun, Google 'world problem solutions' and you get 'education' among the top returns, along with 'science' and 'self-confidence' (the latter courtesy of the American Psychological Association). And all three of these terms have deep roots in learning.

There are plenty of urgent and deadly problems to address: Global unemployment, international refugees, income disparity, national unrest, drug abuse; the numbers over the years aren't getting better.

This is a record year for global unemployment – 200-million out of work, and climbing as the workforce grows faster than jobs are created (Kottasova, 2017). By the year 2050, artificial intelligence and robots replacing workers may well create a new breed of people – a 'useless class' of those not just unemployed, but unemployable (Harari, 2017).

Unemployed or uninspired, many are searching in dark corners for solace. Over the last year, 1.3-million Americans were hospitalized due to a record opioid epidemic (Achenbach & Keating, 2017).

Richer countries that could disregard the woes outside their borders are now paying premiums for refugees. The world's displaced population hit a post-war high in 2016 with nearly 67-million refugees, asylum seekers, and others displaced from their homes (Gladstone, 2017).

It's a familiar question thru most any decade: What then must we do? Education, as a global social solution, leads the list.

Over the last twelve years, the ideals of universal learning have gone from fringe, to core. In 2005, little better than 17 percent of the world's population had access to higher education, and academic leaders were just beginning to glimpse the promise of distance learning technologies that could equal or even excel face-to-face instruction (Van Hook, 2005).

Now a dozen years since, a recent survey by the American Council on Education's Center for Internationalization and Global Engagement shows that nearly 75% of responding colleges and universities place internationalization efforts as their top two priorities: sending students abroad, and recruiting international students (Redden, 2017). These goals have been served well by evolving technologies, from emerging tools to those now ubiquitous.

Technology has empowered us in ways that would have the 2005 world spinning in its heady times.

Many other obstacles that may have seemed quaint a dozen years ago are now mission-critical: Online and international faculty need to be engaged and nurtured, even as they work from afar. Courses need to be modified and expanded for a global audience. Equitable solutions need to be found for viable content. Technologies need tapping for what good they might provide, yet within appropriate limits.

Issues of course design, technology, administrative affairs, costs, faculty, subject matter, student support, and ultimately global need must each be addressed and interwoven; not as separate details, but part of the wholistic construction that will make it all work. That is the challenge undertaken here, if not met.

Having traversed the territory between then and now, some of it will be first-person travelogue.

Administration Worries

Early in the new century, Arthur Levine (2001), president of Teachers College at Columbia University, had warned that the current design and structure of American higher education could not be sustained. The "radically different environment" education administrators must tackle includes the nation's transition to an information society, shifting demographics, downward pressures on the cost of higher education, emerging technologies, and a "legion of new competitors" (p. 57).

Academia in 2017 knows how well these predictions hit home.

Programs face pressures to reduce costs while becoming more inclusive. Educators must expand the relevancy and reach of their materials, while accommodating a greater diversity of student performance. Campus PR reps strive for positive perceptions of the institution, to help ensure public support for the tax dollars and alumni contributions that flow (Van Hook, 2011b).

Society has a right to expect that higher education is accountable for fulfilling its purpose, especially through its expenditures of public funds. Even for-profit colleges benefit handsomely from tax-supported financial aid programs. If higher education is to become fragmented and misdirected in its social mission, the loss of public support could well cost all academic institutions, for-profit or not.

Some of those long-held social missions include:

- Improve the quality of learning so as to ensure the skills and knowledge that will be required for the workforce.
- Improve the quality of learning so as to reflect the skills, knowledge, and commitment required for active participation in the civic and social life of the community.
- Provide access and academic attainment for a steadily broadening share of the population of all races, ages, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds, focusing particularly on access and attainment for those currently underserved.
- Serve as an avenue of social mobility for lower-income and minority citizens.
- Serve as the location (virtual or physical) of open debate and discussion of critical, and often controversial, issues of importance to the community.
- Undertake research and scholarship in a manner that is trustworthy and open, in a widening array of fields that serve to advance society.
- Bring the benefit of the knowledge and skills accumulated in colleges and universities to the benefit of the community through outreach and service.
  (Newman, Couturier, & Scurry, 2004, pp. 83-84)

It's worth noting the top two social missions commit to a quality of learning that serves the skills and knowledge that are necessary for participation in the economic, civil, and social life of a community. This is especially challenging given the world's shifting technological, social, and economic conditions touched on earlier.

Under pressure to control tuition costs, administrators will become ever more dependent on public goodwill and support. After a nearly 400 percent rise in college tuition over the last 30 years fueling middle class anxiety and student debt, U.S. tuition costs are this year now growing at the slowest rates in decades (Mitchell, 2017). Cash from tuition is further hit by high competition for enrollments, lower birthrates reducing the college-age pool, government clampdowns on financial aid, and the discounts college must often offer to remain competitive (ibid).

Faculty Demands

Finding faculty suited to teach in global outreach programs can be a challenge; those who can design courses tapping new technologies to serve a culturally diverse worldwide student body. This has been one of the primary factors shying instructors away from new platforms and pedagogies: They simply don't feel prepared (Adair, Blumenstyk, & Udermann, 2017).

Online faculty may need additional training, though still may push back against the training as yet one more thing on their plate; and resent the increased scrutiny of their work as programs strive to prove themselves as a quality way to deliver education (ibid). Rather than directives, administrators might do better to enhance front-end relationships, demonstrate utility for buy-in, and offer equitable compensation and ownership rights for instructor-developed materials – such as co-ownership agreements becoming more common, where both the institution and instructor retain rights to the content (ibid).

Relations between online adjunct faculty and administration – often rarely meeting one another in person – may be improved with an appropriately selected ombud; a liaison between administration and teachers. Administrators need to hear the unvarnished concerns of their faculty – even and especially as those teachers become ever more disjoined and adjuncted. And the faculty needs to hear the organizational concerns, without suspicions of nonrepresentation and exploitation.

For a few years, I was the 'faculty ombud' for an online university (my colleagues called me 'bud') charged with advocating on behalf of other educators; providing a voice, protections and anonymity for instructor concerns. I was a voting member of the faculty senate, and of the administration executive committee. It's a challenging yet effective role. I received no extra compensation beyond service time and rank, yet I found the faculty perspective was not only appreciated, but typically approved in committee votes.

Online faculty wary of time demands may also expect administrators to provide the same level of support to their online students as on-campus students might receive. Regional accreditors may also be looking for online student support services in technology assistance, financial aid, library access, writing and math centers, counseling, tutoring, career services, and such. These same services may influence student decisions as they choose between a vast array of educational options (Adair, Blumenstyk, & Udermann, 2017).

Content Design

As programs design content, it's crucial to consider demands and needs of students and greater society – the top expectation (as mentioned earlier) is a quality of learning that serves for participation in the economic, civil, and social life of a community. Consider again that career choices may be increasingly limited for a future in 2050, populated in part by a 'useless class of the unemployed and unemployable' (Harari, 2017). More demand will be placed on courses simply improving the quality of individual life, which raises the overall levels of society.

Furthermore, the content must be globally accessible: technologically, linguistically, culturally (Van Hook, 2012). The good news (especially for U.S. course designers) is some 25 percent of the world is conversational in English.

Materials for these courses may not best be traditionally academic tomes, but shorter and simplified readings, though not dumbed down. Shorter words, shorter sentences, shorter paragraphs, written at an

8th grade reading level. Globally relevant case studies. Transcultural themes and images that resonate beyond cultural differences (Van Hook, 2011).

More emphasis may be placed on earned certificates, upgraded skills, and simply quality-of-life talents developed through continuing education and extension programs. Skills-based programs – nonprofit, governmental, and corporate – are teaching hard and soft skills (Lohr, 2017).

Hard skills in the tech industry, for example, might include data mining, smartphone app development, and user interface design. Soft skills for social engagement might include communication, teamwork, empathy, time management, open-mindedness (ibid).

Beyond the course design, programs need to provide other venues and niches to keep students engaged with a sense of belonging and place – even as they live in different states, countries, and dimensions of time (synchronous and asynchronous). How might distant students be made to feel connected to greater community? Programs can create institutional social media and alumni groups, stream live events of distinguished lecturers, musical events, theater events, athletic events (Adair, Blumenstyk, & Udermann, 2017).

For about a decade, I've been providing international students in the virtual world Second Life with a streaming radio station broadcasting content such as expert interviews and primers on world affairs, and communication skills: http://wwmr.us/support/podcasts/educare/educarepodcast.htm

Very Cool Tech

Slightly more than a dozen years ago, a challenge was put forth for the e-learning industry: expand and scale higher education opportunities to the large percentage of the precluded population, combining resources to serve a world of need in all its cultural diversity (Irvine, 2003, p. 78).

Early online courses may have been viewed as something inferior, given the limitations of the primitive technologies and platforms. Zoom forward, and 'online' is perhaps now a quaint term; now that our cars, our houselights, and even our pets are connected, 'online' seems a pointless distinction. Face-to-face may be also a demoted term, with 3D immersive virtual worlds more immediate and close-up friendly.

The drive to tap and scale learning technologies has been inexorable. MOOCs (massive open online courses) surfed a wave of hype in 2012, programs entirely free for massive numbers – sometimes as many as 100,000 students in some courses (Sandeen, 2017).

University partnerships created three powerful MOOC platforms (Coursera, Udacity, and edX), mostly funded by venture capital, and offering free courses while generating no discernible revenue stream; though they have since started charging fees for nanodegrees, specializations, certificates, and badges. While the MOOC experiment has provided some positives, it may still be left to traditional institutions to go about the business of degree completion (ibid).

One nonprofit institution, Saylor Academy, has been offering fully developed courses for free to a worldwide student body. All of the nearly 100 openly-licensed courses have no tuition or textbook costs, and 31 of those courses can earn students up to 91 hours of transferable credits from partner colleges.

In full disclosure, I have designed three courses for Saylor including Customer Service (https://learn.saylor.org/course/cust105), Public Relations (hhttps://learn.saylor.org/course/comm411), and Principles of Marketing (https://learn.saylor.org/course/bus203).

Many potential but precluded students live in developing nations, not a fully wired world. The World Bank has found that out of 6-billion mobile phones in the world, 5-billion were used as the primary internet connection in countries short on bandwidth (Van Hook, 2013).

I've modified my course in Customer Service for access through cellphones, including videos, read-along materials and accompanying audio files. WordPress provides a platform that makes it work well enough for access-challenged African students taking the course: http://wwmr.us/wp/courses/customerservice

The most immediate breaking technology impacting academia may well (and finally) be virtually immersive campuses.

CEO Philip Rosedale of High Fidelity and founder of Linden Labs, and tech evangelist Robert Scoble, recently held a webinar to preview some of the technologies emerging towards the end of 2017 and the early days of 2018 (Scoble & Rosedale, 2017).

The newest version of the Apple iPhone soon to be released will have two 3D sensors in it, able to project augmented reality (AR) on the phone's screen, which in turn is part of a greater transition away from the desktop screen altogether. As the phone hits the market, it may well sell about 100-million units in the first quarter – that's about a hundred-fold immediate increase in the number of augmented- and virtual-reality (VR) devices currently in play (ibid).

Scoble and Rosedale (2017) predict that in just four years, we'll be able to watch a virtual football game on our kitchen table. Students already use AR and VR glasses to learn repair of million-dollar Caterpillar tractors and Boeing jet engines with virtual overlays, and may take a meeting in Yosemite at a finger snap, study principles of gravity between planets by actually flying through the universe, and visualize complex equations in math, physics, chemistry with 3D models (ibid).

The costs of virtual-world design may not come cheap. The budget for Grand Theft Auto 5 was $400-million, for the detail and quality and experience of it; but the costs for virtual-world teaching, and hanging out and giving talks on stage … those simple and inexpensive ideas are going to carry the day, where the physicality of place and manipulating with your hands is just "magical" (Scoble & Rosedale, 2017).

The promise of VR and AR in education could have profound impacts on social class and discrimination, where people may be judged by the content of their character rather than the hidden intangibles of race, gender, geography, or tax bracket; and even isolated regions may receive bandwidth distributed from balloons and drones by companies such as Google and Facebook, accessing virtual world campuses through communities such as Second Life, Sansar, and High Fidelity (ibid).

This is the technological challenge: to expand access to quality courses, while ensuring authentic learning experiences and credibility of credentials.

Our Mission

Researchers and analysts say there has never been a more important time for serving the purposes of global higher education (Van Hook, 2011). Societies around the world need to address problems such as economic revitalization, growing income disparities, enhanced social mobility, health care provision, and ensuring the needs of an engaged and safe civilization.

Data show that where education is strong, people become better (Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2017). Countries with higher education attainment are more likely to have political regimes grounded in democracy and a sense of civic duty. Adults with higher education are also more likely to trust others, benefit from good health, volunteer, and feel political efficacy – regardless of gender, age, and earnings (ibid).

Countries are made more prominent by a commitment to education (Morche, 2017). India is developing 20 world-class universities with a focus on STEM subjects. Brazil's University of São Paulo is the only Latin American university in the Times Higher Education World Reputation Rankings 2017.

Both India and Brazil are climbing in ranks of scientific articles their researchers publish. Brazil produces 54 percent of Latin American scientific articles, and India has climbed to 5th place in the world for scholarly publications (rising from 11th place a dozen years ago in 2005).

Simply put, where education is strong, people do better, academia does better, nations do better, and the world becomes a healthier, more engaging and trusting home for us all.

In Conclusion

There is still much to overcome in bringing universal learning about. Yet we have surmounted the suspicions of technology, while seeking ways to make it work best for the most of us.

We no longer have the luxury of wondering what we can or should do, but must focus on the 'must' of it.

And for those of us weary from our past years of effort, we can simply recall that in the history of everything that has ever worked, there was a long-long time when it didn't.

As we look toward the next dozen years, we shouldn't be too discouraged by the slow pace of reforms usurping our aspirations. Instead we should keep our visions fixed on the horizon.

In the advice of superstar hockey player Wayne Gretzky: Don't skate to where the puck is … skate to where the puck will be.

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