Three Priorities for the Future of Online Education

Laura M. Harrison
Katy B. Mathuews
Ohio University

Abstract

Online courses have moved from the margins to the center of higher education. Some scholars greet this trend cheerfully while others express concerns about quality and equity. Regardless of one's position, online education is here to stay and we have a limited window in which to chart the course of its development. While scholars debate many aspects of online education, we advocate focusing on three priorities (1) reasonable class sizes, (2) meaningful student-faculty connection, and (3) equity in fostering humanistic education. In the following work, we ground this argument in the current literature and our experiences as college educators and researchers.

Introduction

In one of the least publicized sit-ins of our time, high school students in Kansas held a sizable protest against Silicon Valley Summit Learning for converting their schools into a web-based platform (Bowles, 2019). Funded by Mark Zuckerberg and designed by Facebook engineers, this platform promised "personalized learning" and "customized education," but delivered headaches, hand cramps, anxiety, seizures, and isolation (para 4). Marketed in the familiar magic bullet language of success and cost efficiency, this online education experiment failed spectacularly, culminating in student and parent demands for human teachers to give young people the mentorship and guidance required for meaningful learning.

Those high school students became the college students we now teach. We hear their critiques echoed in our students' frustrations that online classes do not feel real. This lack of the tangible also emerged as a frequent theme in our research on academically struggling students (Harison & Mathuews, 2022). Though we did not set out to study online education specifically, it was a popular topic with students who often surfaced the challenges of remote learning in our conversations with them about academic struggle.

Our goal in this article is neither to rehash the well-worn criticisms about online education nor to provide an uncritically cheerful portrayal of it as a cure-all to higher education's challenges. Instead, we aim to offer practical recommendations based on both our experience adapting to the need for online instruction inspired by the COVID-19 pandemic and our research focused on student experiences with academic struggle.

Laura M. Harrison is a professor of counseling and higher education and Katy B. Mathuews is an adjunct instructor of economics at a large and small public university, respectively. While we both had various experiences with online education in the past, the pandemic forced us to fully pivot to online modalities. Harrison teaches synchronous graduate level courses while Mathuews teaches asynchronous undergraduate courses. Additionally, we conducted research in February 2020, just before the pandemic, that focused on student academic struggle. We interviewed 50 undergraduate students to understand how the students experienced academic struggle and what strategies and faculty approaches helped them overcome challenges. While some of our research participants mentioned positive aspects of online education, they more often brought up problems they experienced in online courses. As we entered the remote learning environment of the pandemic, we began to identify with many of the challenges shared by the participants. We draw on our teaching and research experience as we move through the discussions that follow.

Challenges in Online Higher Education

Attrition is a significant issue in postsecondary online courses which have a 10-20% higher rate than their in-person course counterparts (Bawa, 2016). This is particularly worrisome given the exponential growth in online education fueled by the current pandemic. Even before the pandemic, online education was experiencing significant growth due to student interest in flexible course options and institutional demands for increased enrollments. Hence the issue of students'

ability to be successful in online environments has become one of the most pressing educational issues of our time.

Some scholars locate the challenge of online higher education within the students themselves. Paulsen and McCormick (2020), for instance, point out that online students are more likely to be nontraditional students with work and family obligations that complicate their ability to focus on academics. Learner readiness is also a significant theme in the literature. Kebritchi et al.'s (2017) content analysis of 104 scholarly articles about online learning revealed deficits in learners' time management and technical skills as well as a lack of motivation, realistic expectations of faculty, and ability to work independently.

Other scholars conclude that the problems in online education lie with faculty who receive little to no training in pedagogy generally, much less in online teaching specifically (Sithole et al., 2019). Still others posit faculty attitudes toward online teaching as a prevalent issue (Wingo et al., 2017). More specifically, faculty concerns about quality, student learning outcomes, technical support, and workload appear as frequent themes in the literature regarding online education (Bettes & Heaston, 2014).

Finally, some scholars focus on higher education institutions themselves, positing that they frequently treat online programs as cash cows designed to boost revenue rather than quality learning (Busch, 2017). Declines in public funding for higher education have made many institutions more tuition-dependent, causing institutions to seek market-driven solutions. As Keehn et al. (2018) explain, "These reforms have also ushered in the commercial logic of convenience that suggests offering more and more online classes is primarily a way to increase enrollment" (p. 48). The emphasis here is on the kind of convenience that elevates ease over quality in a way that diminishes deeper learning at the expense of expediency. While there have always been tensions between the parts of a university responsible for the financial bottom line and those focused on the academic mission, higher education's enrollment decline is shifting the balance of power toward the former. According to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, nationwide college enrollment dropped by 3.1% or 465,300 students in the fall semester of 2021 (Douglas-Gabriel, 2022). Losses in revenue tend to pressure universities to find efficiencies, often in the form of reducing tenure track faculty and increasing class size (Kezar, DePaola, & Scott, 2019). Unfortunately, these practices often sacrifice effectiveness for efficiency. Educational and financial goals need not exist in opposition; in fact, prioritizing effective student learning practices pay off in the long run in terms of retention, graduation, and employment.

What Makes Online Learning Work

As Kim (2020) asserts, "We have let the narrative about online education center too much around revenue generation and not enough around (all student) learning" (para 11). Kim's words resonate with our experience teaching online: it works when it is motivated by and designed for student engagement.

Understanding the salience of the issues with student engagement in online courses, scholars advocate a host of strategies such as ice-breakers and welcome videos, groupwork assignments, and forums for interaction such as discussion boards and virtual office hours. Martin and Bollinger (2018) studied students' perceptions of these strategies, breaking down learner-to-learner, learner-to-instructor, and learner-to-content engagement in their survey results. Students valued learner-to-instructor engagement strategies the most, many citing the importance of knowing there is someone "on the other end" who will "support, listen to, and communicate with them" (p. 218).

The aforementioned research is consistent with Taft et al.'s (2019) synthesis of 58 evidence-based articles on the issue of class size in online courses. They discuss the well-known practice of universities seeking financial gain by raising enrollment numbers "without examining the impact on students' attainment of learning objectives" (p. 192). The authors acknowledge that fiscal concerns ought to be addressed, but asserted that pedagogical concerns should be the central part of the decision-making process regarding class sizes. Their findings indicate large courses (defined as 40+ students) can be effective for foundational, fact-based content requiring "low levels of critical thinking, limited personalized interaction with faculty; little individualized instruction, formative feedback, sense of community, shared knowledge creation; and less higher order thinking, intellectual challenge, skill development, problem-solving, research and writing, journal reflection, of faculty-moderated discussions" (p. 218).

Faculty workload accounts for these limits in large online courses because professors cannot offer what the authors refer to as *teaching-intensive* pedagogy to this many students. As one might imagine, the literature shows that faculty required to teach large courses shift their instruction from "more active and engaged" to "less individualized approaches" to accommodate the increased workload (p. 206). Not surprisingly, these kinds of issues lead to lower evaluations in large courses (p. 216).

Some dismiss course evaluations specifically and student satisfaction more generally as shallow and arbitrary due to students some-

times focusing on unimportant factors such as whether a professor was entertaining or cool. While we agree student satisfaction must be examined with a critical lens, we argue it would be a mistake to dismiss it entirely. As Lu points out, student satisfaction relates directly to engagement, which is an important part of students' academic performance. We agree with Hung et al's (2010) framing of motivation as "the need to do something out of curiosity and enjoyment" (p. 1082). As one of our student research participants explained, "It's hard to keep doing something you hate." Expressing enthusiasm for one's subject and making the course material relevant to students' lives are integral parts of being engaging to students.

Recommendations

Too often, scholars write academic articles long on problem formulation and short on solutions. We understand the reality that this phenomenon likely results from "wicked" problems that do not lend themselves to easy answers, yet scholars must begin to coalesce around some goals in order to make progress on the challenges of online education. We offer the following three proposals as the priorities scholars should advocate in their efforts to promote effective and responsible online education. Whether fan or foe, we know online education is only going to continue to expand in the years ahead and it is incumbent upon us to ensure that this growth leads to positive outcomes for students.

Advocating for Reasonably Sized Classes

In both our research and experience, the importance of human connection emerged as the most important factor for student learning. The participant from our study who pointed out that it is difficult to keep doing something you hate went on to explain that it was her relationship with faculty that helped her discern the topics that inspired her intellectual curiosity. Some of our other participants spoke of the academic struggles that arose even when they were studying subjects in which they had genuine interest. Nearly all of them cited relationships with encouraging, supportive, and skilled faculty as what helped them persevere through academic challenges. Some participants emphasized professors' ability to explain material in several different ways until the student "got it." Others focused on the emotional support faculty provided, explaining that it motivated them to keep going because "you don't want to let professors down when they've done so much for you." These students' stories reflect the centrality of engagement to learning.

As these students expressed, being seen and known plays a vital role in student satisfaction, engagement, and success. I (Harrison) can see and know about twenty students well, but that becomes harder with larger classes. In addition to the examples articulated by the participants in our study, feedback is a practice difficult to do effectively with big classes. Despite all the efficiency software that purportedly makes feedback easier, there is no shortcut when it comes to providing personalized attention to student work. I (Mathuews) found this to be true as I worked with over 70 students in an online course during my second semester of teaching fully online. Particularly as an adjunct who teaches in addition to working at a separate full-time job, providing feedback on 70 discussion board posts per week proved quite challenging. Compared to the previous semester with only 35 students in my online class, I felt my bandwidth to provide meaningful feedback suffered with double the class size.

Grading and feedback are not the same thing; grading can be reduced to fields on a website, but feedback requires observing and communicating students' strengths and growth areas. Quality feedback demands faculty actually attend to the human beings in front of them so that they can have a meaningful exchange in which students receive something substantive. This is not the kind of thing that can be systematized because students are not interchangeable parts to which faculty can deliver stock comments.

I (Harrison) write treatises in response to my students, often attaching articles and/or videos I think will speak to them. When I know a student struggles with imposter syndrome or other issues that make them feel particularly vulnerable, I make an extra effort to be sensitive to that. If the student and I have shared intellectual interests, I tell them about my own thinking and experience with the topic at hand. I know they appreciate the individualized attention because they respond with intensely expressed gratitude, often adding that no one has ever taken the time to write such detailed comments on their work. I share this neither to brag nor to condemn other faculty, many of whom I know are teaching unreasonably sized classes where it is not possible to interact with students on this level. I share these stories because I fear the day when the powers that be increase enrollments to the level where I can no longer provide the kind of feedback I know is vital to student learning. I fear this not just because of my own experience, but also because of the volume of literature providing evidence of this point (Wisniewski, Zierer, & Hattie, 2020).

We must advocate for class sizes that make it possible to teach and learn effectively, asserting that effectiveness and efficiency are not

synonymous. Taft et al. (2019) offer the rare gift of a clear guidepost for class sizes that is rooted in the literature about student learning. Their aforementioned points about the kind of rudimentary learning that can be achieved at the 40+ class size indicates that very few courses should be that large. They point out that researchers do not use the words "small," "medium," and "large" to refer to specific ranges consistently in the literature, but 15-20 students shows up frequently enough as needed to create the conditions necessary to support the following outcomes (p. 212):

> (a) Nuanced learning dependent on substantive online interaction (30 articles),
>
> (b) Student development (22 articles),
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> (c) Mastery of complex phenomena (16 articles), and
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> (d) Development of higher order thinking (14 articles).

The authors cite the *U.S News and World Reports* ranking systems' awarding of points for class sizes of under twenty students as additional evidence that this is a meaningful cut-off point for promoting quality student learning. While faculty express many concerns about student learning generally and online learning specifically, we believe the literature warrants a specific focus on reasonable class sizes as a top priority.

Fostering Connection

In addition to increasing class sizes, achieving consistency is another goal for which online education is often used. The impact of cookbook-type curriculum in which instructors are handed a boilerplate online course they had no role in creating has been magnified as institutions moved to remote learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Often it is adjunct faculty, who may already be dealing with feeling a disconnect from their department or institution, who are at the helm of such online courses.

I (Mathuews) experienced this perspective during fall semester 2020 when I returned to adjunct teaching via an online course at a small public institution. The most provocative observation from my experience was identifying with the participants in the academic struggle study who did not feel that online education was "real." This was partially due to not participating in the creation of the curriculum. Developing lesson plans, PowerPoint slides, and assignments are not only essential logistics to delivering a course, but also important in helping

the instructor feel an ownership of and connection with the course. Anyone who has created or built something with their own hands will naturally have a greater sense of pride and identification with that thing. My role in the asynchronous course was to troubleshoot the mechanics of the online content, respond to student emails, and grade the assignments that could not be graded automatically in the course management system. Interacting in such a tangential way and only through a computer screen gave me a sense that what I was doing was not real.

The sense of disconnection was also rooted in the asynchronous format itself. Of the 35 students in the course, only about one-third interacted with me via email. Many of these students simply asked a question about course logistics and I never heard from them again. Two students in the course reached out to me regularly to discuss course content and questions they answered incorrectly on exams. It was obvious that they were committed to fully understanding the material, but a desire for connection also surfaced. They shared that the online format was challenging because they did not feel connected. I was able to empathize with their experience and through our shared empathy, we were able to foster a meaningful rapport via email. One student stated that my swift and thorough email responses were very helpful and a courtesy that, in her experience, was rare.

Further magnifying my sense of disconnection was the lack of a formal system of support available to adjunct faculty. In my past experience teaching at the same institution, an orientation was offered to adjunct faculty at the beginning of the school year to help adjuncts learn about procedures for such things using online course content software and how to navigate grade submittal. That an orientation session was not offered may have been due, in part, to the circumstances of the pandemic, but the pandemic and associated departure from normal connection made such an orientation essential for adjunct faculty. I found myself frequently emailing various offices on campus, including my own academic department, to try to navigate my responsibilities in the online learning environment. In half of my efforts, I received an incomplete response, conflicting information, or no response at all.

Based on the points illustrated in this section, it is essential for institutions to foster connection for faculty as well as students. Where possible, it is useful to allow flexibility for faculty to tailor even the more boilerplate courses to fit their teaching style and to allow for a more personal approach to course delivery. While asynchronous courses may have a place in some programs and for some students and faculty, the synchronous online approach better supports interpersonal connection. The ability to see faces and converse in real time, for me,

would have created the sense of connection I struggled to sustain via email in my asynchronous course. Finally, institutions should be sure to provide formal and informal support systems for faculty, especially adjunct faculty. Not having the advantage of attending department meetings or being embedded in the day-to-day culture of an institution--even in an online environment-- creates a very isolated and frustrating experience. Institutions should make any existing forms of support, such as orientation sessions, even more robust in an online learning environment.

Recommitting to Equity and Humanization

When Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) began nearly a decade ago, pundits lauded their potential to deliver higher education free or cheaply to the masses, some predicting it would replace traditional college life. The president of Northeastern University, for example, declared, “with the advent of the MOOCs, we’re witnessing the end of higher education as we know it” (quoted in Carlson & Blumenstyk, 2012). It soon became clear that MOOCs were not the panacea some hoped they would be. With average completion rates at 12%, MOOCs existed mostly as enrichment activities in which the already highly educated dabbled (Jordan, 2015). Most students—particularly those who attended under-resourced K-12 schools and are therefore less likely to be “college ready”—need more guidance and direction than MOOCs can provide.

The MOOC craze provides a cautionary tale about offering substandard educational products to low-income students while preserving enriching learning experiences for the wealthy. Whether packaged in elite universities or honors programs at non-elite institutions, there is an unmistakable phenomenon of reserving faculty time and attention for those students deemed as gifted or otherwise worthy and leaving the rest to scramble for leftovers. This kind of practice is never communicated in these stark terms, but the effect of exacerbating inequality is the same however it is named. If the expansion of online education is not managed thoughtfully with equity concerns at the forefront, it is very likely to hasten the already troublesome stratification in higher education.

In addition to the considerable equity concerns of a higher education system stratified by in-person, personalized attention for the overserved and systematized online courses for the masses, we must call attention to the potential harms of increasing all students’ screen time, regardless of socioeconomic class level. As we have discussed, online

courses can be a force for good, especially in terms of accessibility and convenience. When online courses are reasonably sized and faculty have creative freedom to innovate, there are sometimes pedagogical advantages as I have discussed in previous scholarship (Harrison, 2020). Yet there is a balance that must be achieved in the inherently human enterprise of education at all levels. Just as in-person learning can be bland and stale without innovation and student-centeredness, online courses can be dehumanizing when they are templated and impersonal.

Traditional college-age students have already experienced a significant increase in mental health issues, many of which can be traced to excessive screen time eclipsing traditional human connection (Twenge, 2017). Perhaps this is why the students in Kansas mentioned at the beginning of this article reacted so strongly to the rote learning to which they were being subjected in their shift to online courses. The financial managers of educational institutions tend to believe in online courses as a lucrative source of revenue without acknowledging the cost of viewing students as "butts in seats." We have allowed the language of higher education to be become too transactional, selling it in purely vocational terms as if a student's future career was not part of the richer constellation of their life. Students do better when they have mentors who can help them find the sense of purpose that enables them to persevere through academic challenges and chart a path to an enriching life of which work is a significant—but not the only—part.

The neoliberal narrative dominating higher education today purports a false dichotomy between focusing on holistic student development and emphasizing employability. The reality is that opportunities for reflection, mentorship, and faculty-student interaction are not luxuries, but rather essential ingredients for the complicated work of finding one's passion and staying motivated to do the work necessary to get there (Clydesdale, 2015).

The good news is that providing students with this kind of focused attention is not a matter of online vs in-person education. When online education is delivered with human contact baked into the design, it can be highly relationship-oriented as in the case of Western Governors University (Hembree, 2017) and Southern New Hampshire University (Felton & Lambert, 2020). These institutions emerge frequently in the literature as exemplars for their focus on making sure every student gets personalized attention as they progress toward their academic, career, and personal goals, which really cannot be separated. We have an opportunity to shape online education in the direction of these student-centered models rather than their low-quality counterparts. It is both morally right and financially viable to offer an education of ac-

tual value rather than aiming to fill next semester with more "butts in seats." The current crisis offers an opportunity to move from short-term extraction to long-term sustainability as a model for both online and in-person higher education.

Conclusion

Whether we love or hate online education, there is no doubt that it is here to stay. We must move beyond both the wholesale critique of its shortcomings and blind faith in its magical power. These generalizations are even less useful as we try to adapt intentionally to what higher education means in the digital age. Both passive acceptance of depersonalized, templated, and essentially teacher-less approaches to learning and active revolt against change have already proven futile. We need to focus more on the specifics of what makes online learning engaging and advocate for these conditions so that our students can thrive in the new normal.

If we exercise vision and leadership, the pandemic could serve as a force for creative destruction in higher education. As Friedman (2020) famously said,

> Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable. (p. xiv)

We have a brief window to chart a better course for all postsecondary education—both in-person and online. Felten and Lambert (2020) flip the script on the traditional taken-for-granted assumption that personalized attention is too expensive for the masses and should only be expected for Ivy League and honors students. In their research demonstrating the centrality of relationships to college students' success, they assert and ask:

> Relationships are the path to the learning, professional, and civic outcomes of higher education for our students. Even when budgets are tight, tensions are high, and calendars are full, higher education's guiding question should not be Can we afford to do so? But, rather, Can we afford *not* to do so (p. 5)?

Higher education has lost some public trust in recent years, some of it anti-intellectualism fueled by disdain for experts, some of it legitimate critiques of mission drift. The pressures to focus on short-term financial gain are real, particularly in light of cuts to public funding for higher education. Generating large enrollments in online courses can

be tempting in this situation, but the closures of the for-profit institutions that took this approach should give us pause about this being a smart solution.

In the Hidden Brain podcast, *What's Not on the Test: The Overlooked Factors that Determine Success*, Vedantam (2019) juxtaposes two cases of shortsightedness in metrics obscuring the actual results of student success assessments. One case involved an assessment that made it appear that a couple of months of GED courses had the same effect of four years of high school, findings that were later invalidated by a longitudinal study showing the GED group had lower levels of employment and income in addition to higher levels of imprisonment and divorce. Another case showed the results of preschool with low teacher to student ratios having no effect on students because students in the preschool did not show gains in IQ scores. When other researchers followed up with the preschool students decades later, they had better health, income, and other quality of life indicators than their control group counterparts.

We share these examples to point out that the kind of templated, vocation-driven, easily measured educational approaches that lend themselves to factory-like delivery either in person or online may seem efficient, but are rarely effective. We have the opportunity to shift higher education into a more humanistic, creative space based on a vision of students not as butts in seats, but as bastions of human potential worthy of our collective investment.

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