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GLOBAL PRESIDENTS' FORUM 2022

Summary Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ---

"Building Future Resiliency in OFDL Environments"

At the ICDE President Forum on November 15, 2022, leaders from within the Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning (OFDL) community convened in an online symposium to discuss how to build future resiliencies in OFDL environments.

The briefing that follows summarizes the key themes from this forum. The summary is organized into three sections, each addressing a key discussion question presented at the forum. Part 1 and 2 focus primarily on the context and potential vulnerabilities of future OFDL environments. Part 3 focuses on potential futures adaptations and routes to strengthen futures OFDL environments.



FOREWORD



Neil Fassina
ICDE President



Torunn Gjelsvik
ICDE Secretary General

The ICDE Global Presidents' Forum 2022 was organized as a virtual, half day event in two different time zones on 15 November. Under the theme: "Building future resiliency in Open, Flexible and Distance Learning Environments", the ICDE President and Board members invited Presidents, Vice-Chancellors, Principals, and Rectors of ICDE members and partner institutions to attend this annual, exclusive leadership forum, which attracted more than 100 registered delegates from all world regions.

The International Council of Open and Distance Education's vision is to achieve the potential of open, flexible, and distance learning created through its members and learning communities. As a UNESCO Partner, ICDE amplifies and fosters the perspective that learning is not only a specific goal, but also a fundamental contributor to the achievement of the full suite of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. ICDE members and partners recognize that Open, Flexible, and Distance learning (OFDL) environments are a key contributor to achieving inclusive and equitable access for learners globally and a necessary complement to in-person and on-campus learning environments.

The COVID-19 pandemic enshrined distance and remote learning as a permanent part of the higher education landscape broadly. Potentially more impactful, the pandemic highlighted the fragility of in-person and on-campus learning solutions because of their reliance on the underlying assumption that in-person learning, and physical classrooms would always be available – something that simply was not true.

Although OFDL environments demonstrated great resiliency during the pandemic, they themselves are not immune to future threats. In part, the vulnerability of OFDL environments emerge because of its own underlying assumptions.



FOREWORD

This formed the backdrop for the discussions taking place at the ICDE Presidents' Forum 2022, where delegates were challenged to discuss the following questions:

1. What does the future balance between in-person/on-site and remote/on-line learning look like?
2. Based on that future balance, are there assumptions that the OFDL community makes about modern day OFDL environments that create vulnerability? How do those assumptions create risk, threaten the resiliency, or undermine the potential future of OFDL?
3. With these assumptions in mind, what do future OFDL environments need to integrate to protect against vulnerabilities and ensure resiliency long term? What fundamental changes need to be made to OFDL environments to integrate those changes?

The forum discussions were chaired by the ICDE President and Board members, and took place in a mix of plenary and breakout sessions. The following summary is condensed from the two virtual forum sessions that took place. It is written by the ICDE President, with contributions from other ICDE Board members.

The ICDE Secretariat and the ICDE Board wish to thank all the delegates for providing valuable input and suggestions to the questions addressed. The concrete suggestions will be taken into consideration for further development of ICDEs strategic goals and operational activities in the years to come.

Neil Fassina
ICDE President

Torunn Gjelsvik
ICDE Secretary General



PART 1

The future balance of non-OFDL and OFDL in creating resilient learning environments

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of in-person learning environments and disrupted equitable access to learning for millions of people globally. In response, countless learning systems rapidly engaged “emergency remote learning.” Reflecting on experience, education leaders are developing contingency plans to mitigate an unknown and uncertain risk caused by future disasters. These leaders seek to create a strong and resilient learning system to ensure ongoing equitable access to learning on a global scale, regardless of emergent disruptions.


In hindsight, the pre-pandemic debates about the overall effectiveness of in-person versus remote learning environments seem somewhat meaningless given the challenges we have overcome. Instead, our experience has taught us that our futures are not defined by singular approaches, but rather by a pluralistic and complementary approach to learning systems. More specifically, one may anticipate that the futures strength and resiliencies of global learning systems will require the coexistence of: a) in-person/on-site and remote/off-site learning environments, b) on- and off-line learning experiences, c) synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities, and d) open and competitive entry learning spaces.

When considering the blending of different forms of learning modes, perhaps the question should not focus on an appropriate “balance,” but rather on ensuring that within complementary and diverse systems there are sufficient “functional redundancy” to respond to disruption. A balance implies that a disruption will offset said balance. Having sufficient functional redundancy in a system, on the other hand, enables and empowers a system to shift resources rapidly toward the functional portion of the system in the face of disruption without having to concern itself with balance. In effect, the goal is to create an ecosystem of learning that can adapt both functionally and naturally when one element of that ecosystem is disrupted.


Regardless of the balance or functional redundancy in learning ecosystems, the focus must remain on the goal of ensuring the continuity of learning environments for all learners, and to embrace diversity – regardless of their background, learning style, or other factors that may influence their capacity and capability. To this end, future learning ecosystems will need to amplify the focus on curricular and instructional design that seamlessly integrates across various learning environments without simply attempting to replicate a learning experience in all learning environments.

Design must be purpose built for specific learning environments. To this end, learners should be empowered to traverse between learning environments seamlessly. Nevertheless, the learner experience should not be identical in all learning environments, as different learning environments empower and facilitate different perspectives, pathways and approaches.

Just as learners should have the ability to traverse between learning environments, so too should the staff that support students' learning journeys (i.e., instructional and student support staff). Regardless of their role in empowering learners, a learning ecosystem implies that one will need to think differently about the various jobs at an institution, how employees are developed and trained over time to succeed in those jobs, and how those jobs are applied within the ecosystem to empower learners most effectively.



To achieve a strong and resilient balance within learning systems, novel or unique learning environments need to become part of the culture or ethos of a system rather than a stand-alone department or team working on something unique.



Beyond the fragility of in-person learning environments, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the gaps in learning infrastructure. In particular, the absence of reliable connectivity and broadband. As learning systems grapple with future ecosystem designs, focused attention will need to be given to the design and implementation of infrastructure. This includes physical and digital infrastructure as well as the policies and procedures that systems operate within. To achieve a strong and resilient balance within learning systems, novel or unique learning environments need to become part of the culture or ethos of a system rather than a stand-alone department or team working on something unique.

A final point of consideration related to the application of an ecosystem lens of educational design is the inevitable need to adapt the narrative and terms that are used to describe the futures ecosystem. Current narratives tend to focus on identifying the differences between learning systems (e.g., in-person vs. mixed modality vs. on-line). With the development of future integrated systems, new terminology will need to be adopted.

An emergent question when considering an ecosystem approach to the design of learning systems is at what level does the ecosystem need to be designed to effectively achieve strength and resiliency. For example, does each institution need to create an ecosystem or should the system be created at the regional or national level? Each option has inherent benefits and drawbacks. Regardless of the level at which the ecosystem is created, challenges to resilience need to be addressed at that level.



Assumptions about OFDL & how those assumption may reduce resiliency of OFDL

Digital Infrastructure. A necessary assumption for digitally enabled OFDL environment is the presence of reliable power and connectivity. Although this assumption is regularly violated in parts of the world with low or unreliable power and connectivity, the assumption nevertheless creates a vulnerability to the ongoing presence of digitally enabled OFDL environments.

Physical Infrastructure. For offline (and, off-site) OFDL environments, one may rely on the assumption that physical transit of learning materials through services like postal mail is available to reach learners in all regions of the globe. If distribution/shipping services are neither available nor affordable, this assumption places off-site and off-line learning environments at risk.

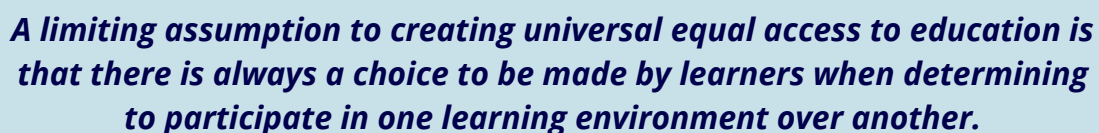
Learner Capability. As noted in section 1, OFDL environments require purposeful design to enable effective learning experiences. Similarly, OFDL environments necessitate, at some level, a different approach by the learner too. An assumption that can create limitations for OFDL environments is that learners have the readiness, ability, and aptitude to learn through an OFDL environment. This assumption stretches from experiences like comfort level operating a digital device through to cultural differences in students' willingness to reach out to a facilitator for support. If this assumption does not hold true, learners' ability, capacity, and readiness to learn may be limited.

Quality. A drawback of the large-scale global shift to emergency remote learning (ERL) during the COVID19 pandemic is that digitally enabled (i.e., distance) learning is of lesser quality than in-person learning – primarily because ERL is not equivalent to purpose designed and built OFDL environments. This assumption extends into employability opportunities if the broader public continues to believe, falsely, that off-site learning is of lesser quality than in-person learning. Without dispelling this assumption, progress toward the large-scale adoption of proper OFDL environments will be limited.

On-site to off-site interface. If both on- and off-site learning experiences are available, an assumption may be that learners are capable, ready, and willing to navigate both an in-person and off-site (either on- or offline) learning environment, including the interface between the two learning environments. Furthermore, there is an assumption that educational systems can effectively design and create a seamless transition between in-person and off-site learning environments. If either angle of this assumption proves to be false, the process of learning will be hampered.

Hybrid, mixed-modality, or otherwise. There is an assumption that the interface between in-person and off-site learning environments will be some formulation of hybrid or mixed-modality learning environment. Hybrid or mixed modality learning environments, however, rely on foundational principles of current in-person and off-site learning environments. There is a further assumption that hybrid or mixed modality learning environments are expensive and capital intensive. It may be possible that an alternative interface may be created between in-person and off-site learning environments.

Technology driven OFDL. Given the reliance on digitally enabled ERL across large global regions during the pandemic, there is somewhat of an assumption that OFDL environments are inherently technology driven. This assumption immediately excludes purposefully designed non-digital and off-line OFDL solutions – key elements of the OFDL portfolio. Without inclusion of all OFDL opportunities, limits are inadvertently placed on the potential breadth and scope of OFDL learning environments.



A limiting assumption to creating universal equal access to education is that there is always a choice to be made by learners when determining to participate in one learning environment over another.

Policy will follow design. A significant assumption, and in some cases a hope, is that government or institutional policy will be adapted to empower more robust OFDL environments globally. Regrettably, without significant policy change in many regions, the application and distribution of OFDL environments remains significantly limited. As a result, the optimized role of OFDL in learning ecosystems is artificially limited.

Equity and Equality of Access. A limiting assumption to creating universal equal access to education is that there is always a choice to be made by learners when determining to participate in one learning environment over another. The reality being that there is not currently equity or equality of access to learning, let alone the personal agency to choose one learning environment over another. A learning ecosystem that embeds the assumption of choice in its design is inherently likely to disadvantage certain groups of learners.

Discipline versus modality. In creating a learning ecosystem bridging on- and off-site learning experiences, one must consider the potential applicability of offsite learning to each learning discipline. To assume that all disciplines are equally adapted to offsite or remote learning may create ineffective learning environments through to large scale safety concerns.

Pathways. When conceptualizing a tertiary learning ecosystem spanning on and offsite learning experiences, one cannot safely assume that there is a seamless transition from secondary education into a tertiary learning ecosystem. Without considering the design of the secondary learning system, tertiary education leaders may inadvertently reduce students' learning simply due to having to adapt to a new learning environment or new discipline.

Social interaction. Specific to the OFDL space, one should not assume that online learning is the same as other forms of distance learning. Specifically, consideration needs to be given to the social needs of a learner and learning regardless of the learning modality. Without doing so, the learning system risks disengagement by learners.

PART 3



Future adaptations for OFDL to strengthen resiliency

In responding to the fragility of in-person learning exposed during the COVID19 pandemic, learning systems globally demonstrated how focus could be turned to alternative education delivery models (e.g., emergency remote teaching, distance education, etc.). In doing so, educational systems inherently discovered the need to consider learning environments as ecosystems in which learners could readily move from one learning environment to another. Despite this learning and the widespread consideration for non-in-person learning opportunities, educational systems remained focused on a very narrow element of the broad OFDL environment.

OFDL environments include experiences that are on- and off-line, synchronous, and asynchronous, open and closed, local and distance, as well as technology driven and technology absent. To fully develop this robust spectrum of learning opportunities, the OFDL community has a series of things to consider going forward. Beyond having the non-OFDL environment understand this breadth, the OFDL community needs to further describe and refine this complexity. Without a global adoption of equality in digital device and connectivity, the OFDL community needs to adapt and create mechanisms to bridge the gap.

At the core of education, there is a need to dispel the assumption that OFDL is a mere extension of synchronous classroom-based learning. Without efforts to dispel this assumption, a significant risk exists that in-person institutions will simply adopt

rudimentary forms of OFDL environments built on the belief that OFDL environments are simply the digitization or offsite version of a classroom. This path will inevitably harm the reputation of the OFDL community as fundamentally different design and pedagogy is required to create effective, engaging, and authentic OFDL environments. While on-site and in-person learning institutions may never acquire the true DNA of OFDL, they must come to understand and respect the DNA of OFDL environments if they wish to avoid failure.



Like any other mode of education, OFDL is an identity with a unique DNA.



Related to the DNA of OFDL is the potential need for a 'brand refresh', as many institutions do not understand its value as a foundation for education and assume that online means a synchronous extension of the classroom. The OFDL community needs to consider a different approach to advocacy.

A key learning for the OFDL community during the COVID19 pandemic is the importance of what might be referred to as the DNA of OFDL. OFDL is not simply an extension of classroom learning. Nor does it exist on its own, completely removed from classroom learning. Rather, it is a series of well-founded curricular, pedagogical, and learning design principles applied purposefully to a series of learning environments that one may define as everything except in-person classroom-based learning. Like any other mode of education, OFDL is an identity with a unique DNA.

Adopting OFDL practice is difficult – it requires a transformation more than a transfer, a holistic approach more than a piecemeal one, an integrated and purposeful infrastructure that brings about effective analytics over a fragmented one that consists of multiple systems, and deliberate change management.

There are many ideas and theories central to OFDL that need to be promoted for those who have never encountered them. The equation that defines quality OFDL is robust and not a simple translation of quality frameworks from in-person learning environments. The wellbeing of our learners and staff must not be overlooked, including the ability of staff to meaningfully engage with the potential for OFDL. Not only does the OFDL community need to consider how best to create informed practice for those new and growing in the OFDL space, but perhaps also create a guide for deliberate change management to support non-OFDL institutions in creating informed OFDL practices.

Our institutions, nations, contexts – and our students – differ by region and over time. We must be careful not to over-generalise or assume things about one another’s setting. Simultaneously, we are all eager to share and make education more accessible and extend its reach. To that end, two outcomes are critical to the future of robust OFDL environments. We must ensure that we have contextual awareness when creating and participating in collaborations for OFDL environments. Further, we need to offer educational choices appropriate to the requirements of learners that recognizes the theory and practical requirements of the curriculum.



Adopting OFDL practice is difficult – it requires a transformation more than a transfer, a holistic approach more than a piecemeal one, an integrated and purposeful infrastructure that brings about effective analytics over a fragmented one that consists of multiple systems, and deliberate change management.



In short, we need to adapt. We need to consider how new models are possible across OFDL. By recognizing that OFDL is not simply an extension of classroom-based learning, the OFDL community needs to consider how best to create the point of exchange between and OFDL environment and an in-person or classroom-based learning environment. In doing so, the OFDL community needs to consider an adapted and strengthened quality framework.

Consideration ought to be given to how the OFDL community could create a deliberate response protocol in the event of emergencies. At the onset of the COVID19 pandemic, numerous OFDL institutions were asked to support the transition of in-person institutions. While this response was coordinated through communities of practice, it did not necessarily follow a consistent and organized transition protocol. A potential area related to the guide for deliberate change management to support non-OFDL institution could be an emergency response guide for non-OFDL institutions to use in the event of an emergency rather than a planned adoption of OFDL into their environment.

Finally, nothing is possible in isolation. In all forward creation, adaptation, and resilience in OFDL environments, partnership and collaboration remain key to our collective success. The context being navigated is complex and uncertain. Through working together, the OFDL community will significantly amplify its agency and achievements.



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