Transcription for INSIDE HIGHER ED: THE KEY

The Impact of COVID-19 Learning Disruption

(UPBEAT MUSIC PLAYS)

DOUG LEDERMAN:
College students almost certainly lost ground academically during the pandemic. But knowing for sure, and having any sense of how much is next to impossible given higher education is relative disinclination to measure learning at all. Hello, and welcome back to the KEY, Inside Higher Ed's News Analysis podcast. I'm Doug Lederman, editor and co-founder of Inside Higher Ed and host of the KEY. It's been a while since you've heard from us given the holidays. My slacking off for a week on vacation. And, oh yes, my bout with COVID. No worries, I'm doing fine but you'll probably hear it in my voice in this week's episode. Speaking of, we're talking today about a report we published last month. Back on track helping students recover from COVID-19 learning disruption which is free to download on the Inside Higher Ed website. The report explores the available evidence about how the pandemic affected students' educational paths and finds that most colleges really don't know whether their students suffered what in the K-12 context is often called learning loss or learning disruption.

But that doesn't mean colleges aren't adapting their practices and policies in areas such as placement, instruction, grading, and assessment to help students make up whatever ground they've lost. We'll talk about some of those issues in the conversation that follows. I'm joined for that discussion by Natasha Jankowski, a higher education and assessment consultant, and former executive director of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment. Matthew Gunkel, Chief Online Learning and Technology Officer for the University of Missouri System. And Michael Hale, Vice President of education at VitalSource, the content management and learning platform company whose financial support made the Back on Track report possible. Before we begin, here's a word from VitalSource, the sponsor of this week's episode. VitalSource is committed to solving for the issues of affordability, access, and impact in higher education. Its latest release, Bookshelf CoachMe is a free built-in study coach that provides embedded practice throughout the e-text offering in the moment learner engagement and low stakes confirmation of the material.

Students prepare, practice and focus all in one place and show up to class confident and ready to learn. Bookshelf CoachMe is available now with 1,000s of titles on VitalSource.com. Now on to today's conversation. Natasha, Mike and Matt, welcome to the KEY and thanks for being here. Natasha, the report coach you were saying that it's pretty clear that learning loss or disruption happened. And you define that as students not coming away with some of the key knowledge or skills that an institution or an instructor would want them to glean from a particular course of study. And you suggested that that could result in a college or university not being entirely sure where on the programmatic path of learning a particular student might be and how to address that. So, can you tell us a little bit more about how we know that that disruption has happened and what we can and maybe can't say about the extent of that disruption?

NATASHA JANKOWSKI:
Sure. So, thank you so much. And I think it's a difficult sort of puzzle of a question to answer. So, I'm going to come at this from a couple different angles, I think. And I'm excited to hear sort of what my colleagues have to offer on it too. But if we come at this from the measurement approach. So, like can we measure loss of learning? I use air quotes around that. We have a lot of self-report data. So, from faculty or students saying, well, faculty going, our students didn't get as much as I wanted. Students

saying, I don't feel like I learned a lot or I was really distracted. And I don't feel like I was doing my best in this space. And then last year I had a hard time concentrating. I don't feel prepared. So, there is some of that self report data there. I think we have some indirect measures that we can look at in terms of institutional responses like policy changes. So, going like let's go with test optional. So, maybe we shouldn't be looking at that as indicator or let's extend our when you can do a withdrawal or an incomplete timeline or some of those logo like let's get flexible in our grading or when we accept submissions and assignments.

So, I think increases in that pass, fail option and could be like an indirect indicator of some of the concerns around that. And I think we also have in that indirect measures approach, contextual factors like do we even have a learning environment that was conducive to learning happening and like sticky learning. That's going to stick. And so we have all the increasing concerns of mental health, the disruption for learning like technology access. We have the pieces of thinking about the stressors, the first cognitive process of learning if I'm concerned about well-being and sort of basic needs, can I even engage in that learning. And I think we thought it too, and the enrollment declines of people just losing learning by disappearing from the education. But lastly for me, and I think the most important that actually helps institutions and faculty decide what to do is the actual assignments and tasks that we were asking the students in their courses in their learning experience. So, that authentic data, sort of our last piece of that of student learning within those individual courses to see like where you and where you're going.

So, a variety of different sort of angles from that measurement piece.

DOUG LEDERMAN:
Sounds like you're almost saying, when you sort of add up the various potential factors there's almost like a common sense, almost inevitability that's somewhere and other students were set back in some way, please.

NATASHA JANKOWSKI:
Yes, I think so. I think it's safer to assume that we need to take a harder look at where you are and what you need. And even if, you know, let's say in a course, I felt confident about that learning. I don't know how well that stuck with you with everything that's going on for our students and our learners. So, that needs to pay more attention to our students. Aware of where they are, do we know where they are? Are we talking about learning actively? And where students need support and where I need support as a faculty to get our students moving. That I think is a good assumption to just have and that we need to start, there's a foundational basic.

DOUG LEDERMAN:
Matt, curious, turning to you how you and your colleagues at the University of Missouri System and its campuses approach the issue of potential learning disruption for your students both before they entered the university's campuses and while they've been enrolled.

MATTHEW GUNKEL:
I mean, I think that Natasha made some really great points. And I think that the evidence is pretty clear and kind of what we've seen. And this this gap, I think that has occurred as people were working to adapt and transition through a really hard change. Right. They didn't choose to make the change. Right. And so because it was done to them, when we were making choices around how were we going to

transition and move the learning experience and how are we going to provide supports for our students. We were really concerned about being able to translate the kind of historical work and understanding and outcomes alignment that we might have had in the past. And while you know, I think lots of institutions across the Nation work really hard to do a really good job of making that transition. It also just wasn't the original expectation of the students. And they were working to re-understand a different modality and a different way to engage and a different way to work through content and material.

And in some cases the methodology required a lot of additional digital skills. And so we were back out not only working to retrain and or train initially on new tools and technologies, the faculty. But then we were also helping students understand how were they going to accomplish some of the things that you would just literally walk out of your dorm room and walk down the hall and pull your group together and do group work. And those things were easy and straightforward. And now all of a sudden, you had this technical barrier. And so we put a lot of thought into kind of what tools, what platforms. Where could we recraft and recreate as many experiences as possible in short order and then iterate on those. And I do think that we've seen significant increases now in our ability to iterate and put out really high-quality content and material that's now much more supportive and is maybe meeting students in the middle, you know, for their expectations. And of course, as we've seen people come back on campus.

It's been really helpful to now have this ability to be more fluid. And that fluidity is really I think, what we were striving to get to when we first began.

DOUG LEDERMAN:
Mike, VitalSource supported Inside Higher Ed's exploration of this topic in this report. So, thank you for that, first of all. What was your interest in doing so? And why do you think these issues are important for college administrators and faculty members to be aware of that prompted you to make this kind of work possible?

MICHAEL HALE:
You know, frankly it's because we believe that the COVID disruption is an opportunity to reflect on the fact that we're just not very good at measuring learning in higher ed. I mean, we know learning loss happen like Natasha said. And we know universities are doing lots of things to support learners, as Matt said. But the truth is there wasn't a great baseline for us to actually look at learning loss. There's lots of losses during this for sure, psychosocial and things like that but we don't have a good baseline. And we'd love for this to be an opportunity for the community to say, look, we should be more serious about that. It's not a lack of data, particularly as more and more course materials have gone digital. All the companies that produce these things and faculty that adopt them, they're producing lots of data that can be paired with other data that the universities get to really try to get at what are the behaviors that produce the right kind of learning? There are great examples out there.

The Georgia State when everybody talks about it. And there's certainly others but why isn't it more? Campuses like WGU also do a great job measuring that. But they're an exception. It's a very particular type of institution. I'd love to see more learning officers like Matt, out there. So, it really is like we're in the learning business. We're on the business side of it but we care about it. And we'd love to encourage this conversation.

DOUG LEDERMAN:
Natasha, why has it historically been so challenging for higher education to get its collective head around learning?

NATASHA JANKOWSKI:
One of the things that I really liked about the report that came out was the tension it elevated between, for us to talk about learning lines, there's a desire for a collective measure. But for us to do something about it we need individual level data. Right. So, we need individual information to help individual students as they're moving through individualized learning paths on one hand. But for us to say, here's what's happened, here's the shared experience, we need something common. And most of the time it's look to like well like Cato, we have standardized testing and all of that. But they have a lot of things we don't have in higher ed that just don't work like a common curriculum or a common core. We don't have that. And if you tried to do it, it would not go over well. And it's not because of faculty alone. It's because we're also doing something different. We're specializing, we're moving you into a discipline and into a career path. And so that doesn't make sense in the same way.

But even if we did have, I think that this is that interesting tension that's raised in this report. Even if we did have a corrective measure in higher ed that we could talk about, I don't actually know if it would have been valuable at this moment in time because we turned away from the standardized ones that we have. We turned away from the admissions tests that help us sort of move through which is a standardized measure. We turned away from looking at some of our even field specific instruments and tools that do that going, oh, I don't know because we really needed at that moment in time that individual data. But it's an ongoing tension that we have within the field.

DOUG LEDERMAN:
Matt, do you have thoughts about what impact this moment might have on the discussion about whether and how we measure learning?

MATTHEW GUNKEL:
I think overall, it's an accelerant. And kind of to Natasha's point, I kind of see two things. Right. So, one is, how can we continue to understand this in some aggregate form? Right. So, how can we continue to articulate our outcomes and look at the kind of instruments that we have to do sort of some large measures against areas and disciplines in schools and majors and those kinds of things. I also see a really interesting sort of unique opportunity for increased individualized reflection. So, how can we help individuals better understand how are they learning? How are they experiencing the material and content? How can they reflect that back to help the faculty or the instructors understand what they know, what they've consumed? And then where are there opportunities for them to come at the material and content from different angles in order to express those outcomes? And I think you've seen that. Right. As you kind of looked at two different sort of fundamental modalities. It's not really that we delivered content differently or we delivered different material but people had to figure out how to consume it differently.

And it's that consumption and then that reflection back to ultimately understand the outcome that I think is sort of critical. And that's where we have the data but we've been looking at it in some aggregate. And I don't know that we've yet reached the point of being able to allow individuals to start to understand it for themselves. How are they kind of working through this? I kind of think about, and this is one of my favorite things that existed. I don't think it's out there anymore. Khan Academy years

ago had a star chart and you could walk the math outcomes through a star chart. And you could like see dots for yourself on like where you are going in a visual representation. And it's that kind of concept of, how can I kind of see where I'm at as I'm traversing this very complex structure that occurs within higher education. And I do think that that is one complexity that is different from K-12 when you move into higher ed. We also allow you to combine differing disciplines and create a definition of an area that people may not understand yet.

And that's all so very interesting in and of itself as well. So, we will ultimately generate new outcomes that don't exist today.

DOUG LEDERMAN:
Mike, did you want to jump in here?

MICHAEL HALE:
Students today still often the assessments they receive, they either perceive it as or it is actually summative versus formative. And so most students and I'm generalizing here, but they just see it as, oh, that's my grade and move on as opposed to seeing that as data for learning. And there's ways to present assessment in that way and like a great writing teacher does this as drafts and if that can be transformative. And we should be looking at tools that do that. And you can measure those things although we know that if you have practice questions along with reading, it produces what's called the doer effect which means if you do those practice questions it can, and this is Oi research coming out of Carnegie Mellon, it can produce a learning benefit six times that of reading a text and three times watching a video that's super well established.

DOUG LEDERMAN:
Natasha.

NATASHA JANKOWSKI:
Yes, no, plus one. So, all of this. So, I think on the complexity part we have the infrastructure there for all the data to pull from. We've done the mapping to more explain. We know what courses are supposed to do what and have done all those pieces. And with that formative part we now have tons of data points. So, at any point in time we can go, OK, here's where you are in that learning journey. But if you're not aware of it or I'm not aware of it or we don't use it in that formative way to then say, OK, you have an opportunity to do something with this feedback. You have a chance to engage in your learning differently and make it part of this learning process. Then we do a disservice to all of this infrastructure that we have to really become the type of thing, I think that suppose talking about an underlying sort of each of these pieces has been the active role of students in that. That it's not the role of an assessment to sort of pop in and look down on the learner and say, ah, I can unveil for you where you are on this.

But it's to be at all throughout that is open and clearly visible to everyone involved in the learning process.

DOUG LEDERMAN:
Mike.

MICHAEL HALE:
Like we just rolled out at VitalSource, you know we have our reader that's pretty ubiquitous on every campus but we rolled out a new feature called CoachMe that it just adds form to the questions

alongside the reading. The cool thing about it is, we launched it a couple of weeks ago. We already have almost a million questions answered. Nobody has to answer these questions. It's just students reading along and they are prompted to it. But the reason I want to mention it is because we're producing tons of data here that we hope universities will use just thinking about how much data we do produce. And as Natasha said and as Matt said, there is infrastructure there. But it seems like we could be better with that. And I don't have the answers there.

NATASHA JANKOWSKI:
This goes back to sort of where I feel like we dropped the ball and assessment is we have all this stuff but we can't tell you about progression. Like I can't tell you where you should be by a particular point in time. So, we've done on this mapping, we know what all these certain things are supposed to do. We might have all this data and stuff. But when we get to that like learning last question, I can't tell you what we need to do to catch you up or how much we need to go because that progression piece we haven't quite figured it out. And so to know like at this level, you should be here doing that. And we all collectively agree. And we're striving towards that. That's a coherent program. That's that missing piece that I think our K-12 partners have in some of those pieces that we haven't quite gotten ourselves wrapped around to be able to answer some of those collective questions.

MICHAEL HALE:
There are people who have attributed some of the learning loss to the fact that students were learning virtually for a good part of the pandemic. Some still are. And that reflects what continues, I think to be skepticism in some circles about the validity and the quality of online learning, etc. It's inevitable that students as Matt said, who were thrust into a different learning environment again, not by choice. It was inevitable that there was going to be some challenge there even if the online learning was as great as it could possibly be. And we know that that emergency remote learning which is what we had for a good while after the start of the pandemic wasn't necessarily a great quality. So, I'm curious about how you think this moment and particularly the moment going forward is likely to affect this whole conversation, I don't know. Natasha, do you have some first thoughts on that?

NATASHA JANKOWSKI:
So, I'll kick us off but I think there are, from my experience of where I sat in conversations especially in assessment. There are zombie ideas in higher ed that it doesn't matter how much data we have to prove it wrong. They just keep coming back and like we can't seem to get rid of them. And I think that perception that somehow inherently online learning is less than or we learn less as a student just because it's online is one of those zombie ideas. Some people are convinced because they had they were forced to do it as faculty and they're like, oh my gosh, actually this isn't what I thought it was. Sure. Will, that idea go away. No, I don't think so. But it does, I think help to remind us the need for intentionality and good instructional design and any modality because whatever way in which you engage in learning, you can do it really poorly and you can also do it really well. But I hate to be the sort of Debbie Downer that I don't think this will be our saving grace for online but I think there will always be some sort of knee jerk, anti online learning.

DOUG LEDERMAN:
Matt, as you sit in that world pretty directly. How do you combat that?

MATTHEW GUNKEL:
Yeah. So, this is a great question. And I am the online guy here running online education. I think that I'm

going to take like a really long view on this, sort of next five to 10 years. And that is, I think that we're going to see educational institutions fold back in their online entities back into their existing operations. And we're going to see this become the standard of operation. So, with that I think this idea of hybrid. But I think we're going to see those concepts just get fundamentally folded back into the operational structures. And so while online will continue to be a path, I think we're going to see more flexibility that's available to the students. And I think this idea of just isn't online is ultimately going to just kind of go away. It's going to fade into the background and end the ether. And we're going to give students a very kind of experience that they might need. And I actually think the last year and a half has just shown a lot of institutions that they can deliver that kind of experience and they can allow more self selection from a learning style perspective.

DOUG LEDERMAN:
A reminder that you're listening to a conversation about learning disruption related to the COVID-19 pandemic involving Natasha Jankowski, Higher Education and Assessment Consultant. Matthew Gunkel, Chief Online Learning and Technology Officer for the University of Missouri System. And Mike Hale, Vice President of Education at VitalSource. If we acknowledge that there has been learning disruption and that the way we do teaching and learning is in an accelerated process of being transformed. What are some of the changes in institutional behavior and policy that are designed to address this renewed focus on understanding learning and helping students proceed educationally? Mike.

MICHAEL HALE:
I'm going to start with something that's like exceedingly simple. One of the things that is the case in higher ed is we have required course materials. Every faculty member says, these are the materials that are required for you to be successful in the course. And yet in most cases they're not actually required in the sense that you don't have to go get them or you're left to this maze of where you go get them. And one of the trends we've seen in the last few years is institutions taking that on with things like inclusive access. Missouri is one of the leaders there which is such a simple thing where students show up in their course, they get one of their course, the LMS and the materials are just there and they click boom and they're charged for it. But that seems such a simple thing. If you truly believe that these course materials are necessary for success, why not make sure they get them? If you don't then don't make them required. But if you do, and so that's what we're seeing IAA and what's also been called equitable access rents tissues saying, hey, we're going to give you one price and make sure you get everything.

But there's not a particularly sophisticated or complex thing. But it's an answer. And it's one that seemed like should be kind of fundamental.

DOUG LEDERMAN:
Matt, you are next.

MATTHEW GUNKEL:
Years ago I had a dream around how can we get to really adaptive learning? I think that's still out there for a number of companies and a number of groups. And I think we're just on the edge of starting to see some of the technology for AI and machine learning concepts that are driving some of those experiences starting to come to fruition. And that's really exciting.

DOUG LEDERMAN:
Natasha, how about you?

NATASHA JANKOWSKI:
Sure. So, for me I think there's three things that I get jazzed about, like me being one is that there is this tight coupling between classroom instruction whether it's online or however that might be an assessment as that these things feed each other, that it's not something that's separate over their heads for reporting. But this is an integrated part of my ongoing practice for how I can be effective and students can be effective. And that's fantastic. It's been an ongoing sort of argument that's been happening and so seeing that come together is great. The second thing I think is the inclusion of student voice and student experience is being vital to making choices of what we need to be doing and how would you respond that it's not, oh, we'll sit over here and decide and then come back. That the students is this active participant and source of information to help make this work. That's huge. And that's coupled to the third part which Matt also was talking about too which is that teaching students how they learn in different situations and how to be engaged in that learning.

And that wouldn't be possible if you didn't have the first two. Have sort of assessment and classroom becoming tight. And then student voices becoming an integral part of this to then say, ah, we actually need to teach students how to navigate successfully through the educational journey as an active participant. And I think those three pieces are really positive changes that have huge implications for other ways we go about doing work.

DOUG LEDERMAN:
Mike.

MICHAEL HALE:
Yeah. That last piece, Natasha. I'm curious to hear from both of you guys on the notion that look, the fact of the matter is most professors were not taught how to teach. It's just not a part of your instruction when you get your PhD, it's simply not. The part of mine because I came from an educator background and I was teaching teachers how to teach. So, how do you get to that last, is it the onus on the instructor to get those skills and teach students how to do that or there should be a separate part of the institution to get to that?

NATASHA JANKOWSKI:
So, in my happy make believe dreamworld, this is actually a part of your graduate training. That that should be, and this is not a new argument that's being made in that space. But that if you have a desire to become future faculty, that you need training in pedagogy and assessment and instructional design. And that that should be a given that disciplinary expertise is not enough in that space even if you're going to be going out and doing research because you have to educate people about your research as well. And these are sort of transferable skills. So, in my happy world, we start producing faculty ready to hit the ground, running on this work in partnership with the online units, in partnership with instructional designers, in partnership with Center for Teaching and Learning.

MICHAEL HALE:
I 100% agree that that's the Holy Grail. Systemic change of that magnitude is really tough to bring about in what we have which is a non-system of higher education. And so I think if we wait for that, I know you're not suggesting we wait for that but like that will require a couple of generations probably. So, one of the potentially silver linings, I think of the pandemic. And it'll be interesting to see if it sticks. But I do think we saw greater acknowledgment on the part of institutions and some extent of individual faculty members as well about the importance of instruction and teaching because a lot of what the other

things that institutions did were stripped away and learning was what was left. And I think we saw pretty meaningful investment in teaching and learning centers and other things. Now, again, that's not going to be this kind of systemic change or transformation of graduate education to focus more on teaching would be. But I do think it was something that I think we saw begun or intensified in the pandemic.

Matt, do you have last thoughts on that?

MATTHEW GUNKEL:
Yeah. I mean, I completely agree. I like the vision, I think it's fantastic. And it's one that I'm constantly driving towards and working on as a unit that has a lot of instructional designers working with faculty on those concepts. I think I also come at it just a little bit from a flip in that helping students better understand self-discovery. And so if you take some leadership models where we go out and we give you breakdowns in, here's your leadership style, here's kind of who you are and strengths finder and all of these kinds of different areas. I think you could almost do something very similar for students. Here's how you learn, here's how that maps. And that then creates a two way conversation then as instructors are gaining those skills and understanding how students are responding to material and content and vice versa which is, can be a really interesting environment.

DOUG LEDERMAN:
That's today's conversation with Natasha Jankowski, Matt Gunkel and Mike Hale. Thanks to them for their insights. The issues we discussed today are likely to matter for some time. Because if students have lost ground during the pandemic, that disruption could mean that students are less prepared for the next course or the one after that. So, it's incumbent on colleges and professors to do all they can to step up their game to help students get back on track. Whether that's altering their placement practices, adopting more active learning pedagogies or better training faculty members in effective teaching. Or just paying extra close attention to students who might be struggling. My sense is that we've seen more of that kind of activity during the pandemic than we did before it. And if that's accurate, that could be an unexpected silver lining from the long nightmare that is COVID. That's a wrap for this episode of the KEY. We'll be getting back to our weekly cadence. So, please join us again next week.

And a reminder that if you'd like the KEY, please subscribe on Apple or Google Podcasts, Stitcher or your favorite podcast platform. Until next week, I'm Doug Lederman. Stay well and stay safe.