Transcription for

THE KEY: INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP 58: TEACHING AND LEARNING IN (ANOTHER) FLUID FALL

JEFF BORDEN

DOUG LEDERMAN

SEPTEMBER 2021

PROVIDED BY

CAPTION ACCESS

contact@captionaccess

www.captionaccess.com

OCTOBER 5, 2021

THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP 58: TEACHING AND LEARNING IN (ANOTHER) FLUID FALL

JEFF BORDEN

DOUG LEDERMAN

29:24

===

[MUSIC]

DOUG LEDERMAN: Hello and welcome to The Key, Inside Higher Ed's news and analysis podcast. I'm Doug Lederman, editor and cofounder of Inside Higher Ed, and I hope you've all had at least a little time in recent weeks to catch a breath and take care of yourselves before heading back into another unsettled and unsettling semester.

Most of us have expected, or at least hoped for, a lot more stability this fall. But here we are. For those of you involved in teaching and learning at your colleges and universities that means continuing to live in the sometimes uncomfortable space you've inhabited for the last 18 months. Will my class have to go remote tomorrow? Have I designed my course to withstand that kind of disruption? Can I be effective no matter what setting we're in? These may not be fleeting questions for institutions and instructors as higher education deals with the new reality that, whether it's a global pandemic, or hurricanes or forest fires, or any other kind of interruption or disruption, circumstances may require and students may demand flexibility in how and when academic instruction is delivered.

To talk about those and other issues, I'm joined for this week's episode of The Key by Jeff Borden, chief academic officer at D2L and executive director of the Institute for Inter-Connected Education. Jeff is a longtime faculty member, academic administrator, writer, and speaker. While he spends a lot of time thinking and talking about technology, he's particularly focused right now on whether colleges and instructors sustain their pandemic era focus on non-cognitive as well as cognitive needs.

JEFF BORDEN: The two supportive angles of the learning triangle are affection and conation, and we now know we need both of those things if you want to look at the holistic learner. And so schools I think really got a good sight or insight into that. Students were able to finally sort of bubble that up as an actual need, maybe with better semantics and language around it. And I hope it sticks, because I know that there were some schools that really made an effort intentionally to try to help students feel supported from a distance. They shouldn't give that up when COVID is quote-unquote "over."

DOUG LEDERMAN: Before we begin today's conversation, here's a word from the sponsor of this week's episode D2L, maker of the Brightspace learning platform.

VOICE: This episode of The Key is sponsored by D2L Brightspace, the LMS partner for top institutions around the world. D2L is a global leader with a cloud-based platform that is easy, flexible, and smart. See how you can level up your LMS at www.d2l.com.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Jeff, welcome to The Key and thanks for being here.

JEFF BORDEN: Well, thanks so much, Doug. It's really great to be here and to speak with the audience. Thanks.

DOUG LEDERMAN: You've been a longtime college instructor. You've been an academic, in addition to you roles at technology companies and a consultant and speaker. And thinking from those varied perspectives, we're entering yet another academic term that is a little confusing and uncertain. And I'm just curious about your sense of the biggest questions that professors and academic affairs types, institutions, are dealing with as they try to deliver and offer productive learning environments in what continues to be a very unsteady condition this fall.

JEFF BORDEN: Yeah, it's the elephant in the room, right? So we have to talk about it.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Yeah, afraid so...

JEFF BORDEN: Yeah, so, you know, in my experience, first of all, I think I gave 28 one-hour webinars

during COVID, which, that's got to be a record for me. I gave three eight-hour Zoom sessions for schools, domestically and internationally. People are really trying to figure this stuff out.

And I think, you know, some of the biggest questions that I am still asked when I talk to presidents, and provosts, and CIOs, there are certainly those that are saying when will we get to back to quote-unquote "normal," whatever that looks like in their world, which typically means, when can we stop worrying doing it tech. But I think for most leaders that are actually, that have a little bit of vision, that are really trying to do right by their institutions, they're really trying to figure out how much of what came out during this emergency situation do we keep. You know, what's appropriate to have? Do we have for all students the ability to take some courses online?

We now have some fans in instructors that weren't fans before. You know, there were plenty of people saying online was second best at best, and now I think that there's, I don't know, 10, 15 percent of those who were forced to teach online going this is okay. I can do this from home, and I can still connect with my students. That wasn't everybody's experience for sure. There are some who still came out at the end saying it was as bad as I told you it was going to be, and I think there's probably some self-fulfilling prophecy there.

But there are definitely some trying to figure out in the world that's coming, and while I hope we don't have another COVID for 100 years like the Spanish flu maybe, it's certainly possible that we're going to have them taking more precedence in our lives faster and faster. And that doesn't even include states that deal with hurricanes, or blizzards, or fires on the West Coast. I mean, there's plenty of reasons to go remote at any given time, just depending on where you are. And having those plans in place, and knowing what they are, I think is a great question to ask and answer. And those are the questions that people are finally to a place where they can ask them. That's the stuff I'm hearing.

DOUG LEDERMAN: That issue of academic continuity, which is the instructional equivalent of business continuity, really, is obviously important. What I've been thinking about even more is the question of how student expectations may have changed as a result of the experience of the last 18 months. You talked about some greater faculty acceptance of digital learning. And while it's too early to say, I think, it seems like there's probably been something similar happening on the student side, even as we've seen many students desperate to return to their campuses this fall.

But if we assume there will be some change in student expectation, the question of what that looks like and how the institutions deal with that is really unclear to me. To the extent that we want, that we see

students expecting to be able to take one of more of their courses online, that's not a snap for every place, but that's, a lot of places can handle that.

A much trickier thing would be if students come to expect or want the ability to make decisions class by class, Tuesday, one thing, Thursday, another, etc., etc. And, again, I think it's too early to say but I would posit that if that's what students want, a lot of institutions would struggle mightily to deal with that now and maybe for some time. How does that strike you?

JEFF BORDEN: Yeah, I agree. Hyflex, lineflex, you know, people are calling it different things. But the notion that an individual student can just make that choice on the fly and toggle back and forth day by day, as Bryan Alexander talked about Toggle Terms, that's toggle classes. And I don't know that many schools, from their infrastructure, from their support models, from their resources, I don't think they can handle that.

I really think that as you look at how schools need to work to get into a good place, there are really two things that come to mind. One, there was a pretty significant survey that came out, I hate saying this out loud sometimes, but it was by Chegg, I know they're very controversial for other reasons, but they surveyed students and said, one of the questions was, how well do you think your professor did with teaching online? And in the United States, because it was worldwide survey, in the United States, students were not impressed. They did not think that their professors knew how to use online learning.

So there obviously some training that needs to happen. It was interesting to me watching, you know, stories in even the LA Times and the Wall Street Journal, and stuff, when professors were saying we're being required to go online, they weren't necessarily also going to look at the LightHouses or the North Stars out there that are saying here's the library of assets that will tell you the best ways to do this. They were often going next door to the other professor who also didn't know anything. What are you doing? And they're saying, well, I'm going to try this. And so they said, okay, well, I'll try that too. And so there was a bevy of professors who didn't know what to do and didn't really go to the literature to see what to do.

Similarly, we know that professional development is always a trial for folks. You know, in the book that I just had come out last week, I'm the editor for this anthology, one of the professors who wrote one of the chapters is a professor in China. And he did a study, a significant study, where they were talking about the difference between US professors coming to China and those from other Western-based cultures, and talking about how much professional development they come to this classroom with. And

when it came to ed tech, when it came to knowing how to use VLE, which is what they call it there, or LMS, there's usually less than an hour of training on how to use that thing from North American professors, whereas in most of the rest of the world, we're talking seven to ten hours of how it works.

So I think that there are some issues with going to the resources, say, here's the best stuff, and then getting the professional development around how to make that work.

DOUG LEDERMAN: We obviously, we saw a lot of institutions ramp that up, sometimes just in the spring break period before the first closure, but then I think a lot over the summer. I'm curious, was that study in China prepandemic or...

JEFF BORDEN: It was.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Yeah, so I would like to think, and from talking to my colleagues in teaching and learning centers, I know they made a lot more available, and I think they saw a lot of take-up of it. So I'd like to think those numbers, that gap might have closed because of the pandemic. But there's no question that we saw more of it, and I'd like to think that we saw institutions, when you talk about sort of the things you hope we might hang on to that might last, I do think that the awareness of a lot of academic administrators about the importance of teaching and of teaching well, because we saw a lot of other things about the institution kind of stripped away, and we saw a lot of people judging the value of their educational experience, based on just what happened in the classroom, if they were sitting in their parents' house or whatever. So I'd like to think that that may have been at least a quasi-permanent change or recognition of the importance to that. And I'd be interested in what you, whether you sense that as well. What are other things that you hope may be bright spots or lessons learned that we might see influence in a positive way going forward?

JEFF BORDEN: Yeah, so I'll go to another survey that you guys ran Inside Higher Ed, where you asked students, one of the questions that was asked was what do you want to keep from what happened during COVID, the context of COVID teaching and learning? And while some to if was interesting in terms of the technology, you know, I thought it was very interesting that students said, I like to maintain a back channel during a lecture with the professor, which I'm sure most professors, like, that's a horrible idea. I don't ever want to do that.

But it was really positive to me to see both sides of the coin I'm about to explain, students said, I want

more opportunities to find support that are not necessarily class-based. I don't necessarily need tutoring. I need help with financial aid. I need to find a way to connect with other people. I need some friendships. And so, you know, the schools I think also got the message and started saying we don't really have a good mechanism by which to support students other than classroom-based stuff.

That stuff, you know, I've talking about and writing about for half a decade, the importance of what, I frame it as the learning triangle. There's cognition at the top, and for fifty years, that's all we focused on, because it's easier to measure, or measure the proxy of cognition, you know, tests, grades, scores. But the two supportive angles of the learning triangle are affection and conation, and we've know this for 110 years.

You know, you've got people, maybe a third of people, who they walk into a classroom without friendships, they cannot learn. Now, we now know why. If you look at the neuroscience behind it, it's because they're creating glutamate rather than oxytocin. And glutamate is this little neurotransmitter that it comes out of your spine and starts to chomp at the neurons of cognition, which you need to think. And for some people, they're in such a state of stress because they don't have friendships, but that's what's happening in their system, rather than oxytocin being created, which allows them to say, hey, I'm liked, I'm supported, I've got relationships, therefore I can learn from an expert.

Similarly, on the other end, you've got conation, and that's what Carol Dweck has made now quite a name for herself talking about grit and mindset, and tenacity and resilience, and just belief in yourself, in self-direction. And we now know you need both of those things if you want to look at the holistic learner.

And so schools, I think, really got a good sight, or insight into that. Students were able to finally sort of bubble that up as an actual need, maybe with better semantics and language around it. And I hope it sticks, because I know that there were some schools that really made an effort intentionally to try to help students feel supported from a distance. They shouldn't give that up when COVID is quote-unquote "over."

DOUG LEDERMAN: So that's a really interesting question, and I'm curious whose responsibility that is, because I guess my sense is that my faculty members, when I've thought about a bright side, I do think we saw many individual faculty members see their students as people that was over and above what had historically been the case when they were walking in a door and walking out 50 minutes later or whatever, and maybe have a half hour of office hours at some point. But they were seeing things, they

were sensing students had a very difficult time for many of them. So I imagine a lot of individual faculty members may have a greater recognition of that. But I'm not sure that they, all of them would necessarily know how to respond to that whole human. So where do you see the responsibility and what are some of the actions and processes or whatever that we might see either individual instructors or institutions do to try and ensure that those other parts of the student get supported?

JEFF BORDEN: Yeah, I've had some very interesting conversations with a guy named Michael Lee Stallard. He's a writer. He's not an educator per se, although he has worked with some educational organizations, TCU being prominent there. But he wrote a book called Connection Culture. And he talks about how, first of all, it is the not the problem of faculty, it is the problem of the institution to help their students when it comes to connecting. And really, when I'm talking about connection, I'm going beyond even this definition and talking about those two underpinning, you know, affection and conation.

And he gives a really excellent example of how TCU has done this, based on largely some leadership from the top that said this is our problem. So rather than saying, you know, student success or retention should be left at the feet of academics, which is always a little bit funny to me, because first of all no one is trained in how to retain students. But quite often the directive is, you know, teach better. What does that mean? They're teaching the best they possibly can. What does that look like? But when you start involving student affairs staff and other liaisons, when you start talking about counselors and advisers, even from enrollment to, again, retention, and even into alumni, you start to see the possibility for a safety net. But, of course, we know that higher ed is filled with many more silos than safety nets. And that requires communication and connection.

And that's where I've truly tried to make my mark in the last decade by creating underpinning infrastructure. There are technologies that can assist with this. You know, I'm not saying it's a technology play, it doesn't have to be. But without it, doing this at scale is, I would argue, is almost impossible, if not impossible. So when you create a community environment, that you really connect to the learning environment, that you then also really connect to the student success and measurement tools that people have. I really don't care necessarily if you just want to go in and look at LMS data that says that 30 percent of your students are struggling, because you're not looking at the other two-thirds of students who are struggling not cognitively, but because they don't have relationships, they're not connected. They're not involved in an organization. They don't have that direction. And so there are groups out there, technologies out there, that can and should be connected that would actually help us save these students so that a faculty member can say, hey, I've got a problem student here. They're struggling academically. But I've also get a student affairs person who could say, hey, this person is in some trouble because they don't have any connection.

[MUSIC]

VOICE: This episode is sponsored by D2L Brightspace, the easy, flexible, and smart choice for your LMS. With D2L's powerful learning analytics, top institutions create personalized experiences for every learner, to deliver real results and can act in real time to get at risk learners back on track. Discover how you can level up your LMS at www.d2l.com

DOUG LEDERMAN: We're joined on The Key today by Jeff Borden, chief academic officer at D2L and executive director of the Institute for Inter-Connected Education. Jeff, you were just discussing that challenge at many colleges to thinking about the various academic, psycho-social, and other needs of any particular student, and the disconnect between instructors, academic affairs, students affairs, technology departments, all of which might have a role in addressing those needs. Is that disconnect primarily a data issue, a technology issue, an institutional structure issue? Is it all of the above?

JEFF BORDEN: The siloed nature of higher ed has just, it really flared up and became obvious during COVID. The idea that, you know, students affairs just doesn't interact very well with academic affairs, which doesn't interact very well with IT, and you really just get a sense of where, for example, where does the tutoring office sit? Where does the writing center sit. Well, often it sits in student affairs. I don't know why. That's just sort of where it sort of has come out of, when it's highly academic in nature. And so you just start to see the little fiefdoms and kingdoms of people saying, no, this is my business, that's your business--and without the connective tissue. And that connective tissue certainly can be technology in order to make it more efficient, scalable, easier to communicate, etc.

But even without that, you can do this culturally to a degree, to an extent. They can have the conversations, they can have those, you know, as Zappos used to call them, intentional collisions when they forced all of their 3000 employees to go through one door. And people would have these intentional collisions of saying, hey, did you see that problem that I saw last week, because you might have some thoughts on that? And then they actually have conversations. That doesn't happen at most institutions of higher education.

DOUG LEDERMAN: What impact do you think the last 18 months have had on perceptions about the role of technology in higher education and about the extent to which technology can helpful or not in delivering instruction?

JEFF BORDEN: I look at it as a continuum. There are e-vangelists on one side. Unfortunately, they tend to overpromise and underdeliver. On the other side, there are the cave people, right, your colleagues against virtually everything, right?

DOUG LEDERMAN: Right...

JEFF BORDEN: In the middle, you've got people who are at a place where they say reasonably, logically, and credibly show me that I can do something that I couldn't do without the technology, then I'll try, I'll give it a go. And it if works, I'll keep at it.

And I think that COVID gave us people in the sort of more reasonable middle than we've had there in higher ed specifically. You know, higher ed is as opposed to change as pretty much any sector I'm aware of. And technology is often associated with that change. As much as it pains me to say innovation is often synonymous with technology in higher ed, I think most of the innovation gurus would tell you that is should be synonymous with change management. That's really what innovation is more about. Technology might be that vehicle, but it may not. So I think we're finally at a place where we're seeing more people say, okay, I hadn't been willing to accept, you might be able to do some things with technology that maybe you can do. And similarly, I think there are some of those e-vangelists who have now said, okay, I used to say you could do anything online. Maybe that's also not true. Maybe you can do many things online, but not everything. And so I think we have more in the reasonable middle. That's my hope for the infrastructure coming out of the instructor level.

DOUG LEDERMAN: That resonates with sort of what I've generally heard. What then is the task at hand for institutions and I guess also individual instructors, is it to really look hard at what can be best done in the various modes, and figuring out how best to combine them? What's the... If we've got a, I don't know, I'll call it a detente, but if we've got sort of like a little bit more of a meeting in the middle where things are possible and minds are somewhat open, what's the job to be done for the next five or ten years, or whatever, in that environment?

JEFF BORDEN: I would really hope that leaders at institutions, and this has to be executively sponsored, I think, that they would use this opportunity to do some experimentation. They're going to have more availability of volunteers, I think, than they've had in past when it comes to technology-enabled educational things.

I'm not just talking about in the classroom, although it certainly applies in the classroom. But even, again, digitally supported organizations, you know, can I as an online student join a club today that I couldn't have joined two years ago because that was only in person? So every aspect of what that might look like. I think you will now see, especially this year and next year, more people willing to say, I'm willing to give that a go. I'll try, I'll try to help make that happen.

And then you can, you know, in the spirit of, this is the chief innovation officer in me coming out, you know, Jack Foster said, if you want to get a good idea, you need to get a lot of ideas. And rather than taking all of our eggs and putting them in one strategic initiative basket next year, which will fail, and then we do it again the year after that, and it will fail, and then people will just start getting use to that and saying I'm not even going to help. If we can start saying, let's experiment and let's try 10 things, 12 things, 20 things, and then the ones that are working, let's feed them, let's add more resources, add more people, add more money, whatever that might look like, I think we might find a way to get to a school saying we have online, we have on ground, we have hybrid, and we are ready for whatever nature throws our way. We're ready for the next problem, to be able to toggle in and out of whatever modality we need, with tremendous fluidity, continuity, as you said at the very beginning.

I think that that's how we can start to get there, because it's going to take time. You know, as much as people are willing to utilize technology, they still have to practice. You're first online class will never be as good as your second, which will never be as good as your third, just like your face-to-face experience was the same way. So we still need time to practice, as well as prepare.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Do you sort of enter this next phase more optimistic than you might have been a couple of years ago that this ecosystem of institutions and people, can get to that place that you describe, maybe not all of them, but enough of them that students will be served at least as well, if not better?

JEFF BORDEN: I am as optimistic for digital assistance as ever. Again, I'm not saying everything has to be digital. That's just not my perspective, but I think that we've got more people that are willing to try, whether that's because of some forced empathy... You know, to your point, as you said earlier, there were I think some faculty who had treated students like widgets in the past, who had a rough time during COVID. They lost people or they had people get sick, or they had people struggle. And so when students came to them and said I've got someone at home who's struggling, or I've got someone at home I've lost, they suddenly have connection that they hadn't really had prior to COVID.

So we've not only got the sort of socio-emotional lens of sort of enhanced, augmented connectivity and overlap, we've got the same thing with technology with people. You know, students said I don't want to take a class online, just as faculty had said, I will never teach a class online. And both of those groups were in online classes in the last year and a half. And again, some of them said, hey, this isn't so bad. So I think that we've just got this sort of moment of shared empathy that we can capitalize on, and the best schools I think will, rather than just putting out all the fires that continue to come up.

DOUG LEDERMAN: That was Jeff Borden, chief academic officer of D2L, sharing his insights about the fluid landscape for teaching and learning at the start of yet another unstable fall. I was particularly struck by how this conversation, which was nominally about the role of technology in instruction kept veering instead to much more fundamental human issues--the state of mind of students, the need to better prepare professors to succeed however they're teaching, knocking down institutional barriers that prevent faculty and staff members from seeing and serving the whole student. Eager as we all are to get back to normal, let's try to hold on to that increased awareness many of us gained about the importance of the human side of our work, of our colleagues, our students, our clients. Maybe take a beat before you fire off that email, or dial that number in anger, or honk that horn extra loud. The world is still a little out of whack, and a little compassion never hurts.

That's all for this week's episode of The Key. I'm Doug Lederman, and until next week, stay well and stay safe.

[MUSIC]