

Things More Things Change

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History never repeats ...?

There is nothing like two years in a pandemic to bring out all the cliches. This is not a criticism but an acknowledgment that the seemingly endless days of listening to COVID numbers, isolating at home and trying to keep up with regulation changes has left everyone lost for words and resorting to formulaic phrases if for nothing else than to reassure ourselves that 'this too shall pass'. However, despite the total immersion in binge watching Netflix series or cleaning out long ignored shelves, which was the experience of many, much of society continued to function. The basic necessities of food, power and health continued as did other activities considered vital.

While we live in a highly connected, highly technological world, there are some interesting parallels in our human history. Egan (2020) gives a vivid description of the impact of the bubonic plague, the "Black Death" in mid-14th century England. He notes that almost immediately after the outbreak "students vacated centers of education, such as the new universities that had popped up in northern Italy, Paris and Oxford". Surprisingly however, demand for higher education grew. Four new colleges at Cambridge were established during what might be considered the peak of the bubonic pandemic – Pembroke (1347), Gonville and Caius (1348), Trinity Hall (1350), and Corpus Christi (1352). Enrolment Oxford had increased already by 1375, to the extent that it had to establish New College in 1379.

In wiping out 30% of the population, that pandemic caused significant social disruption. It broke the feudal system in Europe. The shackles of a tightly bound class system began to fall away as acute labour shortages meant field labours could shop around for the best wages. (A digressive parallel-try getting a Tradie in Melbourne these days!) The increased mobility and improved income of the peasantry, especially in England and Italy meant that families who would previously have never imagined a university-bound son were now able to place their child in the path of learning Courtenay ("Effect," 713). There was no overnight upheaval, but enough people began to see the possibility of a new path forward. The changes began with the expansion of the local feeder or prep schools, where children learned basic writing, English and Latin grammar, as well as hymns and songs to support the weekly mass. Boys as young as 13 could expect to sit entrance exams for the universities. Such schools would eventually educate a young Willie Shakespeare and give rise to generations of poets and writers.

Immediate similarities

There are some immediate similarities. The campuses of the major universities have certainly been relatively deserted over the last two years. However, rather than build new physical campuses, higher education institutions have had to construct virtual

campuses and while online learning had been a feature of aspects of higher education courses, it became the pre-eminent means of delivery in every course. As West (2022) notes, "COVID-19 has accelerated the widespread use and acceptance of online higher education delivery. From March 2020 all higher education was online delivery due to the COVID lockdowns." COVID-19 will be seen as the moment when the virtual class became mainstream.

There are examples of ongoing demand, and indeed growth, in the international sector. I have been involved in the offshore delivery of VCE to China but over the last two years study tours, where students come to the Victorian partner school and experience "Australian life" and which have been a key selling point of the program, were unable to take place. Nonetheless, the foreign enrolments have generally held up. This is despite the low point of the political relationship between Australia and China and the tightening of the Chinese economy. Two schools were forced to close as they had been built as part of Evergrande housing developments which have experienced extreme financial difficulties. In fact, at least one school achieved VCE results that elite schools in Melbourne would envy. The primary sector is also a strong market. The Beijing Foreign Language School introduced an Australian primary program into its curriculum in 2019. It has proved to be extremely popular, expanding in each of the COVID years to the point where pre-booked enrolments will mean a doubling of classes at all levels.

While the circumstances between the 14th century and our present times certainly have differences, there is also a resonance in the response across the centuries. If the COVID experience has done anything, it has forced a prioritization of values and a concentration of the mind on what is important. Australia had a huge international education cohort which drew students largely from developing economies, countries with low GDPs and varying opportunities. These students, most with financial assistance from their families, came with the aim of improving their futures through study. Generalizations can be dangerous, but in international terms, the limited opportunities for these students might be considered roughly analogous to the limitations experienced by the peasantry in feudal times. The social changes initiated by the plague allowed many to conceptualize a future through education, and international study today has done the same. COVID has reinforced the importance of education in modern society and the desire.

Oxford 1379 - UBSS 2021

I have already suggested that this will be seen as the moment that the virtual campus came into its own. Just as New College, Oxford was a response to a changing society affected by a health emergency, so the New/Virtual campus developed by UBSS is also a response accelerated by our situation.

I have written elsewhere (O'Connor, 2021) about how online strategies and processes were used to support international students in offshore programs. The foregrounding of the electronic learning environment has forced changes in method, performance and expectation. First, the method has changed for both teacher and student. The mediating devices now include the smart phone along with the tablet,

laptop and desktop computer replacing the physical face to face classroom and future developments will no doubt include hybrid devices as well. So, the virtual campus is multi-functional, multi-dimensional multi-purpose environment and teachers need to adapt their teaching styles, their classroom performance to this. All the resources that a teacher brings to a classroom need to be re-purposed and focused for use through these devices and increasingly the smart phone. Giving a class will need to be more than just a “talking head” teacher. A further challenge for teachers is the screen competition. The material that students access is highly sophisticated, well produced and interactive so students will have expectations about the quality and manner in which they engage with the teacher and the curriculum. Students, as digital natives, are living in this environment, already conducting their social lives online.

The medium is the message

Sixty years ago, Marshall McLuhan said “the medium is the message” but today “the medium is the reality”. The Virtual Campus is built around devices and software that create an environment and educators have to work with that environment. Moreover, this is not a passive and purely receptive environment, increasingly our students live in a world where they contribute to and create content. This represents a challenge for the “New” Campus. The methodology of virtual teaching, to remain relevant and therefore competitive must recognize all the possibilities the e-landscape offers and incorporate them into its pedagogy.

While the challenges in the development of the virtual campus today seem very distant from a medieval society ravaged by a plague pandemic, there are echoes from that time that offer some signs of hope. Egan (2020) concludes that the disruptions caused by the plague it “cleared the ground for new people and new ideas to emerge”. He asserts that an educational renaissance followed the plague which in time led to the historical Renaissance. We can only hope that we will experience a digital renaissance once we put COVID behind us. So things will change, but the fact of that change is what makes our time the same as our history.

Coda

It would be remiss of me not to highlight one of the ironies in comparing the plague to our pandemic. The black-death was spread by *rats* which swarmed all over medieval Europe, we can only hope that it will be a swarm of *RATs* which will allow us to move forward.

References

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