

Delivering Change When Things are Constantly Changing

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In the 1990s when I was graduating, a highly popular buzzword (phrase) was around every corner and that was 'change management'. We were obsessed with this term and each one of us were trying to understand and drive their bit with this terminology. A series of high profile books emerged on the subject including Conner (1992)¹, Jick (1993)², LaMarsh (1995)³, Kotter (1996)⁴ and Johnson (1998)⁵ providing deep insights on how to manage change in the context of an organisation - and in general. Among these, Johnson's (1998) 'Who moved my cheese' was my favourite as it was exemplary work, simple, and easy to digest. I used this 'Mouse Story' extensively during my corporate and academic engagements to emphasise 'change is constant' and 'acceptance of the change is the way of life'.

When there is a 'change', there is always a 'resistance to change', which is like Newton's second law of physics. It goes hand in hand. A classic example of such change management happened when Information technology revolutionised business - and in fact our lives as well. It was hard for all of us to digest how computerisation would take over the human work and we believed that people would end up jobless. However, that was not the case, and eventually we became obsessed with computers more than we resisted entry of computers into our lives. Today, technologies have taken over our lives and we have happily accepted this change.

Another big change in our lives came along - the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has changed everything from our shopping habits, travel, hospitality and social activities, sport, working arrangements, education delivery and even the health system has undergone dramatic change – as result of the pandemic.

The Education sector has witnessed change more than any other sector as the way of imparting education has changed from face to face to online delivery⁶. COVID-19 lockdowns have deserted streets of cities and towns so to the campuses of universities and institutions. Students are no longer attending lectures by being physically present but rather taking lectures remotely and lecturers (in some cases) are delivering lectures from their home office. Initially all three, institutions, lecturers and students resisted this approach and struggled in accepting the change, but as enter 2022, we are witness to the fact that this changes has slowly become way of life in education sector. How has this become possible, what has inspired institutions, lecturers, and students to deliver this change - is worth examining. In this paper, I take a close look at how education delivery is embracing change when all things around the education sector is constantly changing.

¹ <https://www.amazon.com/Managing-Speed-Change-Daryl-Conner/dp/0679406840>

² <https://www.amazon.com.au/Managing-Change-Cases-Concepts-Text/dp/0073102741>

³ <https://www.amazon.com/Changing-Way-Change-Jeanenne-Lamarsh/dp/0201633647>

⁴ <https://www.amazon.com.au/Leading-Change-New-Preface-Author/>

⁵ <https://www.amazon.com.au/Moved-Cheese-Spencer-M-D-Johnson/dp/0091816971/>

⁶ <https://www.oecd.org/education/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-education-insights-education-at-a-glance-2020.pdf>

What has changed in the education system due to COVID-19?

Within the education system, there have been many changes due to COVID-19. While taking a close look at what really has changed the following (though not exhaustive) is well worth considering -

1. **FROM** believing that education can only be delivered face to face in the presence of a teacher and students, the belief is changed - **TO** education can also be delivered without being present face to face and can be delivered online as effectively as if delivered face to face.
2. **FROM** maintaining admission and enrolments in specific locations where students had to move physically, - **TO** enrol in any institution without physically relocating.
3. **FROM** having an ideology of establishing mammoth size campuses and infrastructure housing lecture theatres, classrooms, faculty areas, cafeterias, the ideology, - **TO** small home office and virtual classrooms with suitably digitally equipped tech-rooms.
4. **FROM** lecturers physically present in classrooms and using power points slides delivering their lectures, - **TO** lecturers learning how to deliver webinars and tutorials and delivering sessions using technology and software from remote locations.
5. **FROM** building dependency on physical hard bound prescribed text books which students to carry all round the year, - **TO** moving to digital content and e-books using ipad, laptops and mobile devices.
6. **FROM** procuring and housing large volume of hardbound books, magazines and periodicals in library setups, - **TO** online library and electronics databases making it easy to search and research.
7. **FROM** students making appointments to meet lecturers or student support in person, - **TO** an online chat and virtual appointment environment where students do not physically queue-up.
8. **FROM** physical classroom based invigilated examinations, - **TO** online assessments, proctored exams, which students can attempt from any location.
9. **FROM** showing up at the workstation to manage day to day organising tasks, - **TO** work from home and continue to do the work as usual.
10. **FROM** students lining up at the notice board to take a glimpse of the marks and information on the timetable and class arrangements, - **TO** mobile apps delivering all necessary information relating to the institute, timetables, assessments, grades and even subject enrolment, campus navigation and so on.

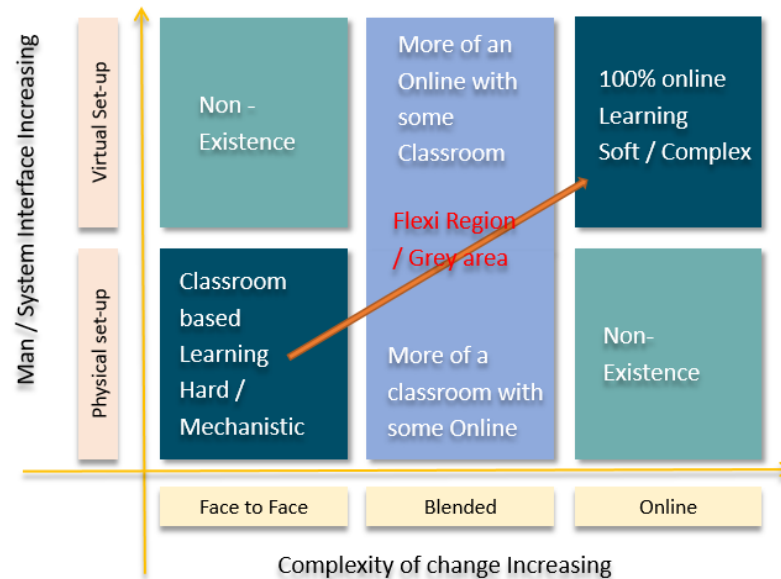
We know that by accepting such changes - lecturers and students' tuned historically to one set of processes and now having to accept a new way of delivering education - is a challenge and takes greater effort and longer time. However, with the COVID-19 situation, the pace of change has substantially accelerated, as there is no other way to escape other than embrace this change or alternatively 'go out of business'.

How change is delivered in education and learning?

Our reaction to delivering change is always influenced by its nature. When a change is purely of a technical nature, such as a new machine or change in component, then the expectation is that existing knowledge would be applied in a mechanistic manner. However, when the change is unexpected and non-technical in nature, people orientation plays important role. To simplify this

connotation, we created a change matrix (see figure 1) which depicts how changes are shaping up in education sector.

Figure 1 – Change Matrix in the context of learning



The change matrix (figure 1) represents how man and system interface increases with an increase in the complexity of change in the context of delivering change in education and learning. A hard or mechanistic change exists towards the left hand side of the spectrum. It is a reasonably static change environment - clear quantifiable, with immediate implications and minimum man/system interface. At the extreme soft end of the spectrum, objectives and time scale become unclear and highly dynamic. Issues typically found involve individual and group interface.

Hard / mechanistic change has clear and concise definitions while soft / complex changes will be difficult to define. Hard changes are mostly technical in nature while soft changes are predominantly interpersonal and in social terms. Delivering change in the soft and complex environment demands involvement and constant learning.

To articulate the above in the real-life situation, two examples described below.

From Training centre to Virtual Training – Gati Ltd, a large logistics organisation

Gati is a pioneer in express distribution company in India and operates through hundreds of offices and depots across length and breadth of country. Training of employees is bringing them together in different groups at various training centres – and this was a significant challenge. We introduced, in 2000, a new approach to learning using video cameras and microphones set-up at six training centres and connecting them with employees attending training simultaneously. This was a new experiment of imparting training in virtual set-up without travelling to one location. The acceptance of such a method of training was a challenge from the outset - but eventually it worked very well.

From Classroom delivery to online delivery – UBSS, a higher education provider

UBSS, an Australian higher education provider, until 2018 delivered education only through classroom setups on its Sydney CBD Campus. Students attended class and lecturers delivered the as scheduled in a face to face only mode. With the government mandate of shutting down campuses due to health precautions, UBSS moved to online delivery. With significant investment in setting up an infrastructure for online delivery, faculty were asked to deliver session online using classroom set up with a studio style, but without students attending physically. Initially, this arrangement was not welcomed by some but slowly and with persistence (and significant staff training) the changes were accepted – today, UBSS can claim education is delivered 100% online.

How to live with the change? Concept of ‘Learning Institutions’

It would be erroneous when discussing delivery change without considering the concept of the ‘learning organisation’. This term has become increasingly popular among management gurus and leaders of change - attributed by Peter Senge⁷ (1990) in his epic book ‘The Fifth Discipline’. In the current situation of the Institutions embracing change, the appropriateness of the term could lead to the concept of ‘*Learning Institutions*’. Lessons from the Senge, we could build *Learning Organisations* and *Learning Institutions* with the same - following five disciplines.

Building a Shared vision

In learning institutions, the vision is created through interaction with the Academics and students. Many institution leaders have personal visions that lack transfer to a shared vision. The only way to create a shared vision is by compromising the Institution and individual visions. Leadership, Academics and student community who do not share the same vision might not contribute as much to the institutions.

Develop Systems Thinking

Instead of focusing on individual issues, systems thinking reflects the observational process of an entire system. Institution leadership and academics have to understand that every action and consequence is interconnected. Online delivery requires a cohesive process from all associated. Academic focus on individual subjects is common and therefore the notion of ‘seeing the big picture’ is often over looked. When the correlation is understood, it enables us to see interrelationships and patterns of change.

Create Mental Models

Leadership and academics must identify the values of the institution. A correct understanding of who we are will enable us to visualize where to go and how to develop further. The institution has to be flexible in accepting change, new mental models, and a new image of the institution itself. The most successful institutions are those who can learn and adapt to new models to become faster than competitors.

⁷ <https://www.toolshero.com/management/five-disciplines-learning-organizations/>

Drive Team Learning

To accomplish excellent functional team dynamics, team-learning is of primary importance. It is the discipline by which personal mastery and shared vision are brought together. It is crucial for the institution leadership and academics to work as a team. The first step is to set up dialogue when change is on the horizon.

Celebrate Personal Mastery

Personal mastery occurs when an individual has a clear vision of a goal, combined with an accurate perception of reality. This creative tension depends on a clear understanding of current reality. For this reason, for personal mastery and the related discipline of a shared vision, looking at and sharing the truth is crucial. However, some academics could believe they lack the competencies to drive online delivery as they are not familiar with current pedagogy or are absorbed in old school thinking that could be difficult to remove or overcome. In such situations, training is the best solution to build competencies and confidence.

Conclusion

As we enter the COVID-19 recovery phase, it will be critical to reflect on the changes that occurred within our educational system. Disruptions on the scale we have just witnessed are not limited to pandemics, but may also result from natural, political, economic and environmental disorder. Our capacity to react effectively and efficiently in the future will hinge on our foresight, readiness and preparedness.

Real change often takes place in deep crises, and this moment holds the possibility that we will not return to the status quo when things return to “normal”. While this current crisis has deeply disruptive implications, including for education, do not have predetermined outcomes. It will be the nature of our collective and systemic response to these disruptions that will determine how we are affected by them.



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