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3 Questions for an Online Leader

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My Thoughts on Re-envisioning Online Teaching and Learning

Dr. Phil Ice is the vice president of research and development for American Public University System. For over a decade, Ice's research has focused on the impact of new and emerging technologies on cognition in online learning environments. Work in this area has brought him international recognition in the form of four Sloan-C Effective Practice of the Year Awards (2007, 2009, 2010 and 2013) as well as the esteemed Gomory Award for Data Driven Quality Improvement in 2009. He has been recognized by industry through membership in Adobe's Education Leaders Group and Adobe's Higher Education Advisory Board, as well as a recipient of the Adobe Higher Education Leaders Impact Award in 2010. Ice's vision for the future of technology in higher education has also been demonstrated by his inclusion on the advisory council for the 2011 NMC / ELI Horizon Report and his role as Principal Investigator on a $1.05 million WICHE/WCET grant to explore online retention patterns across six institutions. His work has covered the use of technology mediated feedback, which has been adopted by over 50 institutions of higher education in five countries, multi-level institutional assessment techniques, learning analytics and application of semantic analysis for mapping institutional learning assets. Ice has also worked with seven other researchers in the United States and Canada in numerous other research initiatives related to the Community of Inquiry Framework. This research has resulted in the development of a validated instrument that captures the intersection of Teaching, Social and Cognitive presence in online learning environments.

I had the opportunity to sit down with this issue's "3 Questions for an Online Leader" to speak with him about his accomplishments as well as to find out more about his visions for online learning and current projects he is involved with.

Question 1. Dr. Ice, so I am very familiar with your research on using the Community of Inquiry framework for online teaching and learning, but what have you been involved in lately?

Ice: *One of the big projects I became engaged with after the initial flurry of activity around the CoI was Learning Analytics. I got involved with that early on, I would say. At APUS we started looking at how we could use big data to predict retention in the same way that sports uses analytics to handicap an event or marketing agencies use analytics to predict customer trends. From there I approached the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation about getting a group of universities together and see if we could aggregate multi-institutional data sets and look for trends. That resulted in funding for the Predictive Analytics Reporting (PAR) Framework and later as one of the inspirational factors that led to the founding of f Civitas.*

Since then I've moved on to work with rich learning environments that can be delivered on mobile as well as the desktop. As you know, this journal was the inspiration for what is now being done with course apps at APUS and an increasing number of other institutions. That's what is consuming all of my time now and I must say its quite exciting.

Question 2. This is obviously a new evolution for online teaching and learning. What changes or shifts do you foresee as a result of this evolution?

Ice: *First, I would have to say that it's probably as much of a revolution as an evolution; and one that is much overdue at that. When you look at what we provide our students, in terms of a learning experience, very little has changed since the inception of online learning. It's still a very flat, text-centric experience that is not at all stimulating for the student. In stark contrast, they engage with rich, online experiences everyday in their personal lives and then are condemned to engage with outdated experiences when they enter the classroom. Some older students are still willing to accept this because they are of an age where they knew a world that wasn't fully digital, however, younger learners, especially Gen Z aren't going to accept what we have to offer. They are going to laugh at us. So if higher education wants to remain relevant, we have to adapt. I think that's what we are doing with course apps, or at least trying to do. We are providing rich, interactive experiences that engage learners with a look and feel that is aligned with contemporary experiences.*

In some ways this is a heavy lift for institutions. They are being forced to rethink everything about how they engage students and what the implications are for both faculty and infrastructure. I believe though that this is the beginning of serious differentiation among institutions. Of course the top 300 will always survive, but for everyone else I believe that those who adopt this type of approach will separate themselves from everyone else and it will be this group that

doesn't just survive, but thrive. Further, its not just a matter of differentiation and survival, it's just the right thing to do. We have the ability to create incredible learning experiences and if we don't do it then I think we need to consider why we are in higher education to start with.

With respect to models and underlying theory, well I think we are making that up as we go and there's nothing wrong with that. When online learning first emerged the CoI was made up to explain what was happening. Some of it was based on grounded theory in traditional learning environments and some of it was based upon what we discovered about how the environment impacted cognition, interaction, etc. The same is true now. I believe we have foundational elements, including the CoI that will still apply, albeit in pieces and then there are things we are seeing that will have to be researched and explained. The models are definitely changing and that's really exciting to me.

Question 3. Undoubtedly, you've had several innovative ideas in the world of online education throughout your professional career. What fuels, or inspires you to come up with such innovation?

Ice: *Simply put, I'm a dreamer. I guess I'm lucky enough to be one of those people who managed to muddle their way through our K-12 and higher education institutions without being completely stripped of creativity. To me, the art of the possible is the most exciting thing there is. Being able to continually think about what can be instead of what is gives me hope. That's part of my everyday life, but it has special meaning in my professional life because I see how many more people can be positively impacted if we can deliver on the adjacent possible. When I get tired of trying to do that, or when it becomes obvious that the field is no longer interested in the possible, then I know it's time for me to find something else to do. So far I've been lucky enough that that hasn't happened. The downside is that you frequently rub a lot of people the wrong way when you continuously dream, but so far I've been able to find a handful of others who are willing to embrace an idea that everyone else considers crazy and help me run with it.*