

Chapter 15

Liberal Arts Education and Online Learning: Prospects and Challenges



Aaron Einfeld

Abstract The COVID-19 pandemic forced liberal arts educators into an unplanned dive into online learning. Though many schools had little experience with online learning, some liberal arts colleges had already begun experimenting with online learning before the pandemic. This chapter begins by examining the perceptions, practices, and lessons learned from online liberal arts education before and during the pandemic. Based on this insight, this chapter discusses the ways that liberal arts educators can leverage online environments for learning in future. As the chapter illustrates, crisis and constraints can prompt new thinking and unexpected innovation. The chapter closes with advice and suggestions for future research, theory, and practice of online liberal arts education.

Keywords Online learning · Hybrid learning · Liberal learning outcomes · Online learning community

15.1 Perceptions of Online Learning Quality

Enrollments in online higher education have grown significantly in the twentieth century. For example, by 2018, the National Center for Educational Statistics found that 79% of colleges in the United States were offering online courses or programs (Ruiz & Sun, 2021). Although faculty perceptions of the quality of online learning had improved pre-pandemic surveys still revealed mixed perceptions of the quality of online instruction in the United States (Lederman & McKenzie, 2017). As recently as 2015, only 29% of academic leaders in the United States reported that their faculty “accepts the value and legitimacy of online education” (Allen et al., 2016, p. 26). Furthermore, online learning has not been adopted equally by all institution types. For instance, by 2019, nearly all public universities in the United States (96%) offered online courses or programs, whereas only a slight majority (53%) of private non-profit colleges had online options (Ruiz & Sun, 2021). This data demonstrates that

A. Einfeld (✉)
Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, MI, USA
e-mail: aaron@calvinseminary.edu

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd. 2023
I. Jung and K. H. Mok (eds.), *The Reinvention of Liberal Learning around the Globe*,
Crossing Cultures: Liberal Learning for a World in Flux,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-8265-1_15

241

enrollments in online learning have grown despite widespread concerns regarding its educational effectiveness.

This tension poses a particularly challenging question for liberal arts educators because liberal arts education has long relied on intensive and formative residential peer learning environments. As Roche (2010) points out, liberal arts education presupposes that there is a meaningful, residential community of learning that extends beyond the classroom. This highly social form of education is aimed at developing particular skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, and collaboration. Further, liberal arts education is aimed at deeper goals of developing moral and civic character and training citizens for democracy (Chopp, 2014; Nussbaum, 2010). But what happens when this form of education moves online? In other words, do online learning environments challenge, undermine, or support liberal arts education?

15.1.1 *Undermining Learning*

Throughout the past two decades, liberal arts educators have expressed skepticism about the potential compatibility between liberal arts education and online learning. For example, Socratic pedagogy has been a hallmark of liberal arts education where students engage in self-examination, critical argument, and logical questioning (Roche, 2010). Some have gone as far as to say that Socratic pedagogy in a liberal arts education requires an *embodied* experience that is relational, emotional, and engages more than simply the mind (Ess, 2003). Ess, therefore, proposed that developing wisdom or virtue cannot be fully taught online. Instead, live, embodied interaction is required. A recent survey of faculty at a mid-sized liberal arts university concurs that in-person communication and relationships, live interaction, and the residential campus experience are essential ingredients for this kind of learning (Shreaves et al., 2020). In other words, the embodied experience of interactive learning should extend beyond the formal pedagogy of the classroom. As McCardell Jr. (2014) points out, an effective residential learning community is seamless, comprehensive, and relevant. Seamless learning communities extend learning beyond the classroom. Comprehensive residential experiences incorporate a wide range of character forming activities beyond the classroom. Relevant learning communities do not limit learning to abstract ideas, but seek to make clear connections between the learning experience and life after college (McCardell Jr., 2014). Together, academic and social experiences can shape deep learning and liberal arts outcomes.

There is concern that without interactive, in-person instruction, and residential peer learning, the quality of a liberal arts education would be undermined. Historically, outcomes such as critical thinking problem-solving, communication, and collaboration have been connected to a highly interactive and relational residential learning experience. If in-person and residential aspects of liberal arts education

are removed, what are the implications for developing these outcomes? Can individuals develop these skills through online platforms? Moreover, can the broader goals of developing moral citizens in a democracy be achieved through online platforms?

15.1.2 Online Possibilities for Liberal Arts Education

Despite these well documented questions and concerns about the quality of online learning, some liberal arts educators who had experience with online teaching before the COVID-19 pandemic already saw potential ways for some compatibility between online learning and liberal arts education. My own doctoral research in 2016 examined a case where a liberal arts college had begun piloting online undergraduate courses. The purpose of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the key issues, tensions, and perceptions surrounding online liberal arts education (Einfeld, 2016). Through in-depth interviews with administrators, faculty, and students, I observed a consensus: The common perception among these stakeholder groups was that moving liberal arts education to an entirely online format would undermine the essential nature and quality of the experience. Administrators—none of whom had experience teaching or learning online—were concerned that online learning would undermine essential features of liberal arts education, such as interactive problem-solving, community life, and good teaching. Faculty—each of whom had experience teaching online—said that online learning made faculty and student interaction more difficult. Faculty was concerned that “disembodied learning” made it more difficult for online classes to develop the sense of trust and community that normally would help students’ holistic learning and development. Students at the same college concurred that face-to-face discussion was preferable to technology mediated interaction.

Although my research elaborated on the concerns that national surveys had already identified, administrators, faculty, and students each expressed openness to online aspects of a liberal arts education. The common overarching theme was an openness to *hybrid learning*. Interviewees believed that portions of a liberal arts education could move online as long as co-curricular learning, campus life, and face-to-face learning remained essential features of the student experience. Liberal arts faculty with online teaching experience was the most open to the format. They pointed out that online, asynchronous formats are amenable to particular learning styles. For example, solitary and reflective aspects of asynchronous learning can provide the space for deep analysis and insight. Faculty observed that communal experiences online can quickly bridge a physical divide that allows international and cross-cultural engagement and learning. In this way, faculty expressed a desire to combine and leverage the best and most promising aspects of online and face-to-face learning.

Although examining perceptions of the quality of online learning is helpful in identifying major themes and questions, decisions about learning formats and environments should be grounded in empirical research on educational outcomes that might allow us to re-examine our perceptions. Furthermore, referring to categories

such as *in-person, online, or hybrid* has limited value because the focus is too broad. There is huge variation within each category of learning format. For example, in-person learning includes lecture, experiential learning, problem-based learning, and science labs.

Therefore, rather than talk about online versus residential forms of education, some researchers find it more productive to examine and discuss indicators of online course quality. For example, one study (Joosten et al., 2019) cites learner support, course design and organization, content design and delivery, interactivity, and assessment as key features of online learning environments.

15.2 Lessons Learned by Practitioners During the Pandemic

The Spring 2020 semester was a pivotal moment for online learning because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Suddenly, the world was immersed in an unplanned experiment in the mass adoption of online learning. Instructors and institutions that might never have considered online learning were forced into adapting their instruction with little to no time to prepare. Although this experience began as a way to offer online learning in an emergency, significant lessons were learned through the experience.

First, the pandemic demonstrated that the choice between residential and online learning is not a binary choice. There are variations and combinations of residential, hybrid, and online environments that can be effective for different learners in different contexts (Beatty, 2019). For example, large, lecture-based courses might offer recorded lectures online but require in-person small group discussion. In these courses, students can re-watch or pause lectures while also engaging in meaningful discussion in-person. One particular format of online learning that became common during the pandemic was a hyflex model. Hyflex refers to a course design where students can participate in-person, online, or both. Some students are physically present while others participate via video chat or discussion forums. Hyflex learning allowed students in physical quarantine or isolation the ability to continue to participate in their coursework.

Hyflex learning offers the promise of a more flexible and accessible form of education. For some, the ability to access live class discussion online removed barriers to their learning. For example, a student in one of my classes explained that she had a physical limitation that made travel to campus challenging. Online discussion allowed her to participate without the stress and challenge of navigating to campus. For this student, sitting in chairs on campus might be particularly uncomfortable, while being able to sit a chair at home that was designed for her, would allow her to relax and engage in conversation more easily.

Second, we observed that different formats of online learning are better suited for different types of learners. A significant choice in designing an online course is whether or not to include synchronous online learning elements to the course.

Adding synchronous video chat can increase student interaction and build the sense of connection and trust between learners (Fabriz et al., 2021; Rinesko & Bukhori Muslim, 2020). However, faculty whom I interviewed for this book chapter observed that participating in synchronous chat during the pandemic was very difficult for students with family responsibilities. This was particularly evident as students who are parents tried to participate in live video chat while at the same time facilitating at home online learning for their children. For non-traditional students, or those with significant work and family responsibilities, synchronous requirements can be a significant barrier. Required synchronous sessions create logistical challenges for courses with students enrolled across the globe simply due to time zone differences. However, for students without outside family or work requirements, synchronous chat requirements are less burdensome and can increase engagement if facilitated well. The value of synchronous chat depends on a particular learner's needs as well. For students who have high needs for socialization, or who are seeking deep friendship with classmates, live conversation is more important. For learners with more established social networks and outside commitments, the need to experience community in a course might be less.

Third, faculty need significant support in order to successfully offer hybrid, hyflex, and online learning. This was evident before the pandemic. For example, research from the Teagle Foundation's "Hybrid Learning and Residential Liberal Arts Experience" initiative found that faculty support should be multidimensional: including technical training, faculty peer-to-peer mentoring, and close work with instructional designers (Pazich et al., 2018). In addressing the challenges and opportunities with adapting liberal arts education to new formats, one faculty member explained:

My concern is that most people I work with and talk to have no concept of the level of redesign this takes, nor do they have the courage to tackle it. So they use online tools in uncoordinated and unsatisfying ways, to themselves and to their students, and rightly feel it weakens the liberal arts experience. But it is not the online that does that. It is the design of the learning experience in the medium that does that (Pazich et al., 2018, p. 50).

The abrupt shift to online learning during the pandemic did not afford schools the opportunity to develop robust, system wide faculty support. The following section explores how schools might intentionally design online learning to achieve liberal arts outcomes.

15.3 Achieving Liberal (Arts) Outcomes Through Online Learning

A varied range of instructional strategies and course design principles can make up the ingredients of high-quality online learning (O'Keefe et al., 2020). In this way, educators can design learning experiences that are aligned to most effectively facilitate particular learning outcomes. A liberal arts education equips students with skills

in problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. Additionally, students develop moral and civic character and the motivation and skills to be an engaged member of a democracy (Chopp, 2014).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, liberal arts colleges had already begun experimenting with online learning. In 2014, the Council of Independent Colleges created the Consortium for Online Humanities Instruction. This group began offering online humanities courses and researching their effectiveness. Overall, their research concluded that a large majority of online humanities students met or exceeded the learning expectations defined by their instructors (Hetrik et al., 2019). Students, particularly non-traditional, reported satisfaction with the flexibility of online formats (Hetrik et al., 2019). However, students are not always satisfied with online learning experiences. For example, the abrupt switch to emergency online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in students reporting a sense of disconnection from their peers (Boardman et al., 2021).

Though it is possible to achieve liberal arts outcomes in online settings, it is important to design experiences that maintain a sense of student connectedness while doing so. This section discusses three potential formats for achieving these outcomes while maintaining a sense of connectedness: (a) hybrid models, (b) online learning communities, and (c) place-based online education.

15.3.1 Hybrid Learning

As residential learning communities, liberal arts colleges can be seamless learning environments where relationships and experiences beyond the classroom are necessary ingredients for deep learning. Residential learning communities provide environments and relationships that help to students to connect experiences inside and outside the classroom that result in integrated deep learning. In this way, residential learning communities can facilitate significant moral, social, and intellectual development that are hallmarks of a liberal arts education. Not surprisingly, liberal arts educators are hesitant to adapt hybrid or online learning that would disconnect students from these rich environments.

However, one significant limitation of residential, campus-based educational models is that the residential experience of students can be uneven in quality. This can be particularly for non-traditional or marginalized student groups. Consider the issue of student retention. For many years, educators adopted Tinto's framework for improving student retention (Braxton & Lien, 2000). In order to improve retention, schools should work to help students become fully integrated into campus life—both academically and socially. However, there are limitations to this way of thinking. Pursuing this kind of integration can come at a cost, requiring students to break ties with potential sources of support outside of campus that would help them to navigate campuses that can marginalize some groups of students. Rather than seeking full integration to campus life, what some students need it so maintain strong support networks off campus that will enable better on campus learning

(Rendón et al., 2000). In other words, limiting one's full immersion to campus life while maintaining supportive ties off campus is important for some students to thrive and graduate (Rendón et al., 2000).

But what if adding doses of online learning—intentionally designed—could actually enhance a residential experience? Would maintaining external networks of support help marginalized student groups to achieve better outcomes? Moreover, certain combinations of in-person and online experiences might solve logistical problems while maximizing the learning potential in each format. For example, a student might be able to say “yes” to taking on an internship if a few online courses allow that student the scheduling flexibility to say “yes.” Or a student might be able to study abroad or complete an internship far from campus while spending a semester taking online courses. Online learning environments offer collaborative and interactive tools that allow these students to remain connected to relationships they had established while living and learning on campus. One study observed that hybrid approaches could enable liberal arts colleges to share resources and costs in order to increase programmatic offerings (Pazich et al., 2018). These kinds of scenarios enable educators to offer “a new flexibility” that enhances rather than replaces a residential degree program (McMurtrie, 2021, p. 9). In this way, hybrid degrees and courses can make the most of multiple learning formats. Whereas hybrid courses include multiple learning formats within a course, hybrid degrees could be made up of a combination of courses in different learning formats. For instance, a hybrid degree could begin with an intensive in-person residential experience, then continue online. It seems that hybrid models offer promising options to pursue liberal education outcomes by combining the best of what residential learning and online learning environments might offer together. The previous studies have found that learning outcomes in hybrid or blended courses are comparable to the outcomes of residential courses (Means et al., 2010).

But we can take this a step further by asking a simple question. If embodied, relational, in-person learning is essential to a liberal arts education, does this need to happen on campus, or can it happen elsewhere? Next, we explore the prospects of leveraging online platforms with in-person learning environments that are not limited by the boundaries of a traditional campus.

15.3.2 Online Learning Communities

There is a large body of research that documents the important role that the residential campus can play in facilitating liberal arts outcomes. Relationships with peers and faculty are essential ingredients of a student's liberal arts education (Einfeld, 2016). However, a major limitation to this residential model is accessibility. Foregoing the income of a full time job while paying for an expensive residential experience is a major obstacle for many. Those with less financial means might need to work long hours to afford school, undermining their ability to take advantage of the

holistic learning and development that deep engagement in a campus community can facilitate.

Advocates of online learning are hopeful that online learning communities can remove barriers to accessing liberal arts education. Carefully designed and facilitated online courses can facilitate social learning—rather than undermine—that helps students to engage with broader social issues as global citizens (Spencer, 2004).

Though residential colleges build relationships, so do online environments with people around the world. For example, Spencer (2004) points out that online environments are particularly well suited for connecting social groups and movements for cooperative learning and engagement. Video chats can bring guests from around the world into a traditional classroom. Online course platforms facilitate meaningful follow-up, interactions, relationships, and community. Liberal arts colleges can create virtual networks that increase global connections, learning partnerships, and dialog (McAuliffe, 2004). In this way, online connections have the ability to foster professional relationships and networks beyond the traditional campus. These networks can be cross-disciplinary, include alumni, and focus on developing intercultural community. Still, one major limitation of online learning is the continued digital divide around the world. The pandemic exposed problems related to inadequate access to reliable Internet (Jaggars et al., 2021). As Hill and Lawton (2018) pointed out, it was estimated in 2016 that only 46% of the global population had access to the Internet from home.

15.3.3 Place-Based Online Education

Traditionally, residential liberal arts colleges have been places for students to develop formative relationships with peers and faculty and staff. However, there are also drawbacks to this model. For example, students immersed on campus can become isolated from life beyond campus. While on campus, students are surrounded by mostly 18–24 year olds whose lives are focused on the rhythms of the academic environment.

Despite the potentially insular nature of many campuses, advocates of a residential liberal arts education underscore an important point: achieving liberal education outcomes in with students requires experiences beyond the classroom. Learning must be integrated with life outside the classroom if students are to achieve the kinds of deep learning that we have come to expect from a liberal arts education. Paradoxically, here lies one of the greatest challenges and opportunities for online liberal arts education. Online learning platforms have the ability to remove students from a residential campus environment while at the same time extending learning “beyond the classroom” in new and potentially profound ways.

15.3.3.1 In-Place Learning

Though a residential campus is one example of an effective embodied learning community, schools could explore off campus locations that might provide a similar but different kind of embodied living learning community. Pedagogy in online courses can prompt student interaction with the physical location where a student is located. Assignments and courses can be designed to require students to engage their place through project based and a focus on experiential learning. For example, a student enrolled in a psychology course on the lifespan of human develop might be asked to interview people who are at each of the life stages that that the online course focuses on. A sociology course would require students to research and interact with the community that they are embedded in. Then, online discussion posts allow students to share from their respective neighborhoods around the world using the sociological lenses introduced in the online course.

These placed-based online learning examples enable students to maximize their learning by engaging with the locations where they are physically located. In this way, online pedagogy incorporates proven methods of engaged, active, and experiential learning (Cantor, 1995; Jessup-Anger, 2012). The basic structure is for students to engaging in meaningful work and learning offline, but then to share and extend that learning online. In this model, the online environment provides the accountability, support, and feedback for learners. Students are invited to share the particularities of their own place and culture, and how that relates to the course materials. Rather than relying on translating theory from a classroom to practice in real life, students engage in active experiential learning while receiving support online. Online environments become the place to process, reflect, share, collaborate, and create. In-place online learning leverages active and experiential pedagogy to facilitate learning in online course.

15.3.3.2 Place-Based Hybrid Learning

Hybrid courses have the potential to maximize the benefits of both in-person and online formats. Traditionally, the in-person portion of a hybrid courses has been located on campus. Another option is to gather students at a strategic off campus location for the in-person portion of a hybrid course. Hybrid courses can gather students at culturally and historically significant locations. Learning experiences at these locations can be designed to maximize student interaction with key individuals and organizations at the off campus gathering site.

15.3.3.3 Living Learning Cohorts

Another placed-based model places students in small cohorts of decentralized living learning communities that exist off campus. Drawing from established study abroad models, students live in clusters in a region or around the world. For example, a

cluster might live in an urban art center, or near a government center. Others might exist in border crossing towns or in other strategic locations where the physical environment is rich for engaging in structured experiential learning. These cohorts could be organized around so-called “super courses” (Bain & Bain, 2021) where the focus is on interdisciplinary problems such as the global refugee crisis, climate change, or public health. Students engage in place-based experiential living as a cohort while analyzing these problems from interdisciplinary lenses. The intensive living learning experiences can spark significant learning. Cohorts scattered around the world can then connect with each other through online platforms.

Exact models of place-based online learning could vary by institutional mission and context. But the main idea is that residential learning moves off campus to smaller, intentionally shaped learning communities that remain connected through online platforms. Rather than a centralized campus, there are decentralized learning clusters.

15.4 Supporting Lifelong Learning Through Online Learning

Liberal arts educators hope to instill in their students a capacity and interest in lifelong learning. In this way, the learning and formation of liberal arts education are not intended to end at graduation. The goals of a liberal arts education are ambitious: to develop moral and civic character, critical thinking, problem-solving and communication skills, and the ability to effectively collaborate (Chopp, 2014). Though one can develop these significantly during their undergraduate experience, these are the kinds of skills and competencies that are pursued and refined over one’s lifetime. For example, a liberal arts education might help students develop skills of critical thinking and problem-solving as they study global poverty, climate change, and political radicalization. However, successfully engaging with these problems outside the classroom after graduation requires continual honing and adaptation.

While a four-year degree can prepare students for engaging complicated global challenges, successfully addressing various big social problems require years of interdisciplinary work and collective action beyond one’s college experience (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2020). Additionally, the pursuit of moral and civic character and living as a democratic citizen has different challenges at different stages of life. Online learning environments offer the opportunity for liberal arts schools to offer more sustained support to their graduates throughout their lifespan. These non-degree opportunities can be offered as isolated continuing education experiences in the form of online courses or online and hybrid cohort experiences. Consider Erickson’s theory of lifespan human development (Erikson, 1959). Young adults are establishing their identity, commitments, and love. The dilemma of early adulthood is to wrestle with the tension between intimacy and isolation. Throughout adulthood, we engage in the tension of generativity versus self-absorption and stagnation. In the

context of democratic citizenship, we wrestle with generating something for the civic good or becoming stuck and self-absorbed. Online learning environments offer the possibility for schools to support the ongoing pursuit of moral and civic character throughout these stages of life.

However, time, distance, and graduation are potential barriers to schools offering support for lifelong learning. But features of online learning make it possible for schools to re-engage with their alumni as their alumni (and others) pursue lifelong learning. The collaborative and interactive features of online environments can remove barriers of distance. Communicating asynchronously in online environments can remove barriers of time and time zone differences.

Therefore, liberal arts colleges should consider the possibility of recalibrating their alumni engagement efforts and mission to supporting the lifelong learning of students. This is necessary because the intended outcomes of a liberal arts education require dedicated work beyond a 4-year credentialing degree. Engaging with alumni and lifelong learners is a way for schools to more comprehensively fulfill their existing mission. Online learning environments and tools reduce the barriers for doing this.

If liberal arts colleges/educators are to effectively support the lifelong learning of their alumni, then the educational models should be designed according to the learning needs of adult learners. There is a substantial and growing scholarly literature dedicated to the field of adult learning—commonly referred to as andragogy—from which we can draw insight and inspiration. Andragogy represents an approach to adult learning that has distinct foundational assumptions about the learning needs of adults (Knowles et al., 2020). For example, adults have a self-concept that has an underlying need to be self-directing in their learning. Rather than being told what to do, adults need to be able to control the direction of their learning. Additionally, adults are ready to learn when they see that a learning experience will help them address an immediate need or real-world problem. This can be an immediate need for a concrete skill, or broader developmental task, such as developing one's identity or moving through stages of their psychosocial development. Liberal arts colleges would be wise to develop lifelong learning experiences that align liberal arts learning with these real-world problems.

In summary, principals of andragogy can be used to design collaborative and interactive online environments that support the lifelong pursuit of liberal arts outcomes. As Chametzky (2018) suggests, online environments should be places where learners can be self-directed while building trust with other learners. Online learning environments should be places where learners collaborate and support one another through meaningful interactions (Zucca, 2014). Offering flexible, asynchronous online learning environments can make these kinds of learning experiences accessible for lifelong learners around the world. Online learning environments can be set up in a way to provide students more choice for engaging in open ended projects, experiential learning assignments, and other interactive materials (Spencer, 2004). In this way, self-directed and problem-based online learning that draws on the internal motivation of learners does not require the physical gathering of learners for meaningful learning and interaction. Instead, online connections enable adults to grow

their professional network while gaining connections, encouragement, and accountability for their ongoing learning. In this way, the pedagogical approach of a course is more important than the particular format—online or in-person.

15.5 Fostering Virtue and Civic Engagement in a Digital Age

Online learning environments are particularly well suited for students to wrestle with what it looks like to be a good citizen in the digital age. A liberal arts education is aimed at developing the holistic character and skills of individuals. But the mission includes a broader purpose of pursuing the social good as global citizens as well. Therefore, a successful liberal arts education cultivates moral individuals who pursue the common good and use their knowledge to address the pressing issues of the time and to improve the world (Chopp, 2014).

In this way, a liberal arts education should equip individuals to engage in the public square. However, in the digital age, the public square has made a significant shift online. This shift poses unique challenges and new questions. What does it mean to be a good neighbor and a responsible member of a community when that community has potentially limitless connections online? How do we understand our responsibility to be citizens in a global, digital world? Through social media and video meetings, we can be instantly connected to communities around the world. Online environments are a part of our daily lives, but they are also potentially rich learning labs for learning and practicing critical thinking and communication skills. As evidenced by the spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need for people to better apply critical thinking skills when sifting through the deluge of information that is available online. By immersing students in online environments and asking them to think critically about those environments, educators can help students apply critical thinking and moral reasoning to their digital lives. In other words, online learning environments can help students engage in critical thinking by engaging with the information in the environments in which they encounter them.

15.6 Conclusion: Future Directions

15.6.1 Research

We began this chapter with the broad question: What are the implications when a liberal arts education moves online? Next, we reviewed perceptions of online liberal arts education. We then reviewed some initial practices of online liberal arts education and explored potential directions for online liberal arts education. More should be

done to experiment with these potential directions and to research and document their outcomes.

Learning is a complex and multidimensional endeavor. There is a vast research literature that catalogs the moral, psychosocial, and cognitive learning and development that is linked to attending college (Evans et al., 2010; Mayhew et al., 2016). A parallel literature has examined factors related to student retention, persistence, and graduation (Tight, 2020; Tinto, 2000). Most of this researches have focused on campus-based in-person learning. With respect to online learning, a significant portion of that literature before the COVID-19 pandemic focused on measuring perceptions of (Allen et al., 2016; Harrison et al., 2017; Walters et al., 2017) and on understanding barriers to faculty adopting online learning (Ruth, 2018). Even though these are all valuable areas of inquiry, it is essential that research focuses on how particular formats and educational strategies might translate to online settings. For example, The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) has published a list of evidence-based, high-impact teaching, and learning practices (AACU, 2021). These practices can be adapted to different contexts but include collaborative assignments and projects, global learning, common intellectual experiences, diversity/global learning, ePortfolios, first-year seminars and experiences, internships, community-based learning, undergraduate research, and writing intensive courses. Scholars are beginning to explore how research and best practices on high-impact practices might translate in online environments (Linder & Hayes, 2018). Still, more research is needed to better understand how particular formats of online, hybrid, hyflex, and place-based online learning environments might facilitate specific liberal learning outcomes for specific students. For example, a line of research could ask: What kinds of psychologically and socially supportive online environments might facilitate long-term intellectual, moral, and personal learning and development? Building a more robust body of empirical educational research will enable educators to rely on proven practices rather than on perceptions of online learning that may or may not be accurate.

15.6.2 Practice

Shifting toward online learning has significant implications for faculty, administrators, and students. As Shreaves et al. (2020) point out, “to encourage faculty members to participate in online learning, faculty may need reassurance and support to help them understand how to preserve teaching values in the online environment” (p. 117). A survey completed by the Chronicle of Higher Education during the pandemic found that 60% or more of faculty would like to see the following continue after the pandemic: (a) professional training around effective course design and teaching practices, (b) teaching and learning communities where instructors can share best practices, and (c) more professional training for online and hybrid course design (McMurtrie & Supiano, 2021). As we emerge out of the pandemic, administrators

would be wise to provide the time, space, and permission for their more enthusiastic faculty to explore the prospects and limits of online liberal learning.

Even if faculty is able to refine their programs and pedagogy so that hyflex, hybrid, and place-based online learning effectively result in liberal learning outcomes, the economic question remains. Are these formats economically viable? If a liberal arts college shifts toward online learning, what mix of residential and online learning is ideal from a cost perspective? Early adopters of online learning have found that moving online does not necessarily reduce cost of instruction (Archibald & Feldman, 2011). As faculty discovered during the pandemic, facilitating high-impact learning in online environments can be more time intensive than in-person learning. Therefore, faculty training, development, and support are essential. Administrators will need to determine which financial and educational models hold the most promise in terms of student learning and financial sustainability.

Finally, but most importantly, decisions about online learning should be centered around the learning needs of the student. Research-based practices from the field of adult learning and andragogy should guide decisions about how to best structure liberal arts learning. These student-centered approaches can provide guidance and wisdom as educators engage in the most important question: What makes the most sense for this student in this context?

References

- Allen, I. E., Seaman, J., Poulin, R., & Straut, T. T. (2016). *Online report card: Tracking online education in the United States*.
- American Association of Colleges and Universities. (2021). *High-impact practices*. <https://www.aacu.org/resources/high-impact-practices>
- Archibald, R. B., & Feldman, D. H. (2011). *Why does college cost so much?* Oxford University Press.
- Bain, K., & Bain, M. M. (2021). Why your campus needs more “super courses” now: The case for seizing the moment and offering more courses on big social, economic, and health issues. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 53–57. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/why-post-pandemic-your-campus-needs-more-super-courses>
- Beatty, B. J. (2019). *Hybrid-flexible course design*. EdTech Books. <https://edtechbooks.org/hyflex>
- Boardman, K. L., Vargas, S. A., Cotler, J. L., Burshteyn, D., & College, S. (2021). Effects of emergency online learning during COVID-19 pandemic on student performances and connectedness. *Information Systems Education Journal*, 19(4), 23–36. <http://isedj.org/2021-19/n4/ISEDJv19n4p23.pdf>
- Braxton, J. M., & Lien, L. A. (2000). The viability of academic integration as a central construct in Tinto’s interactionist theory of college student departure. In J. M. Braxton (Ed.), *Reworking the student departure puzzle* (pp. 11–28). Vavnderbilt University Press.
- Cantor, J. A. (1995). Experiential learning in higher education: Linking classroom and community. In *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report* (Vol. 7). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED404949.pdf>
- Chametzky, B. (2018). The interconnectedness of learning: How andragogy can improve the online learning experience. *American Journal of Educational Science*, 4(14), 93–99. <http://files.aisciece.org/journal/article/pdf/70380073.pdf>

- Chopp, R. (2014). Remaking, renewing, reimagining: The liberal arts college takes advantage of change. In R. Chopp, S. Frost, & D. H. Weiss (Eds.), *Remaking college: Innovation in the liberal arts* (pp. 13–24). Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Einfeld, A. (2016). *Liberal arts education and online learning: Practices, prospects, and limits*. Doctoral dissertation, Michigan State University.
- Erikson, E. H. (1959). *Identity and the life cycle*. International University Press.
- Ess, C. (2003). Liberal arts and distance education: Can Socratic virtue (arete) and Confucius' exemplary person (junzi) be taught online? *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 2(2), 117–137. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022203002002002>
- Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2010). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Fabriz, S., Mendzheritskaya, J., & Stehle, S. (2021). Impact of synchronous and asynchronous settings of online teaching and learning in higher education on students' learning experience. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.733554>
- Harrison, R., Hutt, I., Thomas-Varcoe, C., Motteram, G., Else, K., Rawlings, B., & Gemmill, I. (2017). A cross-sectional study to describe academics' confidence, attitudes, and experience of online distance learning in higher education. *Journal of Educators Online*, 14(2). <https://doi.org/10.9743/jeo.2017.14.2.3>
- Hetrick, B., Marcum, D., & Council of Independent Colleges. (2019). Teaching the humanities online: Lessons learned from a consortium of liberal arts colleges. *Council of Independent Colleges*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315030340>
- Hill, C., & Lawton, W. (2018). Universities, the digital divide and global inequality. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 40(6), 598–610. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2018.1531211>
- Jaggars, S. S., Motz, B. A., Rivera, M. D., Heckler, A., Quick, J. D., Hance, E. A., & Karwisch, C. (2021). The digital divide among college students: lessons learned from the covid-19 emergency transition. *Midwestern Higher Education Compact, January*, 1–18. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED611284.pdf>
- Jessup-Anger, J. E. (2012). Examining how residential college environments inspire the life of the mind. *The Review of Higher Education*, 35(3), 431–462. https://epublications.marquette.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1168&context=edu_fac
- Joosten, T., Cusatis, R., & Harness, L. (2019). A cross-institutional study of instructional characteristics and student outcomes: Are quality indicators of online courses able to predict student success? *Online Learning*, 23(4), 354–378. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v23i4.1432>
- Knowles, M. S., Holton, R. F., Swanson, R. A., & Robinson, P. A. (2020). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development*. Routledge.
- Lederman, D., & McKenzie, L. (2017). *Faculty buy-in builds, bit by bit: Survey of faculty attitudes on technology*. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/survey/faculty-buy-builds-bit-bit-bit-survey-faculty-attitudes-technology>
- Linder, K. E., & Hayes, C. M. (2018). *High-impact practices in online education: Research and best practices*. Stylus Publishing.
- Mayhew, M. J., Rockenback, A. N., Bowman, N. A., Seifert, T. A., Wolniak, G. C., Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (2016). *How college affects students: 21st century evidence that higher education works*. Jossey-Bass.
- McAuliffe, J. D. (2004). The networked college—local, global, virtual. In R. Chopp, S. Frost, & D. H. Weiss (Eds.), *Remaking college: Innovation in the liberal arts* (pp. 144–156). The Johns Hopkins University Press.

- McCardell, J. M., Jr. (2014). Glowing against the gray, sober against the fire: Residential academic communities in the twenty-first century. In R. Chopp, S. Frost, & D. H. Weiss (Eds.), *Remaking College: Innovation in the liberal arts* (pp. 169–179). Johns Hopkins University Press.
- McMurtrie, B. (2021). The new flexibility. *The future of teaching: How the classroom is being transformed*.
- McMurtrie, B., & Supiano, B. (2021). Future of teaching: How the classroom is being transformed. *Chronicle of Higher Education*.
- Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., Bakia, M., & Jones, K. (2010). *Evaluation of evidence-based practices in online learning: A meta-analysis and review of online learning studies*.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2010). *Not for profit: Why democracy needs the humanities*. Princeton University Press.
- O’Keefe, L., Rafferty, J., Gunder, A., & Vignare, K. (2020). *Delivering high-quality instruction online in response to COVID-19: Faculty playbook. Every learner everywhere*. http://olc-wordpress-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/2020/05/Faculty-Playbook_Final-1.pdf
- Pazich, L. B., Kurzweil, M., & Rossman, D. (2018). Hybrid learning and the residential liberal arts experience. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 50(6), 45–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2018.1540829>
- Rendón, L. I., Jalomo, R. E., & Nora, A. (2000). Theoretical considerations in the study of minority student retention in higher education. In J. M. Braxton (Ed.), *Reworking the student departure puzzle* (pp. 126–156). Vanderbilt University Press.
- Rinesko, A., & Bukhori Muslim, A. (2020). Synchronous online discussion: Teaching English in higher education amidst the covid-19 pandemic. *JEES (Journal of English Educators Society)*, 5, 155–162. <https://doi.org/10.21070/jees.v5i2.246>
- Roche, M. W. (2010). *Why choose the liberal arts?* University of Notre Dame Press.
- Ruiz, R., & Sun, J. (2021). *Distance education in higher education: What do we know from IPEDS?* NCES Blog: National Center for Educational Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/blogs/nces/post/distance-education-in-college-what-do-we-know-from-ipedes>
- Ruth, S. (2018). Faculty opposition to online learning: Challenges and opportunities. *International Journal of Technology in Teaching and Learning*, 14(1), 12–23. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1211994.pdf>
- Shreaves, D. L., Ching, Y. H., Uribe-Florez, L., & Trespalcacios, J. (2020). Faculty perceptions of online teaching at a mid-sized liberal arts university. *Online Learning Journal*, 24(3), 106–127. <https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v24i3.2199>
- Spencer, B. (2004). On-line adult learning. In G. Foley (Ed.), *Dimensions of adult learning: Adult education and training in a global era*. Allen & Unwin.
- Tight, M. (2020). Student retention and engagement in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44(5), 689–704. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/student-retention-engagement-higher-education/docview/2459004835/se-2?accountid=9844>
- Tinto, V. (2000). Linking learning and leaving. In J. M. Braxton (Ed.), *Reworking the student departure puzzle* (pp. 81–94). Vanderbilt University Press.
- UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. (2020). *Embracing a culture of lifelong learning*. UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374112>
- Walters, S., Grover, K. S., Turner, R. C., & Alexander, J. C. (2017). Faculty perceptions related to teaching online: A starting point for designing faculty development initiatives. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, 18(4), 4–19. <https://doi.org/10.17718/tojde.340365>
- Zucca, G. (2014). Classroom course model: A different model needed for adult online students. *International Journal of Technology, Knowledge & Society*, 9(4), 99–107. <https://doi.org/10.18848/1832-3669/CGP/v09i04/56405>

Dr. Aaron Einfeld is passionate about facilitating transformational lifelong learning and discovery for individuals and organizations. His bachelor’s degree is in Psychology and master’s degree is in Student Affairs and Higher Education. He earned his Ph.D. in Higher, Adult, and

Lifelong Education at Michigan State University where his research focused on the relationships between online learning and liberal arts education. Dr. Einfeld continues to research the ways in which formal and informal online environments shape life and learning in the Digital Age. He currently serves as Director of Lifelong Learning and Partnerships at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Website: www.aaroneinfeld.com