

Episode 9: Pulling Back the Curtain in Online Learning with Dr. Tammy Shelton

Kathryn Harth:

Welcome to Get Online from Great Plains IDEA. I'm your host, Kathryn Harth. Thanks for downloading this week's podcast. Get Online has expert advice and creative resources to inform and enrich the online educational experience for both students and faculty.

Today's episode is brought to you through a partnership between Great Plains IDEA and our friends at CAEL. CAEL is spelled C-A-E-L and stands for the Council for Adult & Experiential Learning.

Organizations like Great Plains IDEA and CAEL have been in this online learning space for decades, but much of the world is only recently joining us and that's because of the pandemic called COVID-19.

In the last six months, everyone who considers themselves an educator has been forced to move their instruction online. Whether teaching kindergarten, real estate law, 8th-grade language arts, calculus 3, or ballet, no teacher is immune to this shift.

And we know some people have done it better than others.

But educators aren't the only ones being stretched beyond their comfort zone. Learners of all ages are having to adapt to new learning styles. They're learning to have discussions through electronic discussion boards, utilizing new technology to complete assignments, and visiting with advisors and teachers during virtual office hours.

Dr. Tammy Shelton is our guest today and she has been working in the online learning environment for decades. She is joining us to help us pull back the curtain in online learning to better understand what goes into it from a teacher's perspective, as well as what learners should expect and even demand of their education.

Dr. Shelton has a unique perspective because of her experience working in traditional and non-traditional course deliveries and institutions. She has been a university administrator and full-time faculty. She has developed academic programs and credentials with not only the student and learner in mind but also the workforce community and future employers.

Dr. Shelton, welcome to Get Online. Thanks for joining us today.

Tammy Shelton:

Thank you so much for having me. Please just call me Tammy, and I have to tell you, I love love love what you guys title your podcast: Get Online exclamation point.

Kathryn Harth:

That's right, we're all about getting online. That's a great transition to my first question. So it seems like online learning is getting a bad reputation lately. We know that because of the pandemic lots of people are moving online or hearing about students moving online. Can you help us understand the difference

between online learning and remote learning because I think it's important that our listeners understand the distinction between the two of those?

Tammy Shelton:

You know, I think there's always been some confusion about online learning. If you look into accreditation even, they call it distance learning and so I think that you're starting from a place where there was confusion, to begin with, and then we're kind of seeing it muddled.

So in the easiest terms, I think when you're talking about remote learning, we're talking about the traditional student taking a lecture-based class that's sitting in the classroom and we're pivoting, we're moving that to remote learning. It's that pivot and it's using the current modalities that you would have felt in a traditional classroom, so the faculty are reading or lecturing or you're reading and then you come to the lecture that you're viewing via Zoom or another media outlet.

So what we're seeing in remote learning is you have your papers it looks traditional but you're doing it through your computer, the faculty is really supplying the information for the student, it's the concentration on covering content rather than maybe application of learning. Where the online course is intentionally built for the media.

So what does that mean? It means things like active learning, having modular content where you're doing chunked learning and that faculty is coming back to that content. The assessment at the end, "how did I do?"-kind of thing that we may have used a final exam for in a remote or a direct teach modality in face-to-face. It may look different, it might be a project-based assessment versus that final exam. It's something that we call "reverse design," so we look at the outcomes and we move back to how we get to those outcomes.

They both use your computer. Let's just make it simple, right, they both go through the computer, through the internet, it's how they use the technology that's different. Online is more intentionally built around the medium than maybe what we're referring to as remote learning.

Kathryn Harth:

I love that the idea of intentionality is different, that makes a lot of sense. So, because of the pandemic, the world that we're living in now we have COVID-19, and more and more of our higher ed institutions are making that shift to online, but we're also seeing that beyond the higher ed institutions other instructors and teachers are having to move things online. So I'm talking about preschools, public schools, vocational training, even my mom's Master Gardener class is now online.

If we want to stay in business and keep students engaged we are having to offer online learning opportunities, no matter who we are, no matter how or what our content is.

Can you tell us about any institutions that are approaching this differently and anyone that you see that are maybe specifically doing it really well and doing something that works better than others?

Tammy Shelton:

Yeah, isn't that interesting? Everyone, I believe, right now is doing it a little bit differently. Basically, there's this new terminology called "high flex" where a student can go partially online partially face-to-face. I think that most institutions are falling within the spectrum all over the place, so the ones that I think that are getting it right are probably ones that realized in spring that the pandemic was going to necessitate that we do things differently in the fall and that technology had to be a part of that solution.

And so they started training faculty how to do it and so the ones that are getting it right said, "okay, this is where we're headed, let's just get in front of it." They taught faculty to take their content and put it into modules and created this course shell that's an online course shell within the learning management system. That's either your blackboard, or your canvas, or whatever you're using, they had it kind of mirror the face-to-face so that you could pick up and move if you started that traditional face-to-face classroom.

If you were to see numbers escalate with the testing of the COVID you could lift and move over into that course shell almost seamlessly. So what does that look like, and what does that mean? It means they already have students turning in assignments, working in teams, doing collaborative project building in the course shell even though they're face-to-face.

So they're teaching again. We teach the teachers how to teach, we need to teach the students how to be a student online at the same time so you can do it while you're attending face-to-face, but you can pivot and move it more easily into the course shell. That's really where we're seeing some institutions get it right.

It was all in preparing, it's all about training and it's all about understanding that we're not seeking perfection. What's interesting, I think empathetically, I've been a traditional professor in a classroom, so I know what the face-to-face is supposed to look like but understanding that there is some fear and concern with faculty and getting them to be where they can feel the most secure when they move forward.

Kathryn Harth:

You use the word "high-flex," someone who maybe is not working at an institution that uses the word high-flex is another word for that maybe "hybrid?" Tell us your difference, tell us the difference.

Tammy Shelton:

Yeah, don't we love our words, in academics. A hybrid is where, I think, it's in who's deciding on the experience.

At the council for Accelerated Program we would have called all of our courses "hybrid," which meant some of the instruction, usually one time a week was face-to-face, the other part was that student was engaged with both the faculty and the content in that course shell during the week or during the month. So it's both, and you still had that experience, but the course intentionally was built that way.

High-flex is more in the student's hand where the student is making the decision that "this week, I'm going to go face-to-face, next week I'm going to go remote." Let's be very clear, which is watching the lecture via online or turning in the assignments via either the course shell or email, so that student is communicating with the faculty, but the student is sort of driving that experience for themselves.

Kathryn Harth:

Okay, that's helpful, thank you. I want to continue talking a little bit about faculty and that preparation. That's important that you talked about preparing and training, you're going to be offering a free webinar through our friends at CAEL and it's going to be October 8th, and I will have more information at the end of this podcast about the webinar, and it'll also be on our website.

I know in that webinar you're going to talk more directly to faculty and administrators in higher ed about what happens and the process of pivoting to an online learning environment and how instructors can engage students online now that they're no longer in the same room together, and how they can present their content in the online environment since they're no longer standing at the front of the room, and how they can continue to have those organic discussions even though it looks different.

That different modality like you were talking about, talk to us a little bit about what's going to be in your webinar, but also some of the tips and tricks you're going to share about engagement and presenting content.

Tammy Shelton:

Sure, so I think it has to start from a place in understanding what online is, again, it's that online deliveries aren't harder or easier, they're not more time or less time, it's just a different pathway. So, for faculty, what does that mean?

One analogy that I was thinking about is *Hamilton*. I saw *Hamilton* on Broadway, I loved *Hamilton*. It was a wonderful experience. I love New York and I love going to the theater. There I was really excited, though when Disney decided they were going to stream *Hamilton* on-

Kathryn Harth:

Yeah, you and all of America was very excited.

Tammy Shelton:

Exactly, yeah, so I had the experience of seeing it live, the lighting and the movement and the storytelling and the no distraction. I'm in a theater, I'm watching, I'm involved with that Broadway play when I watched it, although I have watched it probably about seven times now, it's not the same experience. So I think for faculty [needs] to understand the difference, I love teaching, I love being in front of a live class, being there face-to-face, it's a different experience than a live stream; however, Disney's going to make a movie and it will be *Hamilton The Movie*, that's what we hear.

So it will be made for, again the media, and so for faculty, for traditional faculty, you have to just get to a place of comfort that you're not going to be able to do it the same way you did before. It's going to look different, your outcomes are going to be the same, that's really rigorous about moving that student through their learning to higher levels of learning. It's kind of blues-ish.

What faculty have to do is think about how they're going to get to those outcomes differently. So it's engagement with their students and they're learning the students are going to go engage with content, your job as faculty is to facilitate that experience for that student. Two-way communication is incredibly important.

I laugh about when you go into some online courses, you post your original discussion thread on Tuesday, you respond to three people by Thursday, and you get it back graded on Sunday from the faculty.

It's really using your discussion board as something other than just an affirmation of some information, but that it's supposed to replicate student discussion in a live classroom. So, teaching students how to write a discussion thread, that's different. I like trucks because there's a bed in the back and I can move things, and the response by your peer is, "that was a great post, I love trucks too. You did a great job because I appreciated what you said about having to move things."

It's really about writing questions that can engage students in the experience, so affirming that they have had some relationship with the content and that they're demonstrating that, but also they have that community. So that's one of the things we're going to talk about, creating opportunities for students to understand that the content they're engaged with has an application, helping students see that.

I love case studies where students are collaborating and they're getting involved with each other and using their gifts and talents together. It sometimes frustrates the students, I remember in grad school it was like "oh, a team project," there's a reason. It's that active participation, what does active learning really look like?

The active learning environment, the face-to-face classroom is not faculty standing up front giving content to the students, active learning is watching the students in groups, or there's movement, there's activity, hence the word "active." It looks the same way, but within a computer screen, so those kinds of things, it's really teaching faculty how to use technology and you can't use technology just to use it, it has to make sense.

Gamification is so much fun in some courses and in other courses, it's not really going to work. What we've seen, also, is this opportunity right now on higher ed. I saw this quote inside higher ed, it was talking about [how] we're going to be moving from hands-on to goggles-on, virtual reality. How do you do a lab? You can put on your virtual reality glasses and go through the motions.

We're moving from a face-to-face interaction to a face-to-screen interaction, what does that look like and how is it appropriate? There are lots of different uses of technology, I think you can overproduce it, you can use too much technology, and if you're spending the entire time trying to teach people how to use it you may not get them to the level of learning that you want them to be at, but it's really engaging the students using the technology as a tool. We've got a great opportunity.

Break [Music]

Kathryn Harth:

Let's take a short break from the interview and learn a little more about this webinar. Tammy and a panel of experts will present this free, interactive, one-hour webinar on Thursday, October 8th at 2 pm Central time. It's titled *Effective Remote and Online Learning for Adult Learners: Taking online learning to the next level of excellence* and is offered by our friends at CAEL, that's the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning.

The webinar is free but registration is required. Simply go to the membership page on the CAEL website at www.cael.org/membership. We'll add the link in our show notes on our website as well.

For those who cannot attend the live presentation, you can still register and CAEL will email you the recording after the presentation.

[End of break]

Kathryn Harth:

I love that we're talking futuristic. We keep hearing from the media, and from our administration, and higher ed, and from really all over the world that after this pandemic is in our rearview mirror, there will be a lot of "new normals." I'm using my air quotes because we keep hearing that there will be a "new normal."

I think we're all in agreement that college is going to look different and it's on its way there, you just gave several examples. Talk to us about what is most exciting to you about what it will look like in our new normal.

Tammy Shelton:

The way that I'm hearing and seeing where we're going in the academy in higher education is that we're headed into what they're calling the "fourth industrial revolution" and it goes back to what I was saying earlier that we're moving from an information age to an experience age. That is incredibly exciting to me because what we're going to start doing is looking at the academic credential differently.

In my research for my dissertation, I was really looking at the general education requirements and soft skill development and what do employers think, is there an expectation that when a student graduates with a four-year degree, a master's, or a doctorate, is there an expectation that they're going to be successful on the job and is it still warranted? If you have two candidates, does the credential make

them more appealing? And employers holistically have said yes, the credential still has meaning but we'll keep the ones who are able to perform day one.

So how do we do both ends? I think there's an opportunity, especially in this online space, to do the micro-credentialing. Micro-credentials are really anything that's short term in training. That is not an academic bachelor's, master's, or doctorate degree.

Micro-credentials include things like digital badges, which the digital badge is something that's created after you meet some certain competencies. You have your checklist, and I get the digital badge and what's cool about that digital badge is then you can put it on your LinkedIn, you can put it on your resume. It's a visible representation of something that's really achieved to you for you and then any kind of professional certifications would be included in micro-credentials.

We're going to start looking at the general education requirements differently. There's one institution that added a coding course to their gen ed package, that's a really good application course to a career that every single student that comes through because that's your brand, your general education package that students will be able to graduate with the academic credential, able to code.

So if we know this then you should be able to create some soft skill development, so communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, those kinds of things within your gen ed package but it has to be, again, intentionally built and assessed so that a student can walk out with the academic credential in the workforce development digital badge. So this is an area that's really exciting and online really lends itself to this.

A conversation I was having earlier is that we don't know what the jobs of tomorrow are going to be yet, but what we do know is that it involves technology. I think it changes communications one-on-one to how do we do zoom meetings? How do we do if we're going to accept that, I think that's where we're going?

Some companies are realizing that there's an economy to scale from remote workers, that's one of those areas. So why don't we teach students how to do it within the context of the degree, the academic credentials. If you had a crystal ball, I think they're going to stay the MBAs, the health care administration, all of those fields definitely are going to stay, but I think the institutions who can communicate to parents and to students that "there's something post-graduation, that their life is going to be a little different and here's how." The easier we can explain that is in higher ed, I think the better.

The academy has been forced to look at it differently, this just necessitated it. That's why I think it's really important to understand the difference between remote and online, you may be having a remote learning experience but pedagogically it may not be where a true online degree delivery is, so I think that's one way.

Another way is the incubators that institute higher education. Institutions are bringing around what I found is that as employers, we do individual projects for like a senior project or senior thesis, they would

rather you not do that and they would rather see a team project. And what was interesting about that is what if you got someone who had a bachelor's in marketing working on a project with an engineering student who has an engineering degree and, again, you almost create this little company for a senior thesis.

Kathryn Harth:

It's just like real life.

Tammy Shelton:

Exactly, but what we would do is we go out to the industry and say, "what's a problem we can solve," and let's get all the different kinds of minds and learnings, and then they can talk about it when they go into an interview as well.

So it's really taking these incubators and solving, I do believe, in liberal arts education, wholeheartedly, it makes a difference in the communities that institutions are part of it. If you change a community through education wouldn't it be wonderful to have students graduate, to work on actual solutions to the challenges of that community, homelessness, food insecurity?

Institutions that can do things like this, that can be nimble, that can be flexible are going to be the ones that are very successful. I think it's going to have to change, I don't think it's going to be a choice. The successful institutions are the ones that are going to be able to do this.

Kathryn Harth:

You know, Tammy, I was attending a marketing conference, of course virtually, last week and they said two things that really plug into what you are saying as well. One that they shared was that employers are asking for more focus on those soft skills, which they're actually calling essential skills, so that is really interesting that I heard that in a marketing conference and now you are saying it as well.

The other thing that is interesting is the idea of disciplines working together – that was something else. They're seeing an uptick in enrollments and multi-disciplinary degrees, so that's what prospective students want, they want to be able to have skills that come from various disciplines rather than maybe just focusing on one area.

So two questions left for you, we're just about finished here. The first one would be if you could narrow it down, what's the most important point you hope faculty will take away from this interview today?

Tammy Shelton:

First of all, breathe, no one has experience facilitating higher education through a pandemic. We always used to use these kind of words, but these words before, progress not perfection, you have to be easy on yourself.

As faculty, I believe just from navigating the fear of faculty into going online in the past has been the fear of being irrelevant, the fear of losing something that's so dear to them. I mean, I'm a generation x, I'll put that out there, but the baby boomers that are still faculty, there's a fear of "I'm not going to be able to learn the technology, I'm not going to be able to understand this." I think give yourself permission to first of all, feel your feelings and understanding the stuff, but there are lots and lots and lots of resources out there.

Online is not new, that's why I think instructional designers are so critical, you're the subject matter expert, you know your content, you know your research, you know the historical context partnering, it's a beautiful space to be collaborative and work with an instructional designer or go and access information of different ways to deliver your content, that's different.

First of all, just being gentle on yourself, allowing yourself to not know something, to not be the expert for the first time, maybe it's really got to be scary, but people know this and so accessing people who have that and getting training, there's lots of free training, lots of webinars that are out there--hey, we happen to have one coming up on October the 8th-- so just understanding that and then also understanding online is "easier," in some ways it's very very involved for faculty.

So giving yourself enough ramp-up time, but understanding that your outcomes are not changing, your outcomes are staying the same, you're just getting there differently and allow yourself to kind of play in that space. I think that's what I would tell faculty, but there's lots and lots of people out there to help you.

Kathryn Harth:

That's great, "progress is not perfection." Man, that's amazing life advice, not just for faculty. I wrote it down. Okay, final question, what is the one message you want students to remember because we also have students that listen to this podcast, what do you want them to keep in mind as they continue learning to be an online learner?

Tammy Shelton:

You have to be an advocate for yourself. With all four generations right now in the same learning environment, you've got people at all different ends of the spectrum of being able to handle the technology and the zoom exhaustion is real. We see it on Facebook, little kids who are laying down, the five-year-old who's tired of being on zoom all day.

If it's too much, talk, speak up early, talk to faculty if you're overwhelmed. If you don't understand everything right up front, that's okay, but make sure that you are an advocate for yourself, that you're communicating and that you take opportunities to talk to your classmates.

I'm an extrovert, so right now it is really hard for me, my introverted friends are thriving like crazy, they are so happy. I'm eating myself to death right now because I don't have human connection.

So, just creating that with your student groups and when we do a team project, understand that there's a community, that that's important and cohorts are important. Get involved in your own learning, that's your advocate. Get involved in your own learning because this is what you're going to be doing the rest of your life. I hope I keep learning the rest of my life, so just know you'll be successful. It's different and different is okay.

Kathryn Harth:

Different is okay, absolutely.

That's all we have time for today. Tammy, thank you so much for joining us and helping us pull back the curtain to online learning so that our listeners can better understand how that transition happens and how they can be successful whether they are a faculty member or a student.

Tammy Shelton:

Thank you so much and thank you for all the hard work and everything you're doing to try to help everyone right now. Thank you.

Kathryn Harth:

That's it for today's episode. A special thanks to Jeannie McCarron at CAEL and my colleague at Great Plains IDEA, Amanda Burris, for their help with this show.

If you want to learn more about transitioning to effective online and remote teaching, consider attending the free webinar on October 8th. We will put a link to the registration page in our show notes, as well as Tammy's contact information in case you'd like to follow-up with her.

I also want to let you know that CAEL's annual conference will be virtual this year and is free to their members. It will take place on November 4th-6th and includes topics such as adult learner models and how to use data to create outcomes. Visit their website to register and learn more.

To listen to other Great Plains IDEA episodes, you can find us wherever you get your podcasts or on our website at www.gpidea.org.

I'm your host Kathryn Harth, and until next time, Get Online!