The Pencil Lines of Our Past and Future

ike many other youngest siblings, when I had a birthday as a kid, I always wanted to be older than I was, actively chasing after the impossible dream of catching up to my siblings. My son measured his birthdays differently, with pencil lines on his closet wall to mark, year after year, his ever-increasing height. Anniversaries are subjective experiences. Two people can look back over the same history and see it completely differently, noting different trends and milestones and drawing different conclusions from the very same landmarks. As we celebrate the first twenty years of EDUCAUSE and also look ahead in this issue of EDUCAUSE Review, we offer multiple opportunities for readers to revel in our collective history and future from unique and varying points of view.

To capture personal perspectives, we asked our members four questions, and in “Twenty Years: EDUCAUSE and Higher Education IT” we share these remembrances, predictions, and insights from across our community. The reflections begin with “15-in-20,” the fifteen most significant developments in the past twenty years. With a wide variety of nominations, the internet was nevertheless the clear winner. As Jennifer Sparrow noted, access to internet resources “changed who has access to knowledge and how we can leverage it to create curiosity in our learners.” Many members’ contemplations are personal in nature, since our sense of the past is persistently defined by the events that affected us most powerfully. Depending on your own journey, different voices will speak to you more directly. I found myself drawn to observations of the sweeping changes in information technology. For instance, David Smallen notes: “Institutions of all types have recognized IT as a strategic resource, and CIOs have increasingly become part of institutional leadership at the highest levels. IT has been recognized as foundational/strategic in most areas of college and university life.” And I particularly appreciated Damien Koemans’s insight that “the most significant moments were not those that came to be but the ones that didn’t.” While MOOCs are his example, we could all name our own technology dreams that never quite materialized.

Meanwhile, in his article “Twenty Years of Edtech,” Martin Weller, Professor of Educational Technology at Open University, recognizes that educational technology is inherently such a forward-looking enterprise that we typically don’t make the time to reflect on our own history, even when ideas come and go and often reemerge years later under new management. While Weller’s wonderful concatenation of historical milestones since the birth of EDUCAUSE is valuable in many ways, I find this thread of ideas coming and going and being reborn particularly interesting. In his broad vision, one can see how wikis (1998) are connected to blogs (2003) and ultimately to MOOCs (2012)—and may yet come again in another form. Weller’s history will remind some readers of the countless hours spent building education islands in Second Life (2007), but he understands that this technology too lies waiting possible rebirth as AR and VR become mainstream: “Virtual worlds for learning may be one of those technologies due for a comeback.”

Following this look to the past, Southern New Hampshire University President Paul LeBlanc focuses on the future. His view of EDUCAUSE in 2038 shares my fascination with examining the point where the past, the present, and the future come together in surprising ways. LeBlanc concentrates on what he calls “signals from the future,” technological developments that—even if unsuccessful—can powerfully presage future trends. For example, he tells the story of his first introduction to the Newton PDA from Apple twenty years ago. While that device did not survive, it begat the PalmPilot, which begat the Blackberry, which begat the iPhone and eventually the iPad. Just as the Newton was a signal

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from the future, so too were the computer game Myst, Google Glass, and Fitbit. LeBlanc concludes with some suggestions for what other signals may lie ahead on the road to our fortieth anniversary. For me, LeBlanc’s perspective suggests that rather than waiting for decade milestones to take stock of where we are and where we’re headed, we should be future-aware every year, continually watching for signals.

At one point or another, the insights from our members, Weller, and LeBlanc note that as we round out the last twenty years, we are entering a new period in the evolution of higher education information technology—one with less focus on the technology itself and more attention on the implications of the technology. If the first wave of higher education information technology was establishing technology as a utility, followed by a second wave in which technology became recognized as strategically critical, there is strong evidence that the next wave will find us grappling not with what technology is or what it does but with what it means for society and humanity. For example, LeBlanc looks to “EDUCAUSE 2038” to provide an understanding of the ethics, morality, and philosophy of emerging technologies and advises: “We will need as many ethicists and sociologists at EDUCAUSE gatherings as IT staff and edtech vendors.” Susan E. Metros extends this imperative to students: “As IT professionals, we need to provide services and invent tools that will help students sort through the moral and ethical issues of seeing while questioning whether to believe.”

Along these lines, Weller, in his consideration of data analytics, stresses the need to embed an ethical dimension into our use and commodification of student data. When it comes to artificial intelligence (reborn from the intelligent tutoring systems of the 1980s and 1990s), he sees the ethical issues as “more significant” than the technological ones. AI assumptions will shape how education is realized and how learners are served: “If learners don’t fit that conceptual model, they will find themselves outside of the area in which compassion will allow a human to alter or intervene.” Marty Ringle compellingly summarizes the challenge and the opportunity as he recalls a course he taught more than forty years ago: “I went to great lengths to emphasize that the thrill of inventing new technologies needed to be tempered by an understanding of how those technologies might alter society and impact individuals.”

Now, as we undertake implementing this decade’s set of new technology tools, he stresses: “The need to be mindful of the ethical implications of what we do—especially in education—is greater than ever.” His caution? “Let’s not screw it up.”

Perhaps our most important and consequential milestones are ahead of us, because they involve humanity with a capital H. As Deborah Keyek-Franssen observes, we still need to learn how to balance “the uses of technology with the values of human interaction.” The pencil lines that mark EDUCAUSE’s next twenty years will, I believe, track a unique and more crucial set of accomplishments. Maybe this is what the enigmatic Bill Hogue means when he says we must “seek questions hidden by answers.”

The challenges, like the technologies, will come and go, and the jumble of competing ideas is confounding and inspiring, unclear and concrete. Ultimately, the EDUCAUSE community represents the best chance of tackling the hurdles instead of being tackled by them. Bob Flynn comments: “The establishment of organizations like EDUCAUSE gave voice to and fostered community among those whose work plays an increasingly fundamental role in support for, enablement of, and innovation in the core research and academic missions of our institutions. As we move into the future, both known and unknown, we should not lose sight of those important foundations. That is the source of the strength of EDUCAUSE and the institutions it serves.” That collective strength tells the story of the founding of EDUCAUSE in July 1998, our thriving community today, and the promising years of collaboration ahead.

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