

2020 May WIT Online EduPod Episode 1: Online Learning in the Pandemic

INTRO: Your listening to the WIT Online EduPod series. WIT Online partners with faculty, staff, and students to enhance the curriculum, by developing and delivering flexible and innovative online learning experiences. The WIT Online EduPod series includes conversations with the Wentworth community on topics in online teaching and learning.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: Hello, everyone. I'm Ke'Anna Skipwith from Wentworth Online, and I will be your host for today's podcast. We're so glad that you're tuning in from wherever you are. This month we are speaking with Adam Payne about online learning in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. I'm excited and honored to have Adam join me today. He is our first guest for our debut episode.

So before getting started, I wanted to take a few moments to introduce Adam to our listeners. Adam is an Assistant Professor of Psychology in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Wentworth Institute of Technology. He earned a Doctor of Education at the Penn Chief Learning Officer program from the University of Pennsylvania. Additionally, he holds a Master of Arts in Industrial Organizational Psychology and a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and Statistics.

Previously, Adam was a Program Director and Adjunct Instructor at Bentley University, and has taught as a part time adjunct instructor at many institutions in the greater Boston area. In addition to his role at Wentworth, Adam has also developed and taught a course on research techniques and processes for adult learners in the Woods College located at Boston College. Recently Adam's work has been published in the American Journal of Management and the Journal of Higher Education, Theory, and Practice. And he has presented at numerous conferences, and even served as a TED-Ed speaker.

One interesting thing I've learned about Adam is that he's a musician. He has recorded six albums while contributing to several other albums and projects.

So welcome, Adam, to our podcast show. How have you been doing in this mist of change?

ADAM PAYNE: Thank you very much for having me, Ke'Anna. Yeah, it's been interesting, I think, for all of us. It seems like any person I've talked to it's been an adjustment. It's like we have to give ourselves a few minutes to just say, yep, it's crazy. But I think I'm doing the best that I can. How about you?

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: I can also relate with you. For me, I'm grateful just to be alive and healthy with all that's going on.

ADAM PAYNE: Definitely.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: So I've developed a sense of what's really important. You know, how can I really prioritize myself care? You know, I'm exercising more than ever.

ADAM PAYNE: No excuses now.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: No. And trying to find ways to connect with friends and family.

ADAM PAYNE: Absolutely. Yeah, if nothing else, I mean, that is the kind of a silver lining to be able to have more time to connect with people. That is true.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: Absolutely. And now let's get into the questions, shall we? So my first question for you, Adam, is what has your experience been like converting your courses to online or remote learning doing the COVID-19 disruption?

ADAM PAYNE: Sure. My initial answer to that is it was very sudden, right? It was unexpected. But I think that because of the flexibility of the students, I think that's number one. And I think with just kind of the support and everything that Wentworth offers, I mean I think it was much smoother than if I were, like-- let's say if I would have done a scenario in my industrial organizational psychology class. You know, like a work related scenario. I think that I couldn't have planned it better. And I think that in terms of the response, it was perfect. And I think that as best as it could be, I think the transition was smooth. And I think a lot of that attributed to the good people, like yourself, that work at Wentworth made that possible.

But I think for me specifically with the students it was definitely, like I said, they required some flexibility. The learning curve of just reacquainting myself with online material. But I think in the end, I think it ended up working out and I think it was a quality experience for everybody.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: Right. I totally agree. When we first started the transition, there was a whole lot of communication going out, working with the faculty to make sure they were adjusting. Because some of the faculty were actually new actually using the LMS. They've never used it before.

ADAM PAYNE: Oh, that's right.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: So we had to worry about that on top of the students and faculty, just their mental state, how they're going to do this now after going back home and watching from the campus, so-- it's just been real to see how things happened so quickly.

ADAM PAYNE: Absolutely. I think the last piece that I would add to that, Ke'Anna I think, because everybody was kind of experiencing something crazy, it required all of us to be patient with each other. Knowing that it's not just people joining a class to get together and talking about a subject. But you're dealing with people who are displaced and all kinds of different mental states. So trying to find the most comfortable common space to be able to have a quality class experience is a challenge in and of itself.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: So my follow up question to that, Adam, is after teaching remotely for the last few weeks since you were about to transition into the spring semester, what were some of the lessons learned and key takeaways you have?

ADAM PAYNE: Sure. I think that number one, it's something that can be done. I've worked in the higher education space for a long time and I think that we-- mainly I remember with massive open online courses, back in 2011, there was a lot of talk about how we can incorporate online learning. And I think that something with a global influence as this pandemic has had I think it's really helped us, you know myself particularly, to know that I can do it. I've taught online before, but I think in a more direct way. That you know, it can be done. It can be done well.

I would also say-- I might say this later, too-- but I think it really puts an onus on the people who support the folks in the classroom. And I think it really makes it more of a team effort. That's what I see. I see a lot more potential, not only for just support efforts, but also a lot more collaboration maybe with folks who aren't as tech savvy working with another person maybe from your area to make the class better, more engaging. So I think that there's a lot of key takeaways. I think it's really positive. It comes from a sudden change, it really paints a lot of positive potential for the future.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: I would just comment saying that being an administrator in online teaching and learning, I have to mention that remote learning is not online learning. Would you agree?

ADAM PAYNE: Absolutely, yes. No, it's good to make that distinction.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: The reason why I say that is that there has been so many articles on this topic during the COVID-19 pandemic. And one that comes to mind was published right before we went our separate ways from campus in March from EDUCAUSE, and they were explaining the difference between the remote versus the online models. And I'll be sure to share these articles on the podcast resource page.

But I just want to say that I would describe remote learning as being easy to access, quick to set up with minimal resources. It requires little instruction or support, you know, to get that onboarding started. But I do think the student experience will be definitely different in remote versus online. Because with online learning, to me, it's very intentional planning. Lots of preparation developing the instruction materials and the content, even the assignments for that particular online student population. So I just want to make that note there.

ADAM PAYNE: That's a very good-- that's a good distinction. And for some of the research that I've done, what you point to is really, I think, course delivery and course design. And both of those elements are really important when you move in to, say, like an asynchronous class, I think in terms of really making sure that there's high potential for learning. It's extremely important to focus on course design. It really has to make sense, it has to flow.

I think when you're in a live classroom, you can get by if your design is more fluid or isn't as well planned. But absolutely with online learning, and remote learning, I would say course design is very important. And then the delivery, it depends. Definitely in a synchronous, people are meeting a couple of times or once a week for class, then course delivery definitely-- how do you sync that together with the course design in a way that-- I think the key piece for me has been to really keep the student experience as number one.

We have a tendency as instructors to want to get in this race to finish. That I have to finish this chapter, I have to finish this material, and it's more about recalibrating the class so that it's really in line with the student experience. If the students aren't getting something, I think even more so than in a live classroom, it's important to slow down or to offer more opportunities for outreach or connection, whether it's individual meetings or whatever it is. But I think the student experience is paramount. And I think making sure that that experience is as good as possible, and as engaging as possible, is really important.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: The next question I have for you-- what was your biggest challenge in keeping your students engaged and feeling connected during this time?

ADAM PAYNE: Sure. Yeah. I mean, for me I would consider myself a very hands on teacher. I like to, for example, walking around the classroom if there's a lecture going on. Or walking around, I think-- maybe I learned a little bit from a thing or two about being a musician, having to kind of work a crowd, right? I see a lot of similarities there, and I think I've incorporated a lot of those elements into my teaching. So I think that a challenge for me was trying to find a way to do that.

And I think at first it's different, right? Like even my transition, say, from playing in bars, restaurants, and pubs to playing music virtually, it's a very, very different experience, but it's important to try to find that connection. So I think it is challenging. But I think I'm really trying to find ways, even if it's just a little bit of discussion in the beginning, to find ways to connect with people. You know, pointing out stuff in people's background on Zoom, or things to make people feel comfortable, I think, is important. And it is different, but I think I definitely see some benefits as well in terms of really being able to make sure that you're paying equal attention or that you're kind of making connections across the screen as opposed to across the classroom. It does have a affordances, I think, when we're talking about a virtual format.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: Thanks for sharing. I totally agree that instructor and social presence are so important, especially in the online community. They want to build that community of trust. They want to build that rapport with their instructors, and even with their peers. Because all of this promotes that sense of belonging, that sense of purpose-- why we're here, why we're learning, and things like that.

ADAM PAYNE: Absolutely.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: So I consider you a guru at online teaching. Can you share any strategies or resources you found helpful?

ADAM PAYNE: Sure, yeah. I think it's very nice of you, once again. I don't know that-- I don't know that I consider myself-- I appreciate it. I'll take it. You know, I guess I would kind of reiterate what I was saying before. I think it's really important as-- I think it's easy as an instructor to get lost in the other priorities that we have without keeping, again, the student experience at the forefront. And I think that no matter what the class is, if it's a very technical class, if it's more of a discussion based class, I think it's absolutely essential to make sure that the students are having the best experience. I think it always matters, but I think it really matters now. And I think it's important, I think, for all instructors, I think, to remember that.

Because the students want to have the best experience. There is a challenge, but I think making sure that doing things like setting expectations in the beginning, letting people know, for example, things might not go perfectly, or being willing, I think, to be authentic is definitely something that helps. And say, look, I'm not perfect. If you're someone who hasn't had experience teaching online before, if this is your first foray into it, I think being upfront about that can help adjust people's expectations and it can help the experience be a lot better.

And I think, like I said, I would just reiterate that this is the material that I am teaching, but these are all students. So this is all the stuff that I planned and the design, but now I have a set of students, a bunch of faces, that are looking at me. If you meet regularly, or just people who are moving through the material.

I think it should be less of a checklist type of process, and it should be more of really taking that extra step to make sure that students are getting something. That students are not just being polite and saying, yeah, everything's fine. Because that kind of forces the checklist later. Yeah, I passed the class, I got it done, I got a decent grade. But how can I learn in the best way in this environment? Based on everything-- the expertise of the instructor in terms of delivering content, all of that together. How can that create the best student experience possible? I think that that is-- there's nothing more important than the student experience.

So I think keeping that in mind, however, that plays out, whatever strategies and tactics that worked for you, I think as long as you keep that in mind, it'll go well.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: What advice would you give your faculty colleagues as they are beginning this summer semester here at Wentworth?

ADAM PAYNE: Yeah. Just, you know, open mind. Be flexible. I think it's very important to-- you know, something that I think we're used to doing, but even more so, being OK to rely on people who can support you at the Institute. Folks in your office, folks in the other areas that would be able to really help not only with, say, not a technical issue. I have this idea, I have this topic that I'm going to talk about. Here's how I did it in the classroom. I need to convert it to more of a remote format. I think it's a perfect opportunity, and I think it will only make things better.

I've been at Wentworth, you know, less than a year. There are such incredible people who are so willing to help. I think that it really makes a big difference to take advantage of that help, and make a big difference for everybody.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: Great. Thanks for sharing these tips and strategies. In your opinion, how is the coronavirus pandemic reshaping higher education?

ADAM PAYNE: That's a good question. I think it really puts more of an emphasis on the quality of the experience that students have. When I see things on the news about students considering a gap year, or when I think of some of the other opportunities that students might take advantage of, it becomes almost a thing that we have to compete with. So I think the onus is really on us while this pandemic has gone on, in the aftermath of it, to really focus more on, again, providing the best experience. And learning what we can learn from the experience, but really making sure that when things resume to some normalcy, and even throughout it, that we are providing the best experience possible because of some of these other things that might be competing with the potential students that we can have.

Making sure that across the board that we provide the best quality classes possible, especially at a school like Wentworth, where students are coming to gain, in a lot of instances, specific technical knowledge. I think it's really important that we all, everybody in higher education, develops a real mastery behind to kind of complement the existing skill sets to really present the information not only in the best way, but that is conscious of the fact that things are going to be in a state of somewhat unsettled for a while after this. Even if everything does reopen and goes back to normal, there's still going to be a lingering effect of this.

So I think that, again, making sure that we're able to do the best that we can from where we are. And to be able to reach students wherever they are. If they're on campus, if they're remote, it's much more important for us to think of each class providing a really, really quality experience.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: Great. What role do you think online learning can play in the future of education?

ADAM PAYNE: I think it can be really the vehicle, very much. I think that, again, as we experiment with different learning styles, as we maybe find the best tools that are in place to use for course design, course delivery, I think that online learning, the importance of that and how it can-- really it will be the vehicle that we use to deliver all of this information. So I think it may be, you know, if things continue in this way, I can see how it might be more important, say, in graduate programs or education programs, wherever instructors will come from, to make sure that they have some kind of how do you take all this information that we're teaching you and deliver it in a way that is remote that might not be as familiar with people?

So I think it really-- we're going to have to train instructors. We're going to have to make sure that instructors really have a mastery of being able to work in the online learning space really well as much so as we have done in the actual physical classrooms. So that highlights the importance of a skill-set for the instructors, but it also highlights the importance, again, for folks

who would be in a position to help those people be the best that they can. Not only, again, with the short, the temporary troubleshooting, but more so with delivering a quality experience for everybody.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: I totally agree. Two things that come to my mind are, as you mentioned, the quality or value of education will change, as well as how higher education institutions may explore actually more academic industry partnerships for learning. I recently read an article by Scott Galloway he's a well-known author and NYU professor who mentioned, quote, "while other crises reshape our future, COVID-19 is just making the feature happen faster."

ADAM PAYNE: That's it. That's it.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: So we couple that, what we just said, with the benefits of online learning. It continues to allow that flexibility. It can be made accessible to anyone and everyone, as you mentioned. And most importantly, it allows for a customized and authentic learning experience for any student who wants to learn.

ADAM PAYNE: Absolutely. That's good.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: So looking ahead to the fall semester, in your opinion, what is the new normal of teaching and learning at Wentworth going to look like?

ADAM PAYNE: That's a really good question. It's funny, I have this crystal ball app on my phone. They're doing maintenance, so I wasn't able to look and get-- of all times, right? But I think the new normal is still evolving. The new normal everyday, you know, it's like with all the different elements I think there's a lot of moving pieces. So I can't say for sure. I don't know if anybody can.

But I think that there are things that are going to be much more important. I think that we have-- all of us, anyone who works in higher education, particularly folks at Wentworth, we have a more of a responsibility to convince students or help them understand that this is something-- this is still something that can be done in a way as it always has been to move you forward. To give you professional experience, et cetera. And I think the expertise that you would need to gain that professional experience.

And I think that, you know, I don't know that things really need to change that much. I think the sentiment that I have, one of the reasons why I'm excited about working at Wentworth and why I'm excited to work at Wentworth, is I think the people, no matter who you talk to, no matter who the workers are, everyone really cares about the student experience. Everyone is thinking about that. And I think that for me, if I were to think about what impact might that have, I think that everything else is easy. Because we will make sure that whoever the students are that they have the best experience possible, regardless of what the circumstances are. And those of us who might need more help with certain things will get it. And I think we'll all make sure that the student experience is as best as it can, no matter where we are.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: Well, you make some really good points, Adam, about the upcoming fall semester from Wentworth. I guess we'll all have to see in the coming months.

ADAM PAYNE: We shall see. But I'm anticipating it, I think, with the same anxiety and anticipation as the rest of us.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: So as we wrap up this episode, Adam, do you have any final thoughts or comments on what we discussed today?

ADAM PAYNE: Yeah. You know, I'd say that my final comment is-- I've been saying it throughout-- but I think anytime we're talking about learning we need to think about who's learning first. Not how do I teach this or how can I put something together, but who's learning? How can they best learn? I would just reiterate the student experience is-- I've been a staff member, faculty now. It's the same across the board. And I think it's the reason why we're all in the positions that we're in. So all of us keeping that very much at the forefront will make all the difference in my opinion.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: Great. Thanks again for joining me today and sharing your insights on this important topic. Finally, how can our listeners get in touch with you and learn more about the work you're doing?

ADAM PAYNE: Sure. I'm on the Wentworth email. You can get in touch me there. I'd love to talk with you. If you want to visit my website, it's just adampayne.biz, and I'd love to hear from you.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: Thanks again, Adam.

ADAM PAYNE: Thank you very much, Ke'Anna.

KE'ANNA SKIPWITH: Take care.

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