Balancing the Shift
Ep 9 Digital Transformation

Lisa
Welcome to balancing the shift with Dr. Lisa Jacka and Dr. Julie Lindsay in this episode we discuss digital transformation with a conversation about our perceptions of what this is and what it means for the future of higher education.

Julie
Digital transformation. Hmm. It's an interesting term, isn't it? And we do hear the word transformation a lot these days. Academic transformation, curriculum transformation, assessment, transformation, anything transformation but it's been around for a while, Lisa, hasn't it? What, can we say about this that's useful for everybody moving forward into a more digital and fluent and technology infused future in higher education? What is digital transformation? How would you define it?

Lisa
Do we need to define digital transformation? Are we looking for a definition for digital transformation? I think we've found a good definition through EDUCAUSE, one of our organizations who come up with nice definitions for things. But maybe we get a bit caught up in trying to define something like this. And if we break it down into the digital, because all things technological I guess, and then transformation, I think transformations the big ticket word in the title, but what does that mean? It means different things to different people, I think. And so it's useful to have somebody such as EDUCAUSE, which was one that we've both been reading, to help frame up what transformation might be and how it how it occurs. And I guess I'm thinking about whether transformation occurs organically or if it is something that needs pushing along, particularly in an organization like a university.

Julie
Yes. So I guess the question is, what are we trying to transform? What are we trying to improve? What are we trying to shift from the way it is now to the way we want it to be? And it could be how the university operates. It could be how we deal with students in terms of enrollment and support, and it could be how we integrate technologies into better technologies and better processes into the whole university's area of learning and teaching, of course, which is where we work in particular.

Lisa
So is it transformation or is it just change or is it different from change?

Julie
I think it's more than change. I think it's well, when you add the word digital to it, it's change using, emerging or perhaps even existing technologies to make change, but to make things more efficient, better accessible, a better outcomes for learners and staff. So it's not just change for the sake of change. It's actually a plan to change. I see it as a planned change.

Lisa
So do you think it's a planned change that's happening out of necessity or is that just this change that's happening because we're so immersed in a digital world?

Julie

Oh, no, I think it's necessity. I don't know if you remember 20, 25 years ago. I actually was working in Zambia 25 years ago, and I remember going from Australia to a little school in Zambia where I was working and everything was paper. There was a woman who sat in an office and it was just all paper, all the accounts, everything, there was nothing digitized. And back in Melbourne at the school I had been working in we were really further, a lot further down the track in terms of digitization of a whole lot of processes and learning and teaching. So now I'm thinking 25 years later, there is still now a lot that we can do because technology has moved on, you know, how we communicate with students, are we using SMS, are we using things like Slack or Microsoft teams to communicate with students that we weren't doing ten years ago?

Lisa

It seems to me like some of what you're talking about is in order for transformation to occur, is the actual transformation of people's approach to what they're doing. So, you know, you mentioned using tools that aren't technology based tools, even though we have access to those tools. Like that's kind of what we see still now in a country like Australia where we do have access to those tools, but not everybody's using them and many people don't quite understand or haven't seen how it could be used or how it can improve their practice and improve the experience for the students. So this is I guess comes back to that change process. So for me, the idea of transformation, it's almost like having an aha moment. It's that shift from what you're doing now and actually doing something differently and understanding the significance of that causes the transformation as different from just changing what you're doing. Because maybe somebody told you you should or you feel that you should do that.

Julie

And you know, this comes back to what we spoke about in our last podcast in terms of the change process. And I actually think digital transformation is more of a leadership challenge than a technical one. You know, having that vision, where do we want to be? How data, you know, data informed learning, for example, how do how do we collect that data? What tools are we using? Where do we want to be in five years time, ten years time? And as a learning institution, we also need to keep up. We can't afford to fall behind with the ways that we communicate, connect, communicate, collaborate and create. So this is this is really tied in with cultural shifts and a leadership challenge within the university.

Lisa

I think what you're talking about Julia is the motivations, you know, what motivates the change or having to do something differently is always, always a challenge, I think, where if you can see it coming from, as you say, in a leadership way and top down, but in a way that brings everybody on board. So that transformation occurs and not simply a change in practice. That's where the work needs to be done, isn't it? We can all kind of do things around the edges, but to have that significant coordinated change is really important to cause transformation. What I would say is proper transformation. I mean, I just think transformation as a term is a really interesting term. Like why call it digital transformation? Why not call it digital change or digital integration or you know, I guess.

Julie
I guess you could think about butterflies and how the grub transforms or what is it called the pupa (is that right). Larvae?

Lisa
The non scientist coming through here.

Julie
Transforms into a butterfly. I mean, that's maybe that's not the right term when we're talking about different animal species or insect species. It includes change, but it's not just about change. It's about becoming something different. And, you know, some of the things that are needed, we need to shift culture and collaboration is a big one that we need to shift. We need to collaborate across silos. This is mandatory. We're not doing it very well. No institution does it very well. We need to focus on the student experience as part of the culture that we want. We want this transformed culture. We want the workforce to shift, to transform, and we want technology to shift. You know, we can't keep using the same technology. We want to transform by adopting new technologies, not just changing, but transforming. New technologies that don't just allow us to change the way we learn and teach, but transform the way we learn and teach. Like some of the tools that we are piloting at the moment. Don't just change, okay, we've gone from Zoom to Engageli. That's a change in technology, but in many ways it's transformative because it's applying new modes or new pedagogies.

Lisa
I reckon some of that then is about having a vision. It's like actually being able to look forward, be a forward future thinking, visionary and say, okay, there's something else. I don't know what it is yet, but it's better and it's probably different. And what might it look like? How can we get there? And today we have so many tools at our disposal that can help us to, I guess, achieve our vision. And I think that gets back to what you're talking about, having that leadership as well, because often in our organizations, that's how things get done. It's like having somebody having a vision who also has a voice and those things coming together that then can cause transformation on a wider scale because we can individually have a transformation.

We can have an aha moments and then move into a different way of doing things, whether that's with or without technology. But I think that, you know, to come back to the word digital transformation, I think that's also to do with the world we live in, the sort of digital, digitally ubiquitous world that we live in. It forces transformation in many ways that those of us who are over the age of 35 have got a sense of, Oh, okay, yeah, this is pretty different. And things have really changed since we were first at university. So to me that's also when you start to accept that and you see that, then you can see there's been a transformation in the way we do things and how we're thinking about things.

Julie
So retrospectively that's important to consider that and of course futuristicly we need to have, we must have that vision and we can't be held back by people who don't have a vision for the future or people who say this is good enough, we don't need to transform, we're

okay the way we're doing it. The change process leads to transformation as far as I see it, in terms of the use of digital technologies.

Lisa
And that's what's so exciting. Like again, I'll go back to those of us who are over the age of 35, but the access to and use of technologies has just opened up so many aspects of, you know, allowing the vision and the thinking that we had before. Now we're able to enact because we have these sorts of technologies. And you were talking about collaborating. And now because of the technology, we have the ability to collaborate with a whole range of people that we couldn't collaborate with before. And for example, you and I, Julie, we're an example of that. We live quite a distance apart from each other and we meet remotely and we work together and we've built a friendship around that. And I've had that happen with a lot of people that I've worked with. I work in this digital space, and before having the access like we do, I wasn't able to do that.

Julie
Yes. So the workplace has transformed due to the ability to, you know, conference via video and collaborate with different tools. And we didn't foresee that 20 years ago, necessarily. Though, you know, we had a vision that technology would continue to change things.

Lisa
So Julie, I think you raised the digital transformation as something that we'd like to talk about and I know you've done some work in that area and done a lot of thinking around it and research and what have you. And you kindly sent me a document from EDUCAUSE, and something I really liked out of that document was the suggestion that the digital transformation is actually potentially the cornerstone of an institution strategic vision for a fruitful future. Quote unquote. And that to me, that really resonated with what we're trying to understand and help enact within our own institution. And so I'd like to take that. I'd like to take that forward as kind of a bit of a mantra for us as well, this idea of digital transformation and that actually we need to have that front and center.

Julie
Lisa I agree. And rather than having a term that's just stuck in a document, we discuss what it actually means in terms of that strategic document. We are basically yes, of course, we need to be strategic. We're living in a rapidly changing world, but we need to transform our learning environments, both physical and virtual. And we need to support creative teaching practices. And we need to, you know, look at emerging pedagogies and technologies as part of that digital transformation. That's the pathway.

Lisa
And I think key to this is that difference between transforming, which is a deep type of change as different from just changing. So I think if we really can bring forward the idea of transforming instead of just having change, then we're on the path.

You have been listening to Balancing the shift with Lisa Jacka and Julie Lindsay and Music by Matt Hill, produced by technology demonstrators learning and teaching futures at the University of Southern Queensland.