Michelle Lamberson

Dr. Michelle N. Lamberson is the Director of the Office of Learning Technology (OLT) at The University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, a role she has held since 2002. Her department is responsible for supporting and managing the development and delivery of the majority of distance education courses at the University, as well as advocating for the needs of distance learners. In addition, the OLT is facilitates learning technology initiatives across the University, including serving as the business owner of learning technology systems. She is a distance educator, teaching an online course in Earth and Ocean Sciences. Michelle has a 13-year involvement in online learning, receiving an Educom Medal in 1997 for her work in developing resources that support online learning in the geosciences. Her early involvement in web-based course development and faculty support at UBC led her to join WebCT for three years in a variety of roles related to training, community facilitation and best practice use of the system. Prior to that, she was the EdTech Coordinator for UBC's Faculty of Science and a Sessional Lecturer in Earth and Ocean Sciences. Michelle's discipline area is Geology, receiving her degrees from The University of British Columbia (PhD, 1993), The Pennsylvania State University (MS, 1987) and Boston University (BA, 1981).

In your view, what is the most probable or desirable future scenario regarding the use of new technologies in higher education?

I always struggle with the concept of "new technologies", as the term is such a moving target! Recently I read an excerpt from our university's 1938 Presidents Report in which the Director of the Extension Division (founded two years earlier in 1936) discussed how they were "…exploring new media for equalization of opportunities offered by the University". He (Gordon Schrum) referenced their intention to use radio and directed study groups to reach underserved and remote areas of the province of British Columbia. The juxtaposition of these two intrigues me, as it speaks to the need to deploy technology with educational purpose, while supporting the social context of learning. While specific applications and products have changed since 1938, the use of technology to bridge distances (even if it is only from the front to the back of a classroom) as well as to support community engagment and content delivery have held constant. For me, a desirable future scenario is that we continue to keep technology and educational purpose tightly linked, and that deployment focuses on addressing issues of pedagogy, expanding access to high quality learning experiences and developing ways to capture information that will enable us to become even better teachers. In particular, I would like to see us invest more in implementing technologies that enhance students' ability to express ideas, receive constructive feedback and showcase/document learning. We need to make it easy for students to store, access and reflect on their learning products as they move through their course of study and into their careers. From an institutional viewpoint, this means improving system usability, streamlining data exchange and facilitating content mobility as well as building strong and ongoing relationships with our students. At the same time, we need to enable faculty to spend more time supporting student learning as opposed to administering courses. Though there has been significant improvement in learning technology tools over time, there is not enough effort going into thinking about the workflows associated with teaching and how that is implemented in software design. Consequently, faculty are reluctant to incorprate technologies into their teaching because of added workload. Time is our most precious commodity.

In your opinion, what is or should be the most important objective for higher education in the future? Why?

In my opinion, the most important objective for higher education now and in the future is to be relevant. If we think of the university as an idea, it is a place that inspires people and to which people aspire. To me, that speaks to the University's position as a place that people believe understands knowledge – its creation, dissemination and stewardship. Teaching is a process that helps students learn and discern, preparing them to contribute to society in meaningful ways. Research enables us to pursue ideas, discover new knowledge or further existing understanding, and invent new products and processes that contribute to the ongoing advancement of society. Service is a means of sharing the intellectual outputs of the University in grounded ways. To remain relevant requires that a university deeply understand its community and is responsive to the changes that affect their lives and dreams. Probably nowhere is relevance more important than preparing students to be creative contributors to a workforce that will change many times over in a person's lifetime. If the focus of their education is on consuming, as opposed to creating, revising and extending knowledge, their ability to adapt will be limited and the university's relevance severely compromised.

What do you consider to be the main future challenge(s) for higher education systems? Why?

In alignment with the answer to the previous question, I believe that the main future challenges for higher education systems revolve around the ability to demonstrate relevance to the community in accessible ways. The community for higher education systems comprises diverse stakeholders, varying according to its mission and mandate. My experience has largely been in the public sector in the Canada and the United States, so my comments centre in that arena. Demonstrating relevance to government in a time of increased fiscal scrutiny challenges institutions to create meaning out of the complex data generated within the university system. What output measures can be used to capture the broad range of activity within the university? How do we devise systems that enable us to gather rich data from diverse sources in scalable ways? How do we collect meaningful data that inform practice while respecting individuals' privacy? Demonstrating relevance to students, particularly those just starting in their careers, is not a task, but a process. Students bring to university their own perceptions of how education works and the university often challenges those perceptions. For example, in situations like that of UBC – a large, publicly funded, research-intensive institution – the competition for admission is intense. The skills that students believe led them to success in their high schools (e.g. an ability to memorize content) are not those which enable them to excel in university (e.g. conceptual understanding, problem solving). Moving students from passive information consumers to knowledge creators is a core, ongoing challenge regardless of the type of university. Exacerbating this challenge is the growing disconnect between the technology-enhanced world students live in and the seemingly unchanging University world – in particular the technologies used by their instructors in classroom situations. Keeping pace with technological change is difficult; getting out in front of it is even more daunting. Addressing both the student-related and government challenges speaks to the need to demonstrate relevance to a diverse set of stakeholders.

In your opinion, what would be the worst, but possible, way to tackle these future challenges? Why?

In my opinion, the worst, but possible way that institutions can respond is to fall back on "tradition", and consider the need to address the relevance challenges described as "passing fads". Considering the long history of many institutions, and the changes that they have already endured, the likelihood that some institutions will respond in this way is high. Examples of this type of response can be seen in the e-learning arena. The for-profit move of institutions that resulted in well-publicised failures has coloured opinions of the methodology; these scenarios are used as justification for not expanding the use of learning technologies. However, institutions that have moved with deliberate purpose and created programs in alignment with their mission have demonstrated success. Responding to government accountability measures with cynicism (afterall, governments do change), and providing only those numbers that are required without thinking about how the data can be used to affect change is possible, but will not move institutions forward. The strongest likelihood that institutions will fall back on tradition, in my opinion, lies in the challenges associated with students, and particularly related to technology use. This is unfortunate, as the newer forms of technology, including those that emphasize personal publishing and allow multimodal collaboration hold strong promise for promoting new forms of scholarship and enabling a shift in student role from information consumer to knowledge producer.

What do you consider to be the best possible way to tackle the above mentioned future challenges? Why?

This is the most difficult question that you have put before us! The challenge of demonstrating relevance calls for institutions to be in tune with their stakeholder communities, as well as prepared to affect deliberate and considered change in response. At the institutional level, the most concrete expression of a university's intentions is its vision, mission and strategic plan. In my opinion, the best place to begin to address the challenges lies in the framework provided by these core institutional documents – starting from their development and through the cycles of revision. Engaging stakeholder communities in ongoing dialogue and providing meaningful opportunities for them to contribute will support institutional efforts in this regard – particularly where students and key community leaders are concerned. In addition, there is a strong need to promote and nurture a culture that considers understanding and responding to change as an operational imperative – something to be embraced and studied, as opposed to avoided an ignored. For public institutions in particular, the relationship with government and funding agencies is an ongoing challenge, particularly with respect to accountability and performance measures. To begin to tackle this, institutions might consider developing a collaborative research agenda that can be used to identify ways to measure the key outputs of the university. This means examining all of the available data sources and researching their value in key areas such as curriculum evaluation and supporting student learning. For example, our major institutional systems (e.g., the learning management system, student information system) are tremendous warehouses of tracking data on the types of resources that students are using – are there ways to leverage these data to inform the practice of individual teachers and students as well as the institution? This is a brand new field so much is still unknown. Privacy is a key consideration in this regard. How should such data be used? How meaningful are aggregated data? At what level do we interpret data (lesson, module/course, program or higher)? These questions are tough ones, but the university should be driving this agenda as it speaks to its core mission. The use of technology to support education is being demanded by students, but as responsible stewards of the public trust, we also need to be actively researching the impact of use in terms that are meaningful to understanding if and how well we are achieving the goals expressed in the vision, mission and strategic plan.