DEAN'S DIGEST

"Persistence and resilience only come from having been given the chance to work through difficult problems"

Gever Tulley
(American writer, educator, entrepreneur, and computer scientist)

Post-covid: Getting back to a new (and better?) normal

Welcome back on campus! It is a true pleasure to experience the ITU most of you know well and have taken for granted before the pandemic: an atrium full of yellow smileys and a vibrant campus of happy and excited students, faculty, and staff. Even though things look the same, and most of us are happy to be back to face-2-face interaction, we are now facing a new normal in the sense that online teaching and meeting activities will become part of our way of working and living. All of us experienced the swing from onsite to online and I assume that due to the social vacuum, many have a wish to swing back to onsite activities in the Autumn semester. However, few of us know yet what is the ideal balance or how to strike it on a longer term, so we will have to spend the forthcoming year(s) with learning and experimentation to learn what works best for us as individuals, for our colleagues, students, and ITU in general. The pandemic forced the adoption of new ways of working and the question to come is how much will sustain post-covid. The long duration of the pandemic means that most of us established new home-working habits, and some will stick with us after the crisis - for better and for worse.

Experimentation with balancing teaching and working formats

To fulfil one of the 2021 tasks named "Activity 3.1", the Dean of Education, Learning Support, and Heads of Departments will implement new forms of learning, based on analysis of the online learning in the Autumn of 2020 and evaluation of COVID-19 teaching experiences as well as specific cases from each study programme. The analysis, which will be published in the Autumn, will form the basis for experimenting with new learning formats this year, which, in turn,

will be used as a significant contribution to the formulation of principles and values for the future of new technology in teaching at ITU.

During the COVID-19 period, we have all run experimentation with online learning, evaluated on the fly, and defined principles for balanced learning, i.e., a balance between teacher-centered and student-centered teaching taking place in online/onsite settings. Thus, analysis, evaluation, experimentation, and definition of principles happen in synchronous learning loops, rather than in sequential stages and will continue doing so the forthcoming year. The reasons are that COVID-19 is still there and continues to interfere with our daily life: vaccinated get infected, children are being sent home from school and students and ITU employees may risk being sent in isolation at home.

Moreover, being a learning organization, boosted by covid-19, we are human beings and creatures of habits and routines. Our habits and routines are the outcome of past learnings and refinements of thinking (mental models) and actions (behavioral patterns). Much of our actions are automated as we act on the spine, and this is usually a safe route to efficiency and better coordination. When we are doing habitual work, we are not engaged in the task in the same way as when we are doing something that is not habitual. The catch is that habits may become outdated or even unwanted as time and situations change. So, the question becomes how can we develop new and better habits and routines based on the acknowledgements and skills we developed during lockdown?

As mentioned, Covid-19 forced us all to learn quickly and to engage with new ways of working and thus break existing habits and routines, but we did not have the right conditions for learning what works best for us in the future. We must therefore draw on past experiences from different contexts that are non-representative for the future. We learned what can work during unusual circumstances. We have all upskilled with high speed – and evaluations show that many of our students, faculty, and staff have been able to handle this adjustment well. So, we now have a choice to do things in a different way than before. Though we are still facing barriers of inadequate technology, skills, and resources at ITU, and many of us are feeling that it is much easier to talk to colleagues or students face to face in the same premises, my hope is that working habits at ITU will most likely update and improve after the Covid-19 crisis.

Implications and questions for the future

We do not yet know the ropes of balanced teaching and working, when it comes to its potential for increasing our wellbeing and welldoing, but this will be part of our individual and cultural learning journey ahead. There will be times when we will experience situations, events and challenges that require increased flexibility so let's prepare for new ideas and approaches and keep our mind open for what may come with new skills, so we avoid swinging back to where we came from. We can do things differently going forward. We will now be thinking from a far more reflective and sustainable perspective about in which situations online interaction may provide a better learning and study experience for our students and appreciate the face-2-face encounters more when they are deemed necessary.

In a quality assurance perspective, with this type of reasoning and decision-making around balanced learning, where teachers and employees act as local "quality agents", will hopefully bring a higher degree of decentralization and autonomy, based on pedagogical reflections rather than top-down education system control.

There are also big questions of how to strike the balance and orchestrate the synchronization between our individual and collective needs and tasks. Anyway, the experimentation ahead will have a significant impact on organizational decision-making regarding the future working and study environment of ITU.

I am looking forward to discussing these matters with you onsite as well as online in the Autumn semester 2021.

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