An Interview with Paul Schacht

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Paul Schacht is Assistant to the Provost for Digital Learning & Scholarship and founding Director of the Center for Digital Learning

What you do as the director of the Center for Digital Learning?

The Center for Digital Learning is a new enterprise this year whose purpose is to help coordinate the work that has gone on at Geneseo over a long time across several different offices and departments. The aim of the Center is, first of all, to be engaged with all aspects of digital learning: online learning, what we might call digital pedagogy—which is where students in classes may use digital tools—and digital scholarship and creative activity, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Also, we convene conversations among people from all of these different offices, to get on the same page, to brainstorm, to plan professional development and events, to put on workshops.

How has the pandemic influenced digital learning at Geneseo? Has it made it more necessary or has it forced it into a campus-wide situation a little bit too soon?

If there is a silver lining in the pandemic—and I hesitate to even use that term—but if there's a silver lining, I think it's that it has made all of us realize how necessary it is for every higher education institution to be prepared to use digital tools in teaching, and to prepare students to be able to use digital tools in their learning. We've had to learn the hard way how to figure out things like ensuring that our students' online course experience is one where they don't feel that they've been set adrift to just learn on their own. Now that we're figuring that out, we will be much better positioned for the next emergency, but also better positioned to give students more choices in their learning when the pandemic's done. What if we still were offering some classes online so that a student would have a little bit more flexibility in their schedule? We haven't done that historically, and we ought to be doing that.

Do you think that our confronting these challenges with online learning has opened the door for maybe other digital learning opportunities in Geneseo? And if so, in what way?

Absolutely. I think there's a lot that faculty are learning to do in this online environment that they can bring into their in-person classes. Let's say you're teaching a hybrid course and you've got some students in the classroom, but other students who, because you're

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alternating days of the week, are not in class. You don't want to leave out the ones who are not in the classroom, so maybe you figure out how to use Google Docs to have the students in the classroom and the students who are in their dorm rooms collaborate on something during the scheduled meeting time. Now, when the pandemic's over and maybe you go back to teaching entirely in person, you've got another incredibly powerful tool that you can use in the classroom with your students.

How do you think, or do you even think, that something like a virtual GREAT Day can impact digital learning opportunities?

A feature of in-person GREAT Day has always been the poster session, where you stand there next to a poster that you've created in the ballroom, and people come by and you talk to them about it informally. But you're only talking to a few people at a time, and you're repeating yourself over and over and over again. A huge benefit of that is the mix-and-mingle part of it. But we're not going to have that available to us in the virtual GREAT Day. What students *could* do, though, is, instead of creating large posters that stand on an easel, they could create some sort of experience online. They could create a deck of slides, they could create a video, they could create a website. And that could contain the same sort of information that before was on a poster. Now the question is: Well, so how do you do the sort of Q&A dimension of it? You have a scheduled time and you invite anybody who wants to at that time and maybe you get fifty people at once that you talk to in Zoom sharing your screen. The people you talk to, if you've got ten people in a Zoom, it might actually feel like they're more of an audience and they're closer to each other than ten people sort of congregated around a physical poster and some are up close to you and other people are kind of hanging back. I think there are opportunities to actually, with some sorts of events, create more of a sense of intimacy than you would think possible in a digital environment, maybe even more of a sense of intimacy than you would have had in an in-person encounter.

Do you think this kind of accessibility and intimacy can be used in other projects and if you can, could you give some examples?

So, imagine if in your in-person class you have a day where you're asking your students who have worked on some presentations to share them with the rest of the students in the class. So, three or six or eight students in the course of a class meeting, each come up to the front of the classroom, take the adapter, try to get it plugged into their computer, try to get the thing to show up on the screen on their computer, and they talk about it. What if, instead, you put all the students in a Zoom meeting and when it's your turn to talk about your slides you just share your screen with me. Everybody sees it on the projector. Only one computer has to be hooked up, and we can make our way around the whole group of people. That's an application of the kind of thing

that we might do in a virtual conference in GREAT Day that could carry over to our ordinary classroom interactions.