

# COVID Challenges in Caring

Leadership Lessons Learned from Healthcare & Health Professions Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

## CASE STUDY



## Supporting Online Faculty Development

Telling the story of Dr. Teresa Chan, HBSc, BEd, MD, FRCPC, MHPE, DRCPC (Clin. Ed.) Former Assistant Dean, Faculty Development, Faculty of Health Sciences, McMaster University



**Dr. Teresa Chan**  
HBSc, BEd, MD, FRCPC,  
MHPE, DRCPC (Clin. Ed.)

It was an overcast March afternoon when Dr. Teresa Chan, the newly appointed Assistant Dean of Faculty Development at McMaster University, fastened her seat-belt and prepared for her Toronto-bound flight from New York's LaGuardia Airport. She was basking in the high of having just spoken at an international education conference. The deep hum from the airplane's revving jet engines lulled her into a trance-like state wherein she reflected on the weekend's captivating talks and exciting exhibitions. There was some discussion around the novel Corona Virus and how it was going to inevitably impact emergency physicians such as herself in the coming weeks, but Dr. Chan managed to suppress these daunting thoughts by instead focusing on some of the more promising conversations she had around her vision for the Program for Faculty Development (PFD). Little did she know, this was the last in-person conference she would be attending for a while...

As the Toronto skyline came into view, Dr. Chan felt a renewed sense of excitement about her new position as Assistant Dean. During the flight, she had begun to imagine the ways in which she could propel her vision for a digital transformation of the PFD into action, inspired by the many conversations she had with her colleagues in New York. This would be the first real project she would take on as Assistant Dean and she was equally determined and committed. This program reinvention would take five years, she decided. To achieve this shift to a digital community of practice, she would need time for development and training. But time was about to run out.

As the wheels touched down on the tarmac and the airplane came to a screeching halt, so too did the way of life that Dr. Chan, and everyone else in the world, had come to know.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic in response to the rapid spread of COVID-19. Doctor Chan was bombarded by this news soon after she landed at Toronto's Pearson International Airport. With a frenzy of nervous energy, Dr. Chan hurried home. The very next day, she was due for a shift as the attending emergency physician at the Juravinski Hospital in Hamilton, ON, Canada. Over the next 48 hours, the COVID-19 protocols began to rapidly change and Dr. Chan was sent home to self-isolate given that she had just travelled outside of Canada. The worry that she may have contracted COVID-19 did not have much time to consume her as it wasn't long before the barrage of emails and phone calls came pouring in. All in-person learning at McMaster University was cancelled. All faculty, staff, and students were being required to immediately pivot to online teaching, learning, and collaboration. Her mind spinning and her inbox flooding, Dr. Chan was faced with the daunting realization that her vision for a digital transformation needed to come to immediate fruition.

“...her vision for a digital transformation needed to come to immediate fruition”

## Early Indications that a Digital Transformation was Needed for Faculty Development

In the second week of September, 2019, Dr. Chan began her role as the Assistant Dean of Faculty Development at McMaster University. This was her first professional senior leadership role and she felt humbled yet ready for the challenge. Her many years of volunteer work and leadership positions in post-secondary school had finally come to a head. She had unknowingly trained for this role for years and was eager to put her skills into practice. Dr. Chan was immediately met with a flurry of new responsibilities, including a new team to support, committees to oversee and a senior leadership with its own set of expectations. But how and where would she first dig her heels?

During the first few months of her tenure, Dr. Chan decided that the best way to find her footing was to spend time investigating what the faculty members wanted and needed most. She went from meeting to meeting, listening and engaging with faculty, and heard a lot about how people couldn't access the various workshops that were part of the PFD because they were held on the main campus and required a significant commute for an extremely busy group of people. They simply didn't have time to drive to main campus to engage in the workshops. It became apparent to Dr. Chan that a digital transformation for faculty development was essential to the future success of the program.

**“The project was feasible, innovative and warranted. Following the WHO’s declaration of the global pandemic, however, this timeline was drastically cut short.”**

She listened, she brainstormed, she researched, and she devised a tentative plan to facilitate a digital transformation. She anticipated driving from campus to campus, conducting workshops to develop digital competencies and support people to make the transition to a digital program.

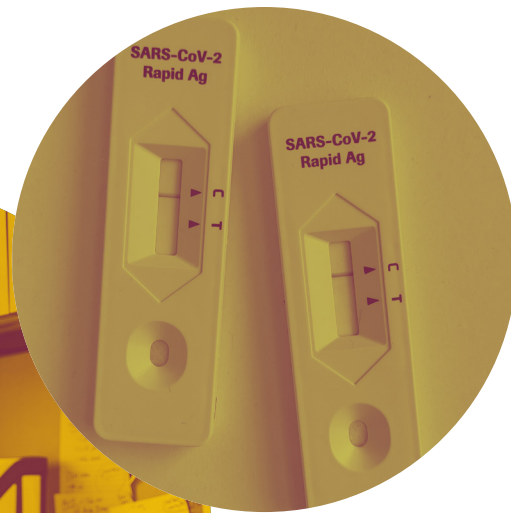
To kickstart her vision for a digital transformation, Dr. Chan and her team developed a Slack channel. They designed the space to serve as a virtual community of practice where faculty could more readily engage in professional development. She was excited about this first step to going digital, but to her dismay, the uptake of this alternative approach to participation was slow. Through informal conversations, she got the sense that faculty members were unsure what to make of the Slack platform and how they were supposed to use it. Doctor Chan took the proverbial deep breath to gain some perspective on the initiative. She decided to take a step back and devote some time and support to get this mode of collaboration and participation off the ground. And, decidedly, she would need some additional mentorship and insights from her colleagues.

The project was feasible, innovative and warranted. Following the WHO's declaration of the global pandemic, however, this timeline was drastically cut short.

## In the Throes of the Pandemic

With all in-person programming and courses being abruptly cancelled, it was obvious to Dr. Chan that her first priority was to figure out a way to exist and carry on in a digital space. She not only needed to support faculty members to make this pivot to online teaching but she needed to ensure that their professional development was able to continue despite the state of the world. Because she already had a glimpse of the faculty's reluctance to engage in the virtual community, Dr. Chan knew that first and foremost, she needed to support the development of the digital competencies necessary to thrive in a virtual world.

**“a digital transformation for faculty development was essential to the future success of the program”.**



## DISCUSSION

- 1 What are some tech barriers that you have experienced when seeking to try new approaches in your organization?
- 2 How do you best prepare a strategy within an organization? What framework or approach do you take to make change?
- 3 How can strategy inform your next steps when faced with a crisis?

### The Need for Collaboration in the Digital Transformation Initiative

Dr. Chan hit the ground running by building off the Slack channel she had fortuitously established prior to the dawn of the pandemic. It turned out that the Slack platform was the solution the faculty didn't realize they needed at the time. It gave Dr. Chan a leg up and offered her an immediate, albeit temporary, place to reroute meetings and collaboration. And so became the new digital reality. Although having this nascent community of practice bought her some time to strategize, Dr. Chan continued to work feverishly, exploring burgeoning virtual platforms that could better support engagement, collaboration and development activities.

Like so many others at the time, Dr. Chan was drawn to the Zoom communications platform for its seamless cloud-based video conferencing capabilities. Learning from her experience in the Fall

when she introduced the faculty to the Slack platform, Dr. Chan knew that before she could transition them to this new virtual platform, she would need to establish operating procedures and management systems to help scaffold the shift. This was a tremendous undertaking and although she felt compelled as a leader to make it happen on her own, she knew that for this transition to happen smoothly and quickly, she needed support.

**"she needed support."**

She pushed the preconceived notion that successful leaders operate in isolation aside and she asked for help. As a united front, she and her team offered fellow faculty members virtual support and engaged in hours of troubleshooting to ensure everyone became fluent with the technology.

Once digital proficiencies were evidently established, Dr. Chan began offering workshops and webinars, recruiting renowned speakers from around the world to address various aspects of faculty development. She dreamed big and the results became clear: the online community of practice was abuzz.

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**"the online community of practice was abuzz."**

What followed was the enormous task of maintaining and coordinating the components of this dynamic and lively virtual learning community. This was compounded by the harsh reality that COVID-19 was ravaging the Ontario health care system, demanding critical care physicians like Dr. Chan to tirelessly offer front line support. While she would not compromise on her commitment to front line service, Dr. Chan did call upon her colleagues and allies to help sustain the digital faculty development program. And they answered. With very little ask, supportive faculty members emerged from the woodwork, stepping up in multiple ways, demonstrating a genuine interest in making a difference. They volunteered their time to join the various digital teams, run webinars, record podcasts, and do everything in their power to help keep the online program moving at full capacity. In fact, they collaboratively generated so many digital resources that they began to bank their content. If you asked Dr. Chan where she thought they'd be two years into a catastrophic global pandemic, never would she have imagined that she'd be sitting on a media empire that showcased the talent and expertise of her esteemed colleagues from around the world.

### It Started Out Like an Awkward High School Dance...

It was a late evening in the summer of 2021. Doctor Chan had just finished recording her monthly podcast and she sat back in her desk chair, breathing a heavy sigh of relief as the high from the recording began to subside. She looked around her home office that was once empty and rarely used and smiled at the piles of books overpowering her desk and the sticky notes highlighting dates, names and ideas, scattered like a mural on her once bare walls. She was jolted out of this trance by an alert from her phone- an email from a colleague in Boston wanting to collaborate on a webinar about Faculty Development in the age

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**"...she would need to establish operating procedures and management systems to help scaffold the shift."**



## “Faculty Development in the age of COVID-19.”

of COVID-19. The email went on to detail some innovative ideas that her colleague had, but Dr. Chan’s mind trailed off again, reflecting on how far she’d come and where it had all started. She found herself picturing one of those awkward high school dances that she had attended so many years ago, complete with an empty dance floor, the pulsating base from the speakers blaring top-40 hits, and crowds of students huddled around the sidelines. Those students were armed with dance moves, waiting with bated breath, just itching for someone to make the first move. All it would take is for one person, a fearless leader, to ask someone to dance before the entire school gymnasium would erupt with energy and sweaty, smiling teenagers dancing their hearts out.

When Dr. Chan called on her colleagues to dance, they more than answered her call. For leaders in healthcare, there is often an underlying pressure to conquer challenging tasks independently and assume sole responsibility for success. In the throes of a global pandemic, Dr. Chan knew this was a time when she required support and needed to engage with others and develop coalitions to sustain the digital program. She called on her colleagues to serve and they exceeded her expectations in answering that call. The richness of the online program resulted from this collaboration and the various skills that the members of Dr. Chan’s coalition brought to the table. They offered a multitude of perspectives and areas of expertise and together they wove an incredible tapestry of digital resources.

### CLOSING DISCUSSION

- 1 Dr. Chan had a strategy to digitize faculty development prior to the pandemic that she simply implemented in hyperdrive. What are some ways in which having a strategy helped her during the pandemic?
- 2 What is the link between Dr. Chan’s nascent pre-pandemic strategy and the eventual digital transformation?
- 3 In Dr. Chan’s story, the pandemic served as fuel to drive change. Some refer to this as having a “burning platform”. The analogy from which this saying originates is a story of an oil rig that is on fire, which compels workers to jump off of the oil rig and take a leap into the cold waters—something they would not usually do if the oil rig were not a burning platform. What is a burning platform that you have recently encountered in your workplace? How might you capitalize on this?

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**“The creativity you need to be a great leader sometimes comes from inspiration that is not in your lane. You have to look around in the world in order to build a better world. And I think that if you stay too drilled down on your local, the drama of the local, the tyranny of the everyday and don’t take some time to zoom out and see the bigger picture, to see how other disciplines in other organizations and other groups do their work well, you won’t have the right tools to be able to pull down the threads from all the different inspiration and to weave something new.”**

- Dr. Teresa Chan

To see **Dr. Chan** tell her story, you can view it by clicking on the **QR Code** below. You may also access it by going to

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2dodb9rlvg>

