


OpenLearning partners with not-for-profit High Resolves for civics education

By **TIM DODD**, HIGHER EDUCATION EDITOR

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High Resolves, a rapidly growing not-for-profit whose education programs in civics and global citizenship reach over 100,000 high school students each year, has turned to Australian online education start-up OpenLearning to enable it to continue operating during the coronavirus crisis.

In 2-3 weeks High Resolves will launch one of its key programs, titled “identity and purpose”, online.

But the challenges in achieving that are tougher than for most online courses because a key part of High Resolves’ work involves getting students together in group activities where their thinking is challenged and they need to make moral choices.

“We do these really deep immersive workshops, it’s not like mathematics with a bunch of times tables,” said High Resolves co-founder and CEO Mehrdad Baghai, who has a career in business and technology and is also an industry professor at the University of Technology Sydney.

Ever since 2010, when High Resolves began delivering programs at scale, Mr Baghai said he and his team had been thinking about how their programs could be delivered online. The onset of the coronavirus made it an imperative.

“About six or seven weeks ago I had a sense that we had to prepare for a worst-case scenario. We began reimagining the curriculum if we had to do it on a digital platform,” he said.

“When we came across OpenLearning it was the first time we had seen a platform to allow us to do the work in a way that would have impact.”

Mr Baghai explained that the identity and purpose module, as it was previously taught, included activities such as this one.

Sixty students gather in a high school gym, they are each given a photograph of somebody and are asked to assume that identity. The photos are of people from different countries, different cultures, different ages, different genders and different appearances.

The students are then asked to group together with others like them.

Each student needs to decide what this means. What is the basis for forming groups? What characteristics do they most identify with, and do they use these to decide whom they join with?

The activity gets deeper when the students read a fuller profile of the person they have adopted the identity of, which is on the back of the photo. This typically describes their personality, the food they like, and the hobbies, sports and recreations they do.

It stimulates deep thinking and the program facilitator leads a discussion.

“We put to them questions like, why didn’t you form one big group? That’s where the reflective process starts,” Mr Baghai said.

He said that it was difficult to move this type of activity online with the video conferencing tools that are usually used for discussions in online classes.

“Do you Zoom with 60 kids? You can’t do that,” he said. “When we came across OpenLearning it was the first time we had seen a platform to allow us to do the work in a way that would have impact.”

He said that OpenLearning’s “widgets” – a feature which allows learning designers to add a variety of components to a learning program – enabled students to interact with each other in large groups.

Compared to the old face-to-face version of the identity and purpose program, the activities are now spread out, with each broken into its components and addressed step-by-step.

For example in the new version of the photo exercise, students are randomly assigned their identity and are asked to choose their group by ticking on other pictures. The activity used to take 30 minutes but now unfolds over 24 hours and, in some ways, it will be richer, Mr Baghai believes. For one thing, there is time for students to have a discussion with their parents about it.

The full program, when done online, will take a couple of weeks. “We can explore this whole question of identity over two weeks and reach the same “aha” (moment) as we can create in a gym in two hours,” Mr Baghai said.

High Resolves other programs will be progressively put online over the next couple of months.

As part of the agreement with OpenLearning, the OpenLearning platform will be made available free of charge to up to 1,000 High Resolves partner schools for 12 months. Schools can also use the platform for other classes if they choose.

After that, if schools want to continue using OpenLearning and the online High Resolves programs, they will have to pay about \$3,000 a year for the platform.

For OpenLearning, founded by its CEO Adam Brimo in Sydney in 2012 and floated on the ASX last year, the deal is an opportunity to expand from its base in the tertiary education market into the school market.

“We haven’t directly worked with schools in the past,” Mr Brimo said. “We’re really hoping that as students go through (the High Resolves program) and teachers see these, they say ‘I didn’t know that was possible online.’”

Mr Brimo warned that, at the moment – as education institutions were quickly putting learning content online for students who must stay home because of the coronavirus – much of the material was very straightforward, often just pdf pages.

“If that’s someone’s only experience of online learning it might leave them with a bad taste,” Mr Brimo said. “These courses (with High Resolves) will be an exemplar for what’s possible.”

Mr Baghai said that the coronavirus illustrated the need for education programs such as High Resolves’ identity and purpose module.

“If you look at what’s going on around the world. If you compare the (infection) curves in Japan, South Korea and Germany with Italy and us – one of the drivers of this is the degree of civic behaviour,” he said.

“The crisis is forcing civic society leaders to recognise that citizenship education is a national strategic advantage during crises.”

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