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Mark Hopkins at One End of a (B)log and a Student at the Other: Deconstructing Curriculum and Delivery

William Charland
Western Michigan University, william.charland@wmich.edu

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Mark Hopkins at one end of a (b)log and a student at the other: Deconstructing curriculum and delivery.

William Charland, Ph.D.
Frost School of Art, Western Michigan University

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**Introduction**

Referring to one of the foremost educators of the day, President James Garfield expressed his concept of an ideal university as “Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a student on the other” (Kunst & Hatrstrap, 1943, p. 384). As realist as this one-to-one faculty/student ratio might be, the image supports the idea that a student learns best when approached as an individual. Such accommodation to individual students’ needs is rarely the case, today, as the demands of fiscal accountability encourage institutions to maximize class sizes, and the perceived function of higher education is reliant from a social boon to a business transaction.

Process and change in tightly and loosely coupled organizational structures

The processes within an organization, the “patterns of interaction, coordination, communication and decision-making” (Christensen, 2005, p. 545), gradually settle into a fixed structure. By definition, a tightly structured organization relies on repetition and coordination of processes that contribute to the organizational whole, where a loosely coupled organization allows more autonomy and less structured coordination of processes (Weick, 1979). Developed over time, most processes in higher education gradually tighten in structure, catalyzing at some level to produce satisfactory, if not optimal, results. As such, they end up serving primarily those students whose needs fall within the range of services that are structurally allowed.

In an art department, students continue to matriculate, attend classes, produce more or less interesting work, and graduate. Viewed from within the institution, this may be interpreted as success. Because there are few feedback mechanisms for college graduates, faculty and administration may interpret the satisfaction completed of academic cycles as an indication that the process is achieving its intended goal. But, are the deep-rooted organizational processes that have developed over decades (centuries?) deliberately designed to facilitate change in societal contexts? The role of administrative leadership in disruptive curricular innovation is examined in the present paper.

**Disruptive innovation in academia**

The concept of disruptive innovation explains the ways in which new technologies and organizations offer more convenient or less costly solutions that now incorporate user flexibility and personalization of a smartphone? Rather than offering a new product that the world wants done.” (Christensen, 2005).

There are no one conceptual framework through which to best understand curriculum and delivery. Depending on the purpose of the analysis, lists of curriculum components can be exhaustive, including goals, dispositions, duration, needs analysis, learners and teachers, exercises and activities, resources, ways of learning, skills to be acquired, lexicon, language, and structure and ability assessment (Zohrabi, 2011), or pared down to such basic concepts as knowing, acting, and being (Barnett & Coate, 2004), or even more abstract to the relationship between information and communication. Most art faculty agree that today’s college graduates benefit from a curriculum that emphasizes flexibility, adaptability, self-reliance and creativity (Salazar, 2013; Strategic National Arts Alumni Project, 2012; Charney & van Beele, 2012).

“Being an artist is no different from learning to become an artist... in order to continue working, the artist learns to constantly prepare for the unknown” (Raqs Media Collective, 2009, p. 74). I would expand this statement to include the notion that being an educator in the arts is no different from being an artist, in that the pursuit of the unknown directs the work of the art educator, whether conducting creative research in the studio, library or community, or developing the means by which knowledge is passed from educator to student. There is immense creative potential in the process of composing and arranging the elements of course content, delivery, and coordination. Informed by research, guided by the cumulative wisdom of practice, acknowledging and taking advantage of limitations and restrictions, hoping the message, and ultimately revealing the product to an audience, a curriculum should be recognized as a serious, relevant, plastic medium.

Location, temporality and authority

Setting aside course content, not because it is irrelevant to the process, but because it represents goals and values that rightly vary from institution to institution, we attend instead to more generic variables of curriculum and delivery: location, temporality, and authority – where teaching and learning take place, when, and by whom. By sorting and coordinating subject-sets of each, it’s possible to synthesize numerous configurations of curriculum and delivery with a complexity to match that of contemporary student and societal needs.

Location

Teaching and learning in higher education is, for the most part, centralized, with faculty, students, and educational resources coming together on the college campus. But, just as cell phones and other digital media have expanded the possibilities of communication while, arguably, diminishing the relevance of location, access to campus facilities may no longer be imperative, and many in the process of composing and arranging the elements of course content, delivery, and coordination. Informed by research, guided by the cumulative wisdom of practice, acknowledging and taking advantage of limitations and restrictions, hoping the message, and ultimately revealing the product to an audience, a curriculum should be recognized as a serious, relevant, plastic medium.

**Smart options: Curriculum and delivery as a creative medium**

- “Institutions are rarely bonded; they meet their end by suicide... They die because they have outlived their usefulness, or fail to do the work that the world wants done.” (Lowell, 1909 in Kunz & Hatrstrap, 1946).
- “What might it look like to disassemble the component elements of curriculum and delivery, and reassemble them into a system with the flexibility and personalization of a smartphone? Rather than offering a one-size-fits-all service, we could take as our model the many digital applications and applications with introductions of new technologies, established job markets collapse and new opportunities emerge, and educational resources shift, little is done

Authority

Although the concept of learning a community has been around since the 1990’s (Sergiovanni, 1994), it has yet to supplant the practice of information flowing unidirectionally from instructor to student. Determining learning objectives, the instructor writes and presents lectures and lessons, assigns readings and out-of-class exercises, and conducts learning assessments. Less common are approaches such as team teaching, student-to-student peer education, student-led courses, non-course-specific university resources, community resources, transfer articulations with other institutions (not necessarily educational institutions), independent online resources, and workplace internships and apprenticeships.

Traditional authority

- Non-traditional sources of knowledge
- Course instructor
- Support staff
- Textbooks, other media
- Student autonomy
- Sanctioned resources
- Peer education
- Student-led courses
- Non-course-specific university resources
- Community resources
- Other institutions
- Independent online resources
- The workplace

**Temporality**

We adhere to a concept of learning that is calendar- and clock-driven (Stover, 1989; Okakri, 1994). The academic year, the semester, the class schedule, the school day all are formatted by synchronizing teaching and learning. Challenging this model are asynchronous approaches, offered online or through other means, that allow the educator to assign lessons that students can complete, within limits, at their convenience. Refocusing the syllabus-driven, sequential, progressive presentation of lessons that typify the standard course curriculum, we might instead consider an individualized competency- based pace of learning. Or, rather than taking a reductive, step-by-step approach to the roll out of course content, consider the benefits of an immersive experience that forces students to make meaning from simultaneous, diverse inputs and contextual cues. The coordination and flow from course to course may also be reconsidered, offering students multiple options to exercise agency by crossing from one area of interest to another.

**Traditional academic year**

- Non-traditional temporality
- Year-round education
- 24-7 access to learning
- Competence-based advancement
- Immersion
- Asynchronous and hybrid online formats
- Access points in coordination and flow

Location, temporality and authority

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Discursive authority

- Non-traditional sources of knowledge
- Course instructor
- Support staff
- Textbooks, other media
- Student autonomy
- Sanctioned resources
- Peer education
- Student-led courses
- Non-course-specific university resources
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**The role of administrative leadership in disruptive curricular change**

To be continued...