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

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

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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” (Kunitz & Hatrakoff, 1947, p. 364). As unrealist as this one-to-one faculty/student ratio might be, the image suggests 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 recast 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, calibrating 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 work that reaches the market, and graduate. Viewed from within the institution, this may be interpreted as success. Because there are few feedback mechanisms for colleges, faculty, and administration may interpret the satisfaction of complex processes as success. As unrealistic as this one to one faculty/student ratio might be, the image suggests 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 recast from a social boon to a business transaction.

And, although college education has, of late, been referred to as a business relationship between the institution and the student, above all else, higher education remains a vehicle for societal benefit.

According to Bower and Christensen (1995, p. 96-7), the following characteristics define a catalytic innovation:

1. They create systemic social change through scaling and replication.
2. They meet a need that is either overserved or not served at all.
3. They offer products and services that are simpler and less costly.
4. They generate resources, such as ... grants, volunteer manpower, or intellectual capital, in ways that are initially unattactive to incumbent competitors.

In these ways, catalytic innovation can, among other benefits, 1) help address issues of class size and redunancy, 2) serve students diverse in needs and resources, 3) offer students, educators and institutions more efficient use of time and resources, and 4) attract funders and other players who desire to contribute to, and be associated with, successful solutions to problems outside or between the educational institution and the workplace, and empower students, institutions, and society through novel approaches to the creation of knowledge.

Opportunities to build facilities from scratch come along rarely, as funding permits. Not insignificant to the teaching and learning process, brick and mortar changes are often welcomed by faculty as an occasion to optimize the delivery of their curriculum. The potential for curricular change, however, relies less on the vagaries of budget windfalls. Instead, the act of disrupting the status quo and rebuilding a curriculum from scratch is dependent primarily on the will of a faculty and the support of administration.

Assuming such will and support exists, how might we deconstruct the many elements of curriculum and delivery, subject them to reexamination, and re-assemble them into structures that take advantage of the new approaches to communication, social interaction, and art production that are characteristic of the twenty-first century? And how do we assure that the resultant structures remain sufficiently loosely coupled to support the diverse needs of students and the ongoing dynamic changes occurring in student and professional domains?

Smart options: Curriculum and delivery as a creative medium

“Istitutions are really medium; 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.”


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 that now incorporate user selection, data and program diversification based on user needs. A smart curriculum and delivery system could, likewise, provide alternative to the traditional model of teaching and learning by offering multiple, flexible, student-centered applications that can be selected and arranged to best accommodate the personal needs and goals of each student.

There no single 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, lexis, language structure, and ability assessment (Zohrabi, 2011), or pared down to such basic concepts as knowing, acting, and being (Bower & Christensen, 2004), or even reimagined to be 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 colleges, faculty, and administration may interpret the satisfaction of complex processes in higher education gradually tighten in structure, calcifying at some level to produce satisfactory, if not optimal, results. As realistic as this one to one faculty/student ratio might be, the image suggests 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 recast from a social boon to a business transaction.

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 condensing the many 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 may even prove burdensome for participants who can work most productively in other locales, or whose mobility is challenged, or for whom transportation, childcare, or opportunity costs are prohibitive.

Traditional

• Campus-based

Non-traditional

• Non-traditional

• Non-traditional

• Non-traditional

• Non-traditional

• Non-traditional

• Non-traditional

• Non-traditional

• Non-traditional

• Non-traditional

The role of administrative leadership in disruptive curricular change

To be continued ...