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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 & Hatcraft, 1964, p. 384). As unrealistic 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 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, calcifying 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 satisfactory completion 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?) sufficiently serving the diverse needs of today's students, successfully preparing them for the next phases of their personal and professional lives?

For the most part, curricula and delivery have changed little over the past century, originally designed to serve a cookie-cutter image of a student. Many aspects of art school curricula can be traced back to the disaggregation of art from daily life as established by the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, or to the foundational structure of the Dessau Bauhaus (Lupton & Miller, 1991; Moran, 2009). Because we tend to teach as we were taught, and accept institutional structures as essential immutable, we seem satisfied to tinkering around the edges with an experimental course or a pedagogical tweak. And so, while the definition of a student has changed radically, the world is altered almost daily with introductions of new technologies, established job markets collapse and new opportunities emerge, and educational resources shift, little is done through curriculum and delivery to keep pace.

## Disruptive innovation in academia

The concept of disruptive innovation explains the ways in which new technologies and organizations offer more convenient or less expensive solutions to users' needs, consequently displacing older, more established technologies and organizations (Bower & Christensen, 1995). Catalytic innovation, as a form of disruptive innovation, also offers an alternative to the status quo, but differs from purely disruptive innovations in intent, as the catalytic innovation is deliberately designed to facilitate change in societal contexts.

And, although college education has, of late, been referred to as a business relationship between the institution and the student client, 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 than existing alternatives.
4. They generate resources, such as … grants, volunteer manpower, or intellectual capital, in ways that are initially unattractive to incumbent competitors.

In these ways, catalytic innovation can, among other benefits, 1) help address issues of class size and redundancy, 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, create symbiotic relationships 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

"Institutions are rarely murdered; 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 Kunitz & Haycraft, 1964).

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 items that now incorporate user-selected applications and allow diversification based on user needs. A smart curriculum and delivery system could, likewise, provide alternatives 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 (Barnett & Coate, 2004), or even more simply, to the relationship between information and communication. Most art faculty agree that today's college graduates benefit from a curriculum that emphasize flexibility, adaptability, self-reliance and creativity (Salazar, 2013; Strategic National Arts Alumni Project, 2012; Charleroy & van Belle, 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 restraints, honing 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 sub-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 | Non-traditional |
|---|---|
| • Campus-based | • Wherever learning can best take place |
| • Classroom | • Private or public spaces |
| • Studio | • Internship, apprenticeship, study abroad or other appropriate work/research locations |
| • Lecture hall | • Internet / virtual spaces |
| | • MOOCs |

### Temporality
We adhere to a concept of learning that is calendar- and clock-driven (Stover, 1989; Okanik, 1994). The academic year, the semester, the class schedule, the school day all are facilitated by synchronous 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. Rethinking the syllabus-driven, sequential, progressive presentation of lessons that typify the standard course curriculum, we might instead consider an individualized competence-based pace of learning. Or, rather than taking a reductivist, step-by-step approach to the roll out of course information, 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 temporality | Non-traditional temporality |
|---|---|
| • Academic year | • Year-round education |
| • Semester | • 24-7 access to learning |
| • Class period | • Competence-based advancement |
| • Course sequence | • Immersion |
| • Reductivist, sequential lessons | • Asynchronous and hybrid online formats |
| • Sequential courses | • Access points in coordination and flow |
| • Synchronous teaching and learning | |

### Authority
Although the concept of a learning community has been around since the 1990s (Sergiovanni, 1994), it has yet to supplant the practice of information flowing uni-directionally 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 | • Team teaching |
| • Textbooks, other sanctioned resources | • Student autonomy |
| | • Peer education |
| | • Student-led courses |
| | • Non-course-specific university resources |
| | • Community resources |
| | • Other institutions (not necessarily educational institutions) |
| | • Independent online resources |
| | • The workplace |

## The role of administrative leadership in disruptive curricular change

To be continued …