

Is online learning really cracking open the public post-secondary system?

JULY 12, 2012 BY TONY BATES

I suspect that I'm not the only one who has been 'disengaged' from the online world of online learning for the past few weeks, in my case for minor medical reasons, and in your case I hope enjoying sun, sand and socializing. So in this post I'm going to pull together a number of recent publications in the blogosphere which taken together, suggest that there are deep rumblings in North America's public post-secondary education systems, if not outright panic in the streets. Or it may just be summer madness and too much heat. I'll leave you to judge.

There's a lot of reading covered, so I'll try and cover the main points then identify some of the lessons I think we can learn from these developments.

Spooked by MOOCs

Whatever your reservations about MOOCs (and I have a lot, which I will come to later in this post) they are definitely causing a stir in post-secondary education. Enough in fact to unseat a university President (who was then reinstated). The prestigious and (in North American terms) ancient University of Virginia, founded by no less than Thomas Jefferson himself, got its knickers in a twist. First the Board of Governors fired the President, for what appears to be not having a strategy to respond to innovation in higher education as manifested by Stanford MOOCs and MITx. She was then reinstated a week or so later, after faculty and students rallied in her support.

It is difficult to know how much weight one should give to this bizarre episode. In fact some faculty in the University of Virginia had been teaching online for over five years, but then it turned out that this was merely recorded lectures that students could unload online. What was clear was the university had no institutional strategy for online learning – it had been left to individual professors to do what they could, obviously without much professional support. Some members of the Board of Governors (and especially the chair) clearly felt that the university should have a strategy for innovation in education.

Lesson 1: No president with an activist Board of Governors is now safe if the university does not have a clear institutional strategy for online learning. It's now become the latest buzzword in post-secondary education.

Now what that strategy should be is less clear. Canada's own George Siemens responded by publishing an open letter to Canadian universities, demanding that they not just join the bandwagon by signing up to Udemity, Coursera or edX as junior partners, but develop their own strategies for innovation, and in particular their own development of open online courses. Unfortunately, George is not the chairman of any university boards (at least yet), and wasn't too clear about how these strategies for innovation would differ from those of the elite universities offering MOOCs (although we can guess – they would be more constructivist MOOCs along the design of George Siemens' and Stephen Downes' #Change 11.)

Are MOOCs the answer?

This raises the question: are the headline-grabbing MOOCs the future, or are they just an interesting development that provides access to large numbers, but doesn't really threaten the 'core' business of campus-based institutions, such as credentialling and a 'quality' educational experience (especially for those who can afford it).

Your guess is as good as mine on this. However, Bonnie Stewart in a very thoughtful article worries about MOOCs becoming a buzzword. She writes:

This nouvelle vague of MOOC hoopla... has been disorienting. But there's no denying it. In major media newsspeak, it appears "MOOC" now signifies some kind of material manifestation of the "disruptive innovation" everybody's sure is upon us but can't quite pin down.... Udacity and the xEd mega-MOOCs, with their overt emphasis on data collection and vaguely-defined business models, begin to look like trojan horses for mass-scale automation of teaching and grading. When the cavalry charge is being led by the most prestigious higher ed institutions in the market, it's hard to assume it'll all just blow over. Clearly, higher ed IS thinking about MOOCs.

The problem, of course, with buzzwords is that they end up empty. In this case, each new media iteration of the term "MOOC" seems to tie it more closely to the behemoth of elite power + rapid change that drives the frenzy around disruption in higher ed. Things fall apart, we hear from every corner. The center cannot hold... The problem with apocalyptic thinking is that it predisposes us towards simple solutions and salvation narratives, even in complex situations.

If we're interested in being part of the conversation around the future of higher ed, we need to stop talking about MOOCs as buzzwords. We need to begin talking about the interests that determine the specific shape of particular MOOCs as they emerge. The danger of buzzwords is that they can come to feel inevitable. MOOCs are not any one thing, unless we permit them to be. MOOCs will not inherently gut faculty positions in higher ed. MOOCs do not have automation and robot grading built into their conceptual structure.

We certainly need more discussion at this level about innovation in higher education, and MOOCs in particular. We need to ask whether MOOCs are successful in anything other than reaching large numbers of learners. For instance, how should we measure the success or failure of MOOCs? Many learners do not intend to take a certificate or to complete all the work, but could MOOCs be improved so the proportion of those that do take an assessment at the end is more than the 5-10% of those that started the program, as at present? What are MOOC participants actually learning? For instance, how many would have passed the end of course exam *without* taking the course, since it seems many who take MOOCs already have knowledge and experience in the topic? Why not offer a challenge exam for a certificate then offer the MOOC to those that fail?

I was therefore interested to see that Udemy, one of the main platforms for delivering MOOCs, has recently totally redesigned its web site, *'enabling students to track their progress, interact more deeply with instructors and discover new courses relevant to them:*

- *Enhanced Course Taking Experience – enables students to take courses through a responsive full screen user interface that encourages course completion and engagement.*
- *Robust Student-Teacher Q&A – facilitates student-instructor and student-student interactions through a powerful Quora-style question & answer experience that's tightly integrated with each course lecture.*
- *Progress Meter – shows how much of a course a student has completed, enabling students to pick up where they left off and stay motivated throughout the course.*
- *Time Stamped Notes – tags students' notes to specific times in a course video/lecture which enhances a student's ability to review the material they are learning.*
- *Personalized Course Discovery – recommends new courses for students based on a Netflix-style recommendation engine which leverages each student's interests, activity on Udemy, and social data.'*

As Stephen Downes commented, this is beginning to look more like a traditional LMS. This begs two deeper questions though:

- why are most MOOCs ignoring 60 years of research into how students learn, and 20 years of developing best practices in online learning? This is the hubris of computer scientists designing online teaching without any knowledge of pedagogy or research in online learning.
- how do you assess learning in massive online courses when the desired learning outcomes are not appropriately tested through computer or 'robot' marking? What kinds of learning are restricted to robot marking?

Lastly, it should be remembered that roughly 15% of all credit course enrollments in public post-secondary education institutions are already online. In Canada this means over one million course enrollments taken as a whole. Completion rates of most online courses in Canada are around 85%. These online courses individually may not reach hundreds of thousands of students,

but those that follow best practices do ensure that most of the students who take such courses learn and succeed.

This is not to deny the value of MOOCs, particularly in putting pressure on existing institutions to change, but there is much room for improvement. We need to look at how we can benefit from both more conventional online learning and from MOOCs, not set one off against the other.

Lesson 2: MOOCs may be the answer – but what is the question? May there be better solutions to the question? And may such solutions exist already but are not being sufficiently supported?

System-wide change

Meanwhile, in quiet, conservative Canada, over the summer period, Glen Murray, Ontario's Minister Training, Colleges and Universities published a bombshell of a discussion paper. First some context. Ontario's Liberal provincial government is heavily committed to education as a driver of economic development, especially in knowledge-based industries. Ontario already has one of the most advanced post-secondary education systems in the world, with 20 universities, many of them in the top 100 world wide, and 24 two year colleges. The government wants to drive up participation in post-secondary education from the current 63% of a cohort to 70%. However, Ontario was particularly badly hit during the 2008 recession and is now facing very large budget deficits. Austerity is required over the next five years at least, so the Minister is faced with the challenge of maintaining and if possible improving the quality of the post-secondary education system, while at best not increasing spending and preferably by finding savings within the system.

So the Ministry produced a discussion paper in the ides of summer, calling on the 'system' to respond to a number of suggestions within the discussion paper which include:

- more flexible credit transfer between institutions (Ontario is way behind most other Canadian jurisdictions in this respect: students have to negotiate individually with academic departments/professors if they wish to change universities to have their credits from their old university accepted by their new university. Often students – especially from out of province – have to start their undergraduate studies all over again if they wish to transfer.)
- more recognition of prior learning and outcomes-based assessment
- options for three year bachelor degrees alongside the existing four year degree programs
- first and second year core and introductory courses shared across the system
- year-round learning
- key performance indicators/benchmarks for the sector
- ways to shift the balance from research to teaching in terms of faculty support and advancement

- more widespread use of technology in the classroom
- more online programs (currently approximately 15% of all credit enrollments are online) and new models for course delivery
- development of financial models that enable tuition fees to be reduced or at least maintained at their current level
- more emphasis on entrepreneurialism and links with business and industry

For contractual reasons, I am unable to comment directly on the discussion paper, but I have invited Tom Carey to write a guest post next week in response to the Minister's paper. However, the Minister has clearly thrown down a challenge to the institutions. It will be interesting to see how they respond.

Lesson 3: Governments are increasingly not going to accept the status quo or business as usual. In particular, if your institution doesn't have a meaningful strategy for innovation in teaching, for improving the cost-effectiveness of the organization, and particularly a strategy for online learning, you will become increasingly vulnerable to funding cuts.

Are faculty the problem?

So far, the challenge has been directed at the senior management of institutions, who after all are responsible for strategic direction. However, as was pointed out in the discussions around the sacking and reinstatement of the President at the University of Virginia, universities are not hierarchical organizations. You have to have the faculty onside. So it was exceedingly depressing to read the Babson College/Inside Higher Education report on 'conflicted faculty'. More than two-thirds of instructors said they believe that students currently learn less in online courses than they do in the classroom. However, the more faculty had experience of online learning, the more favourable they were towards it. John Thelin, who rate himself as an 'old prof', wrote very compellingly about why faculty should not fear online learning

Although the Babson results are depressing, this is not surprising. People fear the unknown. In no other profession do we throw people into the fray without any training. If the only model of teaching you have in your head is that of the classroom, and that's how you make your living, then you are bound to defend and protect it. In the end it comes back to a leadership question. It is necessary but not sufficient to set a strategy for online learning. You need also to prepare and train faculty for such a move. This has to be part of your strategy.

It also has to be part of your strategy to ensure that decisions about online learning within your institutions are made by people with the necessary experience and knowledge. Too often AVPs responsible for learning technologies are unqualified in terms of knowing anything about either pedagogy or technology. Instructional support staff are often treated as second class citizens. Too often the AVP Academic will defer to the CIO rather than listen to her own learning technology staff. This is basically a governance issue. It means working out who should be at the table for different levels of decision-making, and making sure they have the power and responsibility to make those decisions. (For more on this, see Bates and Sangra, 2011)

Lesson 4: Prepare and train your faculty to deal with change and innovation in teaching, and in particular for teaching online

The barbarians are at the gate

Lastly, we should be aware that online learning is becoming increasingly the front line of an ideological war. Especially but not exclusively in the USA, there are strong corporate interests who see opportunities to make tons of money out of post-secondary education. It is in their interest to weaken and criticize the public education system. Thus the recent publication of the GVS Advisors report aptly named 'Fall of the Wall' should be given particular attention. From the executive summary:

In the words of one prominent investor, "I see more and more capital moving to the area and for two primary reasons: anytime large, broken industries exist, significant opportunities for start-ups are created. Additionally, the millennial generation is learning in different ways, which has been driven by technology."

This report should be compulsory reading for Ministers of Advanced Education, and the governors and senior management of post-secondary institutions. It lays out clearly the threat to the post-secondary education system, but it also has some interesting ideas that the institutions themselves could use to fight back against the growing threat of privatization. In particular, it defines interesting criteria for measuring investment in education (what it calls Return on Education or ROE):

We believe that a company or organization can only deliver true ROE if it achieves one or all of the following:

- *Drives down costs for learners and/or institutions*
- *Substantially improves learning outcomes including performance on licensure or professional exams, performance on standardized tests, retention, graduation rates, learner engagement, progression to advanced degrees, college and career readiness, job placement, etc.*
- *Increases student and/or instructor access to education*
- *Increases the effective "capacity" of instruction and instructors thereby improving student outcomes and the professional paths of learning leaders*

So here are some targets for our public institutions. Also it would be useful to make clear what is missing in this list that is also of value economically and socially that only public institutions can provide, such as the development of creative and original thinking, new knowledge, and strong social and ethical attitudes.

Lesson 5: If public institutions do not respond effectively to the challenge of change, they will eventually be swept aside by the private sector – and will deserve it.

Conclusions

First, talk about having to keep your eye on the ball. I thought I could slip away for a month in the summer when nothing is happening in post-secondary education. How wrong can you be!

Second, if even a centrist, moderate provincial government such as Ontario's is looking for some radical changes in the post-secondary system, you can be sure that the pressure will be even greater in those with more ideologically driven state or provincial governments. So be prepared.

Third, I'm left with the question: are our public post-secondary education institutions up to the challenge? Do they see the danger, and if they do, do they have the means to address it? It will be interesting to see how the generally well run Ontario institutions respond to the Minister's challenge.

Fourth, is all this just mid-summer madness, or are there really some major changes happening or about to happen in the public post-secondary world? To what extent will the current frenzy in the USA cross the border to the north? I ask this, because all this reminds me very strongly of the frenzy before the dot-com bust in 1999, when everyone in the USA was rushing to set up for-profit online institutions such as New York University Online and Fathom, all of which collapsed and disappeared. I suspect that this time, the drive for change has more legs. We have reached a wall in terms of the costs of the higher education system, yet demand continues to grow. Something has to give.

Lastly, what are your views on all this? have you been following the discussion? Where do you sit with regard to the need for change? Will there be a job for you when you get back from holiday!!!

Enjoy the rest of your summer!

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