

The Future Agenda of Distance Education

A Learning Environment Approach

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Clearly, distance education has arrived. It has successfully persuaded thousands of students and their employers of its value. Blind to color and gender, it has attracted and embraced diversity and in the process created a level of credibility that has sustained both a national and even global reach. It is now totally seamless and inclusive and ranges from kindergarten to the doctoral level, including areas such as art and nursing about which many were skeptical. It has passed the tough standards of being accredited by both national and regional

associations; its remaining critics are few, cranky, and generational. But it is precisely when an industry settles into and enjoys the comfort zone of success that it may need to pause and reflect as to whether all the assumptions of continuity will continue to go in its favor. Above all, it may need to contemplate the high road and identify futures that are not solely, obediently, and incrementally more of the same. Although each institution routinely engages in strategic forecasting and planning, it may be bracing to factor in the directions and trends for the field as a whole. In particular, five megatrends seem discernable.

QUALITY—PERFORMANCE

Having documented again and again that distance education is minimally as good as traditional education, why should we now not raise the bar and aspire to being among the best in higher education? Now that the Ivies have joined the ranks—reluctantly and conveniently forgetting years of disdain and criticism—we should be able to compare apples and apples. Indeed, a number of our larger institutions have embarked on precisely just such quality quests and already achieved recognition of their next level commitment by their accrediting associations. But whether or not we aspire to being electronic Ivies or simply committed to steady and continuous quality improvement, the field needs



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to address quality obstacles with candor. In particular because we embody the open door policy of the Statue of Liberty, one of our major problems, especially for advanced degrees, is cultural catch-up—educating and training master’s- and doctoral-level students to be scholar-practitioners when they come from and are raised in learning cultures that are often non-academic and employed by businesses that are equally unreceptive to research. Of course we can compare dissertations, but will they remain researchers? Will they continue to be independent critical thinkers? Will they maintain their commitment to be innovative and make original contributions to their fields? Have we sufficiently incorporated into academic study the inquiry systems of the workplace so that the two are minimally aligned or optimally seamless? Or, finally, are we expecting too much, too soon? Will it require more than one generation for such ripening to happen? But before we settle for partial catch-up, we need to bring our collective intelligence to bear on the quality gaps of our learners, where and what we want them to be, and what interventions are needed to extend their performance stretch.

DIAGNOSTICS—PROFILES

Quality outcomes need benchmarks, but deeper and more probing ones—measures that assess attitude, tolerance, and above all readiness. We need to tap the tools currently used by HR to assess promotion and succession worthiness but applied now to learning. In addition, we need to measure the capacity to manage a learning environment in which transition is not a one-time state, but a new norm. And, most important, we need to fuse the knowledge of their learning capacity with their self-management skills—with their work ethic and ability to balance multiple lives. In other words, not only do we need to know more about our learners than ever before for our

interventions to be targeted and sufficient, but also our diagnostic profiles have to drive, shape, and determine the outcomes of the quest for quality performance. Finally and ideally, we have to invite our learners to be our partners and cocreators of their self-knowledge and performance profiles.

STATE OF THE ART—PROCESS

Constant and continuous improvement drives not only the production line of Toyota and electronic universities, but also their cheerleaders. Presidents, deans, and chairs routinely exhort faculty and staff to implement the latest improvements and hail them as significant advances of the state of the art. Initially driven by insecurity, now aspiration to perfection has increased the rate and number of process changes to keep pace with the supreme taskmaster—technology. All this heady and busy push to change has generally left small- and medium-sized institutions alone not so much by choice as by limited budgets. Not so our largest institutions, which, in their desire to be set apart and to enhance their brand, never leave anything intact or alone. They appear to have rewritten the old adage to read: “If it ain’t broke, fix it anyway.” The net result seems to be change for change’s sake, and all involved seem to have to live in a state of constant process revision with no end in sight. The situation perhaps resembles the classic dilemma Pogo encountered and summed up: “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

There is, perhaps, a need for a moratorium on such constant change shock. We may be unknowingly involved in process overkill. The challenge is not to abandon improvement but to reconsider whether the complexity of complexity is the only sign of its success—whether having to figure out or manage the labyrinth is more important than the end results and products—and whether we want faculty and

staff to spend a disproportionate amount of their time and energy being endlessly retrained. In short, we may need to create a decision checklist of change to guide our choices. Minimally, three items should be up-front: does the improvement justify and offset the dislocations and retraining adjustments that inevitably will follow; to what extent does it involve more steps than what it is replacing; and finally does the improvement simplify or complicate process?

COSTS—HOLDING THE LINE AND UPGRADES

Ideally, distance education should be the least costly education option. It involves virtually no bricks and mortar, many of its services and operations are outsourcable, employs a significant number of adjuncts as independent contractors without benefits, and pays nothing to deliver its electronic programs. No wonder why many distance education institutions were originally (and still are) proprietary and why, as for-profit businesses, they have attracted so many venture capitalists (and still do), and why they routinely increase tuition and fees like their traditional counterparts who have elaborate plants and expensive football teams to maintain. But a few words to the wise: tuition remission programs along with other benefits may be cut or eliminated; student loans may be increasingly weighted in terms of cost/benefits; major firms will create (many already have) their own universities and perhaps seek alliances to confer degrees; etc. In other words, increasing costs may kill the goose that lays the golden egg.

What, then, should distance education do? Minimally, consider two courses of action. The first is cost review: where does the money go, for what, with what returns on investment? And if we are planning to increase tuition and fees, where is that additional money going? What is it buying? What can our recruiters and our

advertisements then claim as value-added? The other course of action is to consider offering different levels of degrees pegged to increasing costs—to differentiate programs by their upgrades or perks. The degree requirements would not change, only the ways to get there. Thus, the most basic level would be offered at a no-frills lowest cost, typically tied to tuition remission allowances. The next level would offer the same program, but with a number of intermediate upgrades as options. Finally, there would be first- or business-class version.

It is not totally new. Every institution at one time or another has come up with various good ideas of add-ons or improvements that were rejected because they cost too much or it was unlikely anyone would be willing to pay the price. Now they can be salvaged and built into program levels which pair benefits and charges. If disturbed by the elitism, an institution can offer some of the higher price options at the basic level as costs go down. It happens every year in the auto industry. This year's luxury features in the Cadillac appear in next year's Chevy.

What would set the levels apart? Again, a number of universities already have been exploring implementing such multiple levels, although in piecemeal fashion and without an overall strategy. One powerful and popular upgrade is career enhancement applications: providing executive coaches at middle and top levels; offering various consulting services such as interview prep and resume review; supporting development of presentation skills of speaking and PowerPoint. Curriculum options generally consist of cutting-edge developments offered as overlays or extenders—such as sustainable management, simulation and scenario forecasting, and so forth—new areas that upgrade standard areas of study to catch up with current trends. Finally, like a corporate jet, the newest bells and whistles of technology, especially globally driven, can dramat-

ically enhance traditional inquiry. In short, one of the signs of creative cost review may be the discovery of new program and marketing options that not only sharpen competitive edge, but also invite the exercise of innovation to a sea of curricula sameness.

ECO-LEARNING

Distance education is the supreme version of ecological accountability. It saves energy and pollution by eliminating commuting to class, maintaining an elaborate plant, requiring faculty and staff to be in place (rather than in time), and operates 24/7. If we sought to create an education system that would respect and honor the environment, we could not come up with anything better. But it is not perfect and that in turn requires minimally three follow-ups. The first is internal eco-accountability—examining all resource uses and practices, reducing or eliminating all paper trails, and converting all operations to highest

eco levels. The second is to raise to new levels electronic or voice attendance at meetings or professional conferences. That already has been adopted by some societies that offer annual meetings with two tracks: actual and virtual. Finally, offering such adaptations to other organizations—a kind of electronic outsourcing service offered by innovative eco-e-learning institutions as a public service.

In summary, then, the future of distance education is happily defined by challenges, inside and out, short and long term, wishes and warnings. Are there other trends that should concern us? Of course, but the above provide a good start. Besides, when pursued they will unearth and lead to others. The only fly in the ointment is leadership—not that our presidents will not lead the charge but that they will empower it to be all-involving, collaborative, and collective. Or, as an old Tao proverb advises, “When leaders lead well, the people think they did it themselves.”

FIVE MEGATRENDS:

1. QUALITY—PERFORMANCE
2. DIAGNOSTICS—PROFILES
3. STATE OF THE ART—PROCESS
4. COSTS—HOLDING THE LINE & UPGRADES
5. ECO-LEARNING