Online Learning: Strategies for Pedagogical Retooling

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Abstract: Higher education can be conceptualized as a partnership between the learner and the institution. However, this may necessitate changes in practice, such as the development of flexible learning models to accommodate individuals from a range of backgrounds and life circumstances, particularly those traditionally excluded from higher education. Flexible modes of learning may encounter resistance or fail to deliver expected outcomes, however, thus limiting adoption. Pedagogical retooling can address this. This paper reviews the current status of one type of flexible delivery—online learning—in terms of stakeholder views, the need for continued institutional responsiveness, and pedagogical strategies that support desired outcomes. The latter includes pedagogical training that involves implementing elements of effective course design, simulating the student learning experience, forming communities of practice, and sustaining practice with follow-on support.

1 INTRODUCTION

When the Open University in the United Kingdom opened its doors 45 years ago, some considered the concept to be "blithering nonsense," (Wildavsky, 2016, para. 2). The vision to offer low cost, high quality, personalized, valued degree programs with flexible scheduling to part-time adult learners regardless of academic preparation did not reflect current practice. However, when initial enrollments of 25,000 were realized (compared to 180,000 across all higher education institutions in the United Kingdom), the approach was heralded as the ""most significant event in the history of higher education since land grant colleges were created in the United States" (Wildavsky, 2016, para. 3).

This disruptive innovation has become increasingly common. Recognition that education is "a major contributor to national wealth and economic development" (British Council, 2012, p. 1), the opportunity is being extended to learners of all ages and backgrounds. Many nations have open universities, and traditional institutions are adopting the principles and flexible delivery premises upon which open universities were founded. Consequently, post-secondary enrollments are increasing by 5% per year (British Council, 2012).

Higher education is beginning to be conceptualized as a "partnership between HEPs [higher education providers] and students with the goal of providing accessible yet manageable learning opportunities for a wide range of people" (Higher Education Academic [HEA], 2015, p. 4). Learners wanting to be part of this partnership represent diverse educational backgrounds, levels of academic preparation, social classes, age groups, cultural assets, ethnicities, linguistic proficiencies, and life situations, much more so than traditional university students.

To address the needs of these learners, flexible delivery models are being considered and adopted. Flexibility entails greater choice for learners in terms of time, place, and delivery of educational offerings; however, continued attention is required to provide these choices in ways that support effective learning and successful completion of programs of study. "When well supported, [flexible learning] positively impacts recruitment, retention and progression; widens participation; and offers opportunities to learners of all ages, backgrounds, ethnicities and nationalities" (HEA, 2015, p. 4).

Traditional higher education practices and institutional cultures can present a significant barrier to the adoption of learning paradigms that are flexible and responsive to learner circumstances, however. This is particularly true in terms of the acceptance of online learning as a viable pedagogical approach. This paper examines views of distance learning within the academy, indicates the

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need for continued responsiveness, and shares strategies for effective retooling and pedagogical practice in online programs.

2 PERSPECTIVES ON ONLINE LEARNING

For many, online learning is considered the most viable solution to increasing educational demand from a diverse pool of learners (European Commission [EU], 2014; HEA, 2015). It has the potential to "reach individuals previously marginalized to change lives and improve communities and economies" (Andrade, 2013, p. 67). Traditional degree programs are becoming modernized in terms of greater access to materials, and pedagogies that blend technology with traditional approaches; this modernization is resulting in wider acceptance of online learning (EU, 2014).

Indeed, enrollment patterns for online courses clearly indicate increasing access to, and by implication, acceptance of this mode of delivery. Although growth in the percentage of students taking at least one online course has slowed to approximately 3.7 (as compared to 20% in 2003, 2005, and 2009), this exceeds overall higher education enrollment increases of 1.2% for the same time period (Allen and Seaman, 2015). As expected, undergraduates who are older, employed full-time, and have a spouse or dependent are more likely to participate than their traditional counterparts (Radford, 2011). This patterns supports the founding principles of the open university and the need to extend these principles to traditional institutions.

However, perspectives on the sustainability and quality of online learning differ. Critics observe that retention in online courses is 8% lower than in traditionally-delivered courses (Lokken and Mullins, 2014). Nearly 45% of chief academic officers feel that it is more difficult to retain students in online courses than in face-to-face courses, and the majority (68.3%) believe that more discipline is needed for success in online than in traditional courses (Allen and Seaman, 2015).

Certainly, flexible learning has the potential to encourage "students to become independent and autonomous, fostering attributes that will enable them to manage the complexities of 21st century life" (HEA, 2015, p. 3). Simply enrolling in a flexible learning course, however, does not create an autonomous or independent learner. Developing these abilities requires intentional course design and instructor facilitation (Andrade, 2014a, 2014b).

Faculty stakeholders are often characterized as being resistant to online learning.

> There are still a number of faculty on our campus who question what we are doing to our students. [They think that if they are] not going to get the campus experience, they aren't going to get the interaction they used to get (Bichsel, 2013, p. 23).

Faculty members at institutions that offer online programs and those who have taught online tend to have more positive views than their counterparts (Allen and Seaman, 2015). However, fewer than half feel that their institutions have appropriate assessment mechanisms to ensure the quality of online offerings, and almost two-thirds feel that learning outcomes are inferior (Allen & Seaman, 2012). In contrast, approximately 75% of administrators view student learning outcomes in online courses as equivalent to or higher than face-to-face courses (Allen and Seaman, 2015).

3 THE NEED FOR RESPONSIVENESS

In spite of these varying perspectives, the call for higher education is to "become more responsive and relevant to new demands from a clientele reflecting an evolving demographic profile" (Beaudoin, in press). Higher education is a long-established enterprise with long-standing traditions that have not been questioned to much extent. Current conversations indicate concerns with rising costs, return on investment, the practice of measuring quality by inputs such as seat time and credit hours, lack of accountability, and elitism (Christensen et al., 2011). Higher education must reinvent itself to effectively serve a range of student populations and prepare graduates for a constantly changing global environment.

Online learning is a disruptive innovation in higher education with the potential to effect needed change. Disruptive innovation is "the process by which products and services, which at one point were so expensive, complicated, and inconvenient that only a small fraction of people could access them, become transformed into ones that are simpler, more convenient, lower in cost, and far more accessible" (Christensen et al., 2011, p. 10). Online learning enables "learning to happen in a

variety of contexts, locations, and times; it allows for a transformation of curriculum and learning" (Christensen et al., 2011, p. 4). The issue is how to ensure the effectiveness and encourage acceptance of this transformation.

Higher education has been a sustaining innovation, historically available to only those with the cultural and financial capital to prepare them with the requisite life experiences and advantages for access and success. Due to rising demand, the need to accommodate diverse learners, external criticism, and increasing competition from for-profit providers (i.e., disruptive innovators), traditional institutions are recognizing the need to change in order to provide an affordable, high quality experience to a broad population.

Innovations typically require changes in structure, policy, and business models. Universities may decide to offer online programs to new audiences to avoid self-competition (Roscorla, 2014). Otherwise, students may choose online over face-to-face courses, threatening the latter and creating concerns within the academy. Institutions sometimes spin off their online learning operations to free themselves from slow decision-making processes and resistance, and to serve greater numbers of students. This is the case with institutions such as Southern New Hampshire University, the first online competency-based U.S. institution to be eligible for student federal financial aid (LeBlanc, 2015).

"New and emerging approaches to teaching and learning, made possible by new technologies, can complement, consolidate, support, and further advance" access (EU, 2014, p. 4). In spite of this, goals for widely accessible higher education opportunity have not yet been realized (EU, 2014). Additionally, concerns about quality and student success indicate the need for greater attention to effective practice and pedagogical strategies.

Few teaching staff see value in online learning according to their chief academic administrators (Allen and Seaman, 2015). This may be due to resistance to change, tradition, or familiar cultural practices. It may also be due to unfamiliarity with this mode of teaching and learning, insecurity about technology, and uncertainty about how to adapt. Preparing instructors to teach online has been cited as a significant challenge (Lokken and Mullins, 2014).

4 REFORM STRATEGIES

To address the challenges noted, institutions should consider developing a multi-dimensional approach for supporting effective online teaching. These involve strategies that range from effective course design to simulated training, the formation of communities of learning, and follow-on support.

4.1 Implement Effective Elements of Course Design

A successful online teaching and learning experience begins with course design. Teaching staff must be made aware of the elements of good practice and how to implement them. These include pre-enrollment information (program specifics, fees, estimated time to completion, needed background knowledge); intentional design (learning outcomes, media and social networking, relevant content); interventions (progress checks, alerts for missing assignments or low scores); formative and summative assessments; personalized support (conferencing, social networking, learning resources); and learner analytics (Tait, 2015). Additionally, courses might embed learning strategy training to encourage learner responsibility and success (Andrade, 2014a; 2014b).

Understanding how online courses are intentionally designed may help address instructor concerns with quality and outcomes. Instructors might also see applicability for these practices in their face-to-face courses and the potential for redesigning courses with online components. Course redesign is a current strategy in higher education that addresses unacceptable pass rates in gateway courses, or those that are foundational, highly enrolled, and which students may be at risk of failing (John N. Gardner Institute, 2016). Redesign can result in significant gains in student degree completion (Pushing the Barriers, 2015; Renick, 2016).

Typically, course redesign is characterized by online lectures and practice exercises, pre/post-assessments; automated feedback, peer and e-tutoring; and consistency across sections (Educational Advisory Board, 2014; "Pushing the Barriers," 2015). These elements share similarities with those of effective online course design. Learner analytics, outcomes, completion rates, and other metrics can be used to demonstrate efficacy and identify needed improvements.

4.2 Simulate the Student Learning Experience

Training programs for online instructors often simulate the student experience. This might occur in the form of a flipped classroom; both learners and instructors use online materials to prepare for in-class engagement and application (Palloff, 2014). This is a hybrid teaching/training model. Instructors participate in the same types of activities as students. They thus increase understanding of the purpose course activities, and have the opportunity to apply appropriate pedagogical techniques.

Instructors must also understand relevant philosophical underpinnings in the student course. For instance, courses may be based on the concept of collaborative control, aimed at helping learners become more responsible, learn help-seeking strategies, and develop autonomy. The learner is not expected to assume complete control over the learning process but manages tasks in collaboration with other students and the instructor (White, 2003). If this is an underlying premise of the course, instructors need to understand their role in facilitating increased learner responsibility.

Developing responsibility involves choice, which leads to autonomy. Students might be given a choice of assignments based on a diagnosis of their strengths and weaknesses. This can be accompanied by goal-setting, performance monitoring, and reflection. As learners strive to achieve a goal, they complete activities, interact with their peers, and assess their progress. This process transfers the responsibility for learning from the instructor to the learner (Andrade, 2014b). Once again, the instructor must understand the purpose of these activities and be skilled at supporting learners in achieving associated outcomes.

To model this approach, activities in the training course might provide instructors with opportunities to determine what they want to learn and why and set goals for enhancing pedagogical practice. They can share these with their colleagues in the course, submit reflections, and determine next steps. This approach supports greater investment in the training as the instructors determine what they want to learn and apply the concept of collaborative control. It simultaneously provides them with an experience that mirrors that of their students.

4.3 Create Communities of Practice

In addition to effective course design practices and simulation of activities in the student course, instructor support should entail opportunities for community building. Teaching online is sometimes seen as isolating, and particularly if instructors are new to it, uncertain of how to approach student learning issues, and feel they have no one to consult for answers to questions or ideas for resolving problems. Online instructors may have never taken an online course much less taught one (McQuiggen, 2012). As such, instructors may benefit from on-going connections with other online instructors.

Communities of practice can be formed by creating instructor groups with an appointed leader who organizes virtual meetings and discussion forums. Participants determine topics for these exchanges and share materials and ideas. Discussions might focus on adapting classroom approaches to an online environment, using technology, and addressing student or course-specific issues.

Teaching groups can be organized within departments offering online courses or across an institution. The former provides an advantage in terms of the opportunity to discuss course-specific content and approaches while the latter provides for cross-disciplinary exchanges on pedagogy. In this way, both novice and seasoned instructors can continue their development as part of a professional community of practice.

On-going training and professional development might also include continued goal-setting in which instructors set a goal each semester, share it with their group, and report on it at the end of the term. This creates an environment in which online instructors learn from and support each other.

Weekly and end-of-term reports, submitted formally to a lead instructor or office staff member, or informally to colleagues in a discussion post or blog, can be an effective way to share teaching insights, report problems, provide feedback on course design or content, comment on student progress, or make suggestions for further training. For course or program administrators, these reports provide critical data for decisions about course changes or training processes and content.

These approaches to collaboration not only ease instructors into a new learning context, but address some of the concerns with quality often cited by critics of online learning. They provide structure, oversight of teaching, consistent standards and expectations, networking opportunities, and continuing professional development, all of which also contribute to the achievement of student learning outcomes.

4.4 Sustain Practice with Follow-on Support

In addition to establishing communities of practice, another strategy is to provide follow-on training that involves outreach to instructors and further opportunities for sharing. Outreach could include weekly e-mails with tips and strategies; quarterly newsletters consisting of innovative ideas, success stories, and institutional reports; or scheduled webcasts. The latter might feature institutional leaders sharing their vision for teaching and learning, and instructors discussing their online teaching insights. Webcasts can be structured so that questions can be submitted in advance and addressed in the session, thereby providing instructors with opportunities for involvement.

Online resource libraries can be created for instructors to share materials such as student-help videos on practical issues ranging from formatting writing assignments to conducting grammar and spelling checks to applying instructor feedback. Instructors can post tips on topics such as using social networking, screencasts, videos, instant chat, recorded verbal feedback, or other forms of technology. Strategies for time management, grading assignments, teaching through response, communication with learners, creating supplementary materials, or example announcements may also be topics of interest. Tips for assisting struggling students or for deepening learning through questioning and commentary can be included as well. Training manuals used in the initial training course can also be made available online for review, clarification, or follow up.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Online learning "presents an opportunity to rethink age-old assumptions about higher education—its processes, where it happens, and what its goals are" (Christensen et al., 2011, p. 4). Institutions are questioning these assumptions and responding to demand by providing learners with access and flexible delivery models.

However, to ensure learner success, institutions must develop quality design, training, and support structures. This entails identifying frameworks for instructor development that will have a positive impact on student success. The strategies outlined are designed to overcome known barriers to successful online learning programs.

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