

DISTANCE EDUCATION: FROM DEEP DISAPPOINTMENT TO NEW OPTIMISM

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Abstract: The demand for higher education continues to rise. The rapid increase among the numbers of undergraduate and graduate enrollment indicates that a university diploma is accepted as a good value and a key to better life even at the face of the remorseless rise in the cost of getting it. On the other hand, higher education is accepted as an essential requirement to cope with the necessities of citizenship in the 21st century. The knowledge requirements are more pressing as the world gets more complicated and economies are transforming to knowledge economies. Furthermore, it also is in the interests of the societies and nations to invest in their people because returns to them are enormous. So the economy needs it, people needs it, societies and governments needs it. There is demand from all sides. But unfortunately this demand is not fulfilled. Approximately 40% of total high school graduates do not make it to universities for different reasons. Within this paradigm, introduction of web based distance education opportunities raised great hopes. Indeed, an appropriately constructed system could make miracles by overcoming physical obstructions as well as financial hardships. But the retention rates among the pioneering US Universities distance learning programs created a huge disappointment. Underneath this failure lies the fact that learning is a “social experience”. Overlooking this phenomenon is a sure remedy for failure. This paper focuses on this aspect of distance learning, and investigates hybrid approaches, flip-class applications and newest web systems incorporated to existing online applications.

Key words: Education, distance, social, online

Introduction

The demand for higher education continues to rise despite the fact that the cost of higher education is increasing faster than inflation (Barber et al., 2013). National Center for Education statistics (NCES, 2014) points an increase of more than 40% at the prices for undergraduate tuition, room and board after adjustment for inflation, in a decade; from 2000 to 2010, while the percentage of students admitted to universities raised from 40% to 60% of the total high school graduates among OECD countries (OECD, 2012). The rapid increase among the numbers of undergraduate and graduate enrollment indicates that a university diploma is accepted as a good value and a key to better life even at the face of the remorseless rise in the cost of getting it. By all manner of means, higher levels of education designate more income over the lifetime and possibly better life. Graduation signals a profoundly different life with much better prospects. Various researches revealed that “*those with undergraduate and postgraduate degrees out-earn their un-credentialed peers*” (Barber et al., 2013). A recent study conducted by Lindley & Machin (2013) from Sutton Trust, found that, “*on average, a master’s degree holder in the UK earned £5,500 more per year than someone with a bachelor’s degree, and in the US the premium is even higher, at \$16,500 per year*”.

On the other hand, higher education is accepted as an essential requirement to cope with the necessities of citizenship in the 21st century (Smith, 2010). The need for a university education is more material nowadays than ever. The world is far more arduous ever before. The knowledge requirements are more pressing. As the world gets more complicated, people needed to be more educated. A university education seems critical in today’s society. Because the economies are transforming to knowledge economies, to acquire a job, to function correctively, even to make it as adult, one will need higher education. Not only in the sense of reaching higher employment opportunities, but also for entrepreneurship. Even the most rudimentary tasks necessitate considerable accumulation of knowledge and deeper understanding about the workings of the business life.

Furthermore, it also is in the interests of the societies and nations to invest in their people because returns to them are enormous (Barber et al., 2013). Contribution of the educated to the society materialize in the

taxes paid, jobs created, and even in the mature and civilized societal relationships and less crime rates. Conversely the social and personal costs of quashing the energies of youth are tremendous. So are the economic costs (Mourshed et al., 2013). The cost to the economy of not being able to re-engage young people into the labor market calculated as a staggering €153 billion in 2011 annually by The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions' 2012 report (Mascherini et al., 2012). If young people cannot land on decent jobs and the sense of security and pride that comes with them, it will be no surprise to encounter dissent, anger or even violence from them (Mourshed et al., 2013). Brown & Adler (2008) cites [Sir John] Daniel (1996), who warned that *"more than one-third of the world's population is under 20, amounting to more than 35 million people qualified to enter a university who have no place to go"*. To be able to furnish the opportunity of a university education to every eager teenager fresh out of high school should be a viable future.

Hence, the need for "a better educated generation", in the deepest and broadest meaning of that word, is crucial (Barber et al., 2013). But how can education be made more accessible to the young despite the shortcomings on the supply side and hindrances of costs?

Online education

Internet and connectedness together with globalization made profound transformations everywhere. From media to communication to banking and finance, it disrupted the mediums of businesses, alternated markets and changed every business it's touched. Although higher education seemed to resist those changes, a hurricane is at sight which will cause devastation to structures and operations that require reorientation of purpose and rebuilding (Senoir & Swailes, 2010). Seemingly unshakable posture of the universities are changing, or at the threshold of change. Indeed, entirely new models of universities are emerging to respond and profit from the opportunities posed by globalization and internet. In fact it is imperative that there needs to be a profound transformation and re-structuring in higher education system.

Concept of the traditional university, conventional lecturing, and even the understanding of why's how's of research are under pressure. University professors no longer have the over information and knowledge they once had. Neither the libraries are the most important resource for them. After all, anyone with an Internet connection can find multi-gigabytes of data, and multiple interpretations of them from multitude of perspectives with a few mouse clicks. The sheer quantity of information has grown exponentially, and it is feely available. This so called *'ubiquity of information and the near-zero cost of storing and transmitting it'* (Barber et al., 2013) contributed to allow the emergence of multiple forms of non-university and non-public providers operating in industries other than the traditionally-conceived education industry (Gallagher, 2013) to conduct research and offer degrees.

In this landscape it is considerably arduous to convince the so called generation Y to stick to accustomed educational patterns. Today's teenagers, being almost always connected, get any information instantaneously, if they have an interest in it. Multitasking seems so natural to them. Because they're so demand-oriented, it is quite hard for them to fit classic education system sitting in a classroom for hours, trying to concentrate, acquire and understand whatever is being forwarded to them (Smith, 2010). Therefore the pressures of disparity are mounting from all of the hubs. Traditional university model is ripe for innovation and university leaders need to understand the opportunities open to them to exploit and profit while creating value for the students.

The pressure to change and the allure of quick and easy money was there even from the very beginning. Quite a bunch of universities tried it. But the early results resurfaced considerable disappointment. Carrying wide range of educational materials to web and labeling them as "online programs" were numerous. Recording the lecture of a renowned professor and make it available on line looked like a sound business. If 50 people watch it good, 5000 better, and why not 5 million. There happened to be a tendency to turn online education to a cash cow, by putting as much students as possible in a virtual classroom with one instructor online. That's a classic "virtual model". By just re-organizing the educational stuff, uploading them to web and expecting to see students flocking is a huge misconception. There's a lot more to online learning. Creating conditions to engage the "disengaged" youth segment in such dynamic yet bounded contexts requires different kinds of competence and understanding (Mourshed et al., 2013). Without actually being in a classroom or even in a campus, the daily proceedings of life cover most of the available attention and motivation to focus becomes extremely difficult. Most of online students tend to lose interest promptly. That is why retention levels are extremely high and graduation rates are below a disappointing 14 percent (Laseter, 2012).

The social dimension of classic education

The vast amount of information and knowledge available online in internet greatly enhanced the accessibility of students without guidance. Yet, determining the relevance of them, creation of new understanding and capabilities based on them and elevating the students from training to education resides at the center of the mission of universities (Laseter, 2012). Universities rely on a complex blend of solid accumulated knowledge base, tested and proven lecturing skills, disposition and values embedded within the institution to improve student learning by creating and employing 'artifacts', such as policies, programs, and procedures where all of them are critical to creating the right environment to improve learning for students (Halverson, 2004). Indeed, despite we have all the information in internet, we don't just go and learn to be engineers. There is another crucial kind of ingredient to learning which is being a faculty member.

One of the most important advantage of attending to a campus-based university is the campus environment: casual discussions with your professors; intense interaction with other students, gaining rich feedback and opportunity to discuss, compare and choose right classes needed to be taking in terms of graduating (Smith, 2010). Pedagogy professionals insist that on any account higher education is an enduring value based on not collecting knowledge but gaining the capacity for intellectual inquiry. And this kind of deeper level of understanding can naturally and efficiently leveraged by interactions within the group. For students, almost always, learning by discussion and debating with peers seems more concrete than being a passive recipient of bundled knowledge chunks.

Thus, the vital part of a university education is the involvement and participation gained by meeting fellow students in vibrant academic surroundings, the opportunity to socialize with like-minded peers in an educational setting, pursuing stimulating activities (Laseter, 2012) to lead an organization, play sport, share thoughts and ideas, and of course to make friends, being together in 'cool' places with good coffee, wine and music, interacting at the library as well as at the accommodation facilities and even participating the nightlife (Barber et al., 2013).

This apprehension shifts the focus of attention from 'what' to 'how', from 'content' to 'context'. Indeed focusing to the learning activities together with the peers who shares same environment, same worries and concerns helps to explain the effectiveness of study groups. Steady interaction, simultaneous feedback in an emotion intense environment greatly enhances understandings, to clarify areas of uncertainty or confusion and improve the re-construction of the knowledge they supposed to learn. Moreover, "one of the quickest ways to learn something new, and to practice it, is to teach others how to do it" says Gallo (2012). This practice is at its best in study groups where students take on the role of teacher and student simultaneously while studying together (Brown & Adler, 2008).

Does these mean that on-line education is inherently crippled and has no real value for higher education? Of course not. The issue is to create an on-line learning perspective integrated with the necessary social element.

A new online ecosystem which contain the social element

Some of the universities went on-line by recording lectures and expect students to review them at their leisure, some of them went further with experimenting with flipped classrooms, with the professors acting as facilitators and activators rather than lecturers. All these so called 'blended approaches' coupling the virtual and the real as a continuum rather than a contrast, aim to physically touching the students one way or another to ensure real-world interaction. Some universities are organizing immersive summer experiencing camps, while others scheduling monthly gatherings under the supervision of the professors for real interaction in the remote campuses established through partnership with local institutions. Providing 'the experience' elsewhere as meet-ups and conventions of learning communities are designed.

But can the social element be provided on-line also?

University of Phoenix is experimenting what is called asynchronous on-line learning (Smith, 2010). Professor leave all the stuff related to the subject, including recorded lecture if s/he feels necessary, together with PPT presentations, documents, web source addresses whatsoever. Students are expected to go over them and at some point, post responses or thoughts on an online bulletin board and communicate with the classmates, objecting the ideas of others and/or presenting new approaches. They participate in the discussion the entire week. Keeping the discussion in mind students may have 'a-ha' moments anytime anywhere, and connect,

challenge and be challenged with a lot time to re-evaluate and re-argue. It's not like you're segmented out two hours today to go to school. It's kind of on your mind the entire day. After the discussions mature, professor assigns a work to each student completed and forwarded individually. Students are not requested to be present on the computer watching a lecture at a given hour. Whenever they have their downtime, they go online, read, reflect, and whenever they feel ripe on the subject they comment and answer. The group is small, interactive and collaborative. It is social and discussion based, loaded with a lot of critical thinking, research and debate. It's not lecture-based. Students do not have the chance loaf around and evade contribution, they have to participate. Contribution is mandatory

Indeed, in a report issued at 2010, US Department of Education indicates that *“the quality of teaching and learning online can be better than face-to-face, not least because all the interactions are explicit and can be analyzed and improved upon, rather than taking place behind lecture room doors”* (USDE, 2010). Consequently students are working a lot harder in an online class than in a traditional class, not just because contribution is mandatory, but also because they engage in tough discussion and debate with the classmates. They don't bounded with the theory only, but also how those theories apply to their life and what they're doing at work or what they're doing in their daily practices.

Brown & Adler (2008) cites the comments of David Wiley at Utah State University about an online course as:

“The writing students did in the first few weeks was interesting but average. In the fourth week, however, I posted a list of links to all the student blogs and mentioned the list on my own blog. I also encouraged the students to start reading one another's writing. The difference in the writing that next week was startling. Each student wrote significantly more than they had previously. Each piece was more thoughtful. Students commented on each other's writing and interlinked their pieces to show related or contradicting thoughts” (Brown & Adler, 2008)

When that happens, and you get that kind of engagement, the interest level goes up, and the retention levels improve.

There are other very successful examples in which technology drastically transformed the conventional understanding of education by leveraging the potential of *“social learning that can better serve the needs of twenty-first century students”* (Brown & Adler, 2008) such as; Terra Incognita Project (University of Southern Queensland, 2014), which has built a classroom in Second Life, the online virtual world that has attracted millions of users, CyberOne: Law in the Court of Public Opinion (Harvard Law School and Harvard Extension School, 2014) course, and, Bugscope Project (Beckman Institute for Advanced Science and Technology at the University of Illinois, 2014) which gives students access to a scanning electron microscope located at the university.

These examples indicate the emergence of a profoundly new form of on-line education approach which is much different than simply mimicking the classical teaching methods through internet. They offer social learning platforms where groups, even “communities of learners” establish, who interact, debate and actively co-create knowledge. Being online creates much wider groups of students in which they can and join niche communities where they can benefit from the opportunities for productive inquiry, peer-based learning and distributed cognitive apprenticeship (Brown & Adler, 2008).

Conclusion

Historically, a university diploma has acted as a proxy for qualification (Mourshed et al., 2013), and having a degree implied the possession of basic capabilities for conducting the relevant task necessities satisfactorily (Wong, 2012). However, this firm belief seems to be in peril. In the rapidly changing environment and unprecedented complexity the institutions of higher education fail to meet the needs of employers. While a diploma or degree is still a highly prized asset, ability to build on foundational knowledge and adapt is evidently not granted. The compatibility between the demands of the sophisticated global labor market and yield of university education seem to break off. A survey conducted by McKinsey (Barton, 2012) revealed that “some 40% of employers believed that they struggle to fill entry-level jobs because the candidates have inadequate skills while 70% of them blamed inadequate training for the shortfall in skilled workers”. A recent (November 2012) poll for Policy Exchange (Burns, 2012) in the UK found almost half (47%) of the contributors across the UK said “there was too much focus on academic subjects at school and not enough practical, job-related training for teenagers” and only 18% agreed the current education received in the universities with the right balance between academic and technical subjects. These disclosures reflected on the rising questions about the value of higher education. According to Karin Fisher (2013) “Boeing Company in 2008 began to rank colleges based on

how well their graduates perform within the corporation; it plans to conduct the same evaluation again this year". Google has a similar intention; instead of recruiting people with the highest scores from the best colleges, it now hires people who can solve problems and work together. Increasingly the credentials that schools and colleges give out are questioned (Hodges, 2014)

To add to the question, there exist a belief that an online degree can't match an on-campus degree in quality (Smith, 2010). Conducting a literature review about the employer perceptions of online degrees, Columbaro & Monaghan (2009) find that traditional degrees are superior to online degrees in the hiring process (eg: Adams & DeFleur, 2006). There is also strong evidence in favor of the hypothesis that the independent schools inflate grades (Wikström & Wikström, 2005) which further deteriorates the problems of acceptance of online degrees. These perceptions propagate the problem of assuring employers and the wider public about the quality of the degree from an online university. This is a profound matter to be dealt with. In the final analysis universities are relying on reputation. If their degrees don't produce real results, and if they fail to convince employers about the competencies of their graduates, then employers won't hire them. Their future is the ability to transform a student into something that's more valuable for their employers, and to be able to prove it in practice. Ultimately, universities are relying on reputation.

Ironically, on line learning in these respects contains profound advantages. It has wide variety of much different tools available now. Availability of most advanced simulations and games, expeditious accessibility to most relevant, most up to date and best content from a vast resource base, and unlimited capacity to provide mentoring can make a very strong argument that this is a superior way to do it.

And also there is the cost factor. In fact, cost is the top barrier for enrollment in higher education. In a recent survey conducted by McKinsey & Company (Mourshed et al., 2013) 31 percent of high-school graduates indicating they did not continue their education because it was too expensive. Contrariwise, costs of getting a degree is increasing perpetually as mentioned before. Customarily, classical indicators of quality for an educational institution like low student: teacher ratio, vast research capacity and incentives to ensure it place a heavy burden on the administrators to rise the tuition fees. Here again online education might offer an effective and efficient way out from this straightened contingency. The average instructional costs of a traditional campus based university is about 70 to 75 percent of tuition (Hansen & Weisbrod, 1970). In online this rate dramatically drops down to 15 percent. The difference gives the administration a lot of room to lower tuition dramatically and still provide more student services and better online tools. Insisting on small groups, interactive and collaborative, promoting discussion based critical thinking, and especially insisting on social dimension might come out as a sure remedy for success. Online interaction together with online learning under the supervision and mentorship of the academics, will grow students to the level of synthesis capacity. Indeed, faced with an incredibly abundant amount of information, searching, selecting, re-grouping and especially synthesizing the relevant information gained paramount importance. In the era of internet, where students are always connected, knowledge can be created collaboratively with outstanding quality and with almost no cost. And here both technology and the faculty will make the difference. Every professor is a program designer, is a curriculum designer, and is a syllabus designer (Smith, 2010). Developing and promoting them, giving them the tools to be practitioners of online teaching, will make them great new generation of teachers who are comfortable with internet, and online interaction. Their success rapidly effect and disseminate to the students and that kind of reputation gets out very, very quickly.

Higher education is heading for deep and radical disruption (Christenses & Eyring, 2011). What seemed unbreakable in the past is shattering in pieces. "The models of higher education that marched triumphantly across the globe in the second half of the 20th century are broken" (Barber at al., 2013). But the new prospects seems brighter and more promising. If all the stakeholders in the system, starting from academia to governments and to students, recognize the opportunity, seize the initiative and act ambitiously, creation of better societies is a viable future.

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