



THE CHANGING NATURE OF COURSE “AUTHORSHIP” IN ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION

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In the late 90s, what might now be described as the “early days” of online higher education, 56.6 kbps modems were just starting to appear in homes, online enrolment was a fraction of what it is today, the push to grow online learning was largely faculty-led, and few university strategic plans included more than a passing reference to online education.

In 2016, of course, education professionals in North America have become accustomed to reading breathless editorials in mass-market publications like the New York Times about the disruptive power of online learning. University Presidents tell us that online education is a “game changer”. Public intellectuals like Clay Shirky explain that technology is bringing an end to business as usual for higher education, just as it has for newspapers and the music industry. Much has changed.

In the midst of all this talk of upheaval, one aspect of online higher education has remained virtually unchanged: the way that traditional colleges and universities go about designing, creating, and financing in-house online course development.

Now, as in the late 90s, individual instructors assume the bulk of the responsibility for course design and development. Support is now often available from an instructional designer and technical staff, but their impact is limited by workplace conventions that encourage faculty to work alone (and staff to let them). Funds for course development are similarly constrained, due to the conventional notion/practice that course materials should be built for use only within the institution from which they came.

The impact of these practices on the potential for high quality instructional content can't be overstated. The development of more sophisticated forms of digital learning such as personalized instruction driven by analytics, immersive gaming, or the use of rich media, to name but a few possibilities, almost always require a team of specialists, longer development schedules, and considerably more funding than is available in the current approach. Placing the burden on lone educators with minuscule (or non-existent) funding and who are not hired for their strengths in instructional media development is neither logical, nor fair. But more to the point, it's a lost opportunity to leverage high-quality course design to drive improvements in learning outcomes.

As a result, students across North America are frequently presented with online courses consisting of repurposed classroom PowerPoint slides, home-made graphics, and an incoherent pastiche of free content from the Net – each element developed for different purposes and pitched at different levels. Worst of all, these online learning experiences are being developed without deep knowledge of the science of how people actually learn most effectively – knowledge, ironically, that universities themselves have generated.

Drivers of Change to Authoring and Content Quality

In 2016, though, a number of factors are converging that appear set to reconfigure the role and status of high-quality instructional content and, consequently, the activities involved in course authoring and content acquisition. The more pertinent factors include:

Quality Course Design and Competitive Differentiation

The number of online and blended courses continues produced by North American institutions continues to climb rapidly. Real choice for online students leads to real competition between institutions. And competition requires differentiation. Increasing the instructional quality and production value of online course content is a relatively obvious and tangible means of responding to the demands of competition.

Beyond Instructionally Agnostic Software

For much of online higher education’s short history, educational software has been used primarily as merely as a cost effective means of distributing repurposed classroom materials. But new, more advanced forms of instructional software and content are finally emerging which have instructional strategies built into them. These applications have the capacity to improve and scale effective instructional practices, helping educators do more with limited resources – such as providing each student with personalized feedback on their progress.

Increased Transparency

The Internet is making it easier for instructional materials – normally kept out of reach behind password-protected sites – to be available to people outside the institution. The most obvious example of this trend is OER (open educational resources) and its’ offspring, MOOCs. The trend puts a core activity of the institution – its teaching and teachers – on display in unprecedented ways, opening up the institution and its personnel to evaluation and direct comparison with other institutions. Competition between institutions will continue to materialize as more content and activity becomes publicly available.

Consumer-education apps crossover

Educators are turning to consumer applications, such as Facebook, WordPress, and others to deliver their online courses. The quality, functionality, and ease of use of these applications, will set new standards for content that will be difficult to meet through in-house efforts in universities.

Media Company Investment in Edtech

There is growing interest in digital higher education among traditional media companies, including News Corp. (Amplify), New York Times (The Learning Network), The Washington Post (Kaplan Inc.), Bertelsmann AG (Brandman University), and Condé Nast (Condé Nast College of Fashion and Design). While many in education bristle at this trend, these corporations bring deep experience in packaging and delivering information-related products with high quality design that will further raise the bar for quality in instructional quality.

Rising Use of Apps

The share of internet traffic handled by native applications – particularly in mobile devices – continues to grow faster than browser-based traffic. Due in part to the superior user experience afforded by applications.

These six factors are serving to raise the bar for instructional content in online higher education. Colleges and universities are responding, albeit slowly, by relying more heavily on packaged content solutions and directing more funds to in-house content development processes and resources.

References

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