Online Higher Education – Moving From Ordinary to Extraordinary

A Position Paper on Online Pedagogy Innovation

Part 2: Theory or Practice – Where is the Problem?

Fall 2013

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report poses the question: Can online higher education go from ordinary to extraordinary?

Why is this report important? Online higher education has been very successful in terms of perceived convenience compared to the traditional classroom, as well as with respect to access for underrepresented groups and stimulating career-oriented programming. Online has been much less successful on tougher objectives that ultimately matter most to students and policymakers – transformative pedagogy, compelling outcomes in terms of both quality and quantity, and substantial reduction of instructional costs.

This report is a guide for those interested in turning greater attention to these tougher objectives, starting with online pedagogy. Indeed, schools active online cannot ignore these tougher objectives. Simply offering online programs is no longer a differentiator. Throwing vast sums at marketing is not an option for most schools and offers diminishing returns from a savvier consumer. Trying to compete on convenience and flexibility, amid hundreds of schools touting the same message, is not a winning formula. Features that schools position as distinctive – career programs, student support services, an adult-friendly environment, practitioner faculty, and a well-known parent institution – are now commonplace. But with respect to pedagogy, the student experience, outcomes, and cost reduction – the things that matter most to students and policymakers – the landscape is wide open. There is huge potential for schools here, but complexities and sensitivities loom.

The main focus of this report is pedagogy but is also relevant for cost reduction and outcomes.

The report is available in three parts:

- ▶ **Part 1:** State of Play – Online Pedagogy at Leading Schools
- ▶ **Part 2:** Theory or Practice – Where is the Problem?
- ▶ **Part 3:** Map of the New Vendor Universe – Introducing the Eduventures *Class of 2013*

THEORY OR PRACTICE: WHERE IS THE PROBLEM?

Exceptions aside, given the recent maturation of the online higher education market – with hundreds of schools jockeying for position, overall higher education enrollment down, a sustained weak economy, and the distraction of MOOCs and other alternatives – the lack of pedagogic specificity and distinctiveness across leading online schools is a major problem.

But what caused this situation? The problem is not lack of clarity or consistency in the literature on online pedagogic good practice. Indeed, online learning is widely positioned as bound by the same "rules" as pedagogy generally. Delivery mode is a pedagogic variable, but pedagogic success largely transcends delivery mode. This argument has aided mainstream acceptance of online learning.
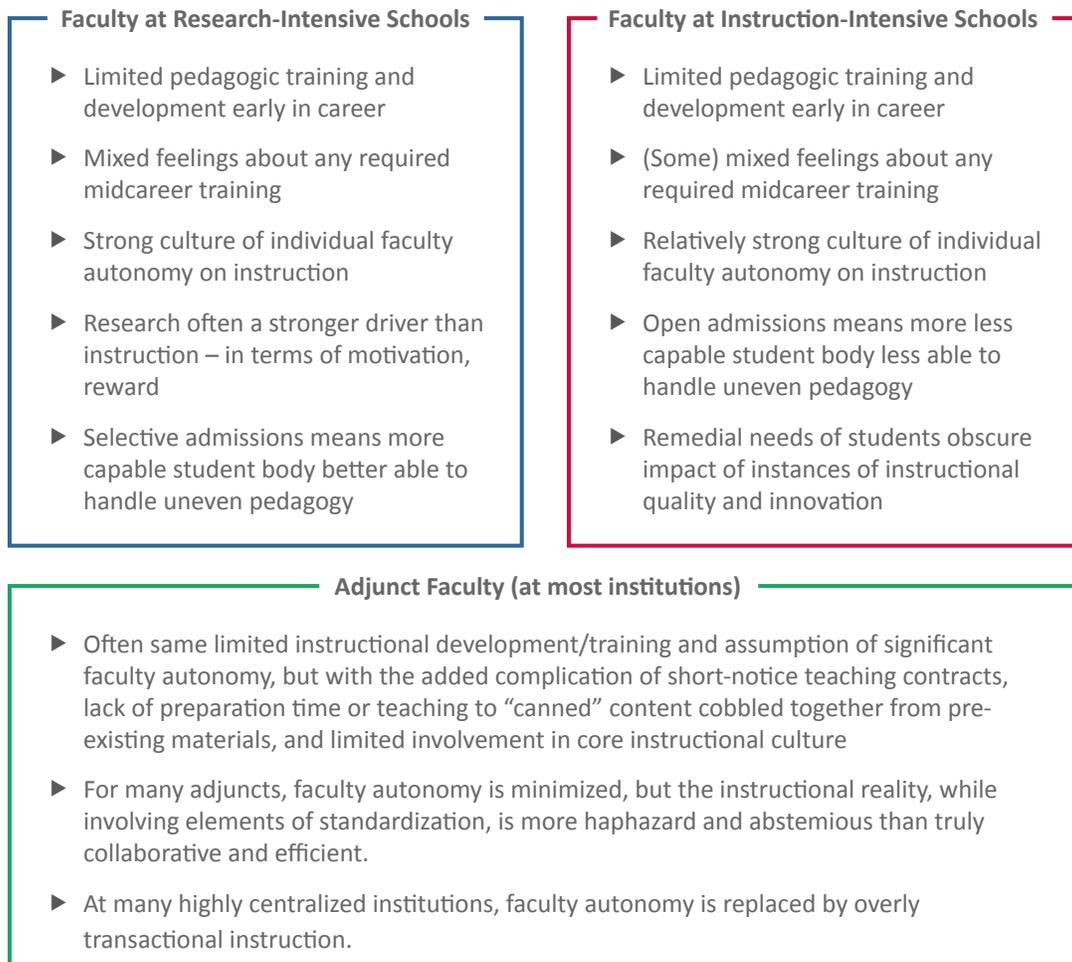
It may be helpful to distinguish the "strategy" of online pedagogy from the "tactics." The former refers to high-level principles, and the latter, tools of implementation. At the "strategy" level, online pedagogy, and pedagogy generally, consists of:

- ▶ Clear expectations – with some student input.

- ▶ The value of context – academic, professional, cultural, and personal.

- ▶ Use of a range of activities (reading, writing, discussion, experimentation, hands-on), more or less structured as appropriate.

- ▶ The value of peer learning.

- ▶ Balance between tutor-led, group, and independent learning.

- ▶ Recognition that individual students prefer to learn in different ways and have learning strengths and weaknesses (and for tutors to both accommodate and stretch students).

- ▶ The value of regular and constructive feedback.

- ▶ A close connection between what is most valued in a program of study (e.g., particular content and activities) and what is formally assessed.

- ▶ The opportunity to "make sense" of what has been learned through personal or professional application.

- ▶ Some form of official recognition of achievement.

It is hard to imagine significant departure among researchers, schools, or even disciplines from this high-level description. Progress has been made on high-level accounts of "*21st century skills*" and general postsecondary outcomes (e.g., the Lumina Foundation's *Degree Qualification Profile* and the National Research Council's *Education for Life and Work* report). It is at the "tactical" level that things get more complicated. This is where the structural and cultural issues, referenced in Part 1, come into play.

The choice and application of tools/approaches to implement the pedagogic consensus are shaped by structural and cultural forces deeply ingrained in U.S. higher education and higher education generally. Figure 2 summarizes the situation:

Figure 2. Higher Education Pedagogy – Structure, Norms, Culture

Faculty at Research-Intensive Schools

- Limited pedagogic training and development early in career
- Mixed feelings about any required midcareer training
- Strong culture of individual faculty autonomy on instruction
- Research often a stronger driver than instruction – in terms of motivation, reward
- Selective admissions means more capable student body better able to handle uneven pedagogy

Faculty at Instruction-Intensive Schools

- Limited pedagogic training and development early in career
- (Some) mixed feelings about any required midcareer training
- Relatively strong culture of individual faculty autonomy on instruction
- Open admissions means more less capable student body less able to handle uneven pedagogy
- Remedial needs of students obscure impact of instances of instructional quality and innovation

Adjunct Faculty (at most institutions)

- Often same limited instructional development/training and assumption of significant faculty autonomy, but with the added complication of short-notice teaching contracts, lack of preparation time or teaching to "canned" content cobbled together from pre-existing materials, and limited involvement in core instructional culture
- For many adjuncts, faculty autonomy is minimized, but the instructional reality, while involving elements of standardization, is more haphazard and abstemious than truly collaborative and efficient.
- At many highly centralized institutions, faculty autonomy is replaced by overly transactional instruction.

Various pedagogic consequences stem from the situation outlined in Figure 2:

- **Teaching Alone.** Vast majority of faculty develop and teach classes largely in isolation, with external guidance and review confined to broad principles, as-needed technical assistance, limited sampling and crisis-only intervention.
- **Consistent and Inconsistent.** There is a curious mix of consistency and inconsistency at the tactical level of online pedagogy. Courses often "look" the same even across disciplines, structured by a common LMS and instructional design basics, but then particular tools and approaches will appear seemingly at random in some courses and not others. The situation is often that online pedagogy is both consistent

and inconsistent where least helpful – consistent where the value is no more than foundational, and inconsistent where unevenness of good practice is most problematic.

▸ **Third-Party Content.** Use of third-party content is almost always confined to a textbook and links to video or audio resources that decorate the core course developed in-house.

▸ **Passive Consumer.** The student as consumer typically has done little self-reflection on personal or general pedagogic good practice and is generally a relatively passive and uncritical participant.

Figure 2 and its consequences are a core explanation for the gap between the pedagogic consensus and inconsistent student experience and performance. Of course, a much larger higher education system with many underprepared students is a cause of substandard system performance, but "student" and "faculty" realities need to be better aligned. Sustaining a fundamentally artisan faculty model in a mass higher education system is a mismatch, weakening quality, inflating cost, and underserving students.

Eduventures is not the only one voicing this perspective. A recent white paper from the *Next Generation Learning Challenges*, an effort to scale education innovation funded by the Gates Foundation, noted that new instructional models "…can be difficult to put in place when the prevailing culture is built on traditional roles. In higher education, the independent nature of much faculty work can be a barrier" (p12).

The excesses of faculty autonomy are also seen in the gap between open educational resource (OER) creation and adoption and the recent change of direction by the National Center for Academic Transformation (N-CAT). The past decade witnessed many efforts to build repositories of OERs designed to improve quality, rationalize production, and lower costs for schools and students. MIT Opencourseware, OER Commons, and the work of the Saylor Foundation are good examples. However, a recent report found low levels of awareness and adoption of OER among U.S. colleges and universities (BSRG, 2012). Mere availability of high-quality instructional resources at little or no cost must contend with a dominant faculty culture where sharing and reuse is far from the norm. Part 3 of this report discusses of Lumen Learning, a new firm founded by OER pioneers wanting to kick-start much wider adoption.

The N-CAT is a non-profit effort to promote course redesign in higher education, targeting wider student access, improved student performance, and lower cost. Since the 1990s, N-CAT has worked with dozens of higher education institutions to spread a methodology defined by consistent use of certain high-impact pedagogy practices aided by automation via online technology. N-CAT's founder, Carol Twigg, recently announced that N-CAT's focus will move away from the institutional pilot programs it has been known for. To quote a newsletter:

> *We at N-CAT know that productivity in higher education can be improved substantially with no diminution in quality – and we have proved it. Many say we are the only ones in higher education showing how it can be done. We say that's because we are the only ones in higher education who want to do it and, unfortunately, the only ones who seem to know how to do it.* (Twigg, 2013)

Dr. Twigg goes on to lament the relative lack of adoption of N-CAT's model, despite ample evidence of success, lip service to the need for reform, and large amounts of seed funding. Dr. Twigg blames the absence of a shared understanding of the problem, saying many institutional leaders and faculty still assume that increased productivity can only lower quality. N-CAT will now dedicate itself to achieving a shared understanding consistent with its past work. Again, methodology, resources, and evidence are no match for structure and culture.

In online higher education, the ultimate consequence of this culture of excessive faculty autonomy is the inhibition of refined, cumulative, research-led "tactical" online pedagogy across departments and schools. The near-absence of team-teaching, leverage of third-party content, and in-depth instructional preparation and review norms makes it very difficult for schools to build deep pedagogic efficacy, consistency, and brand online. It is telling that many schools sampled in Part 1 state that the online student experience varies by program and faculty. Total uniformity is obviously not consistent with disciplinary differences and faculty expertise, but it is far from clear that the extent of inconsistency is optimal. Ironically, the lack of large-scale studies of online course and program efficacy, sometimes cited as a reason for caution, is caused in part by the lack of pedagogical consistency within and among schools that would permit more ambitious methodology.

Figure 3 contrasts the standard view of the relationship between faculty autonomy and quality of instruction, with three alternative perspectives.

Figure 3. Does Mass Higher Education Need to Move Beyond Faculty Artisan?
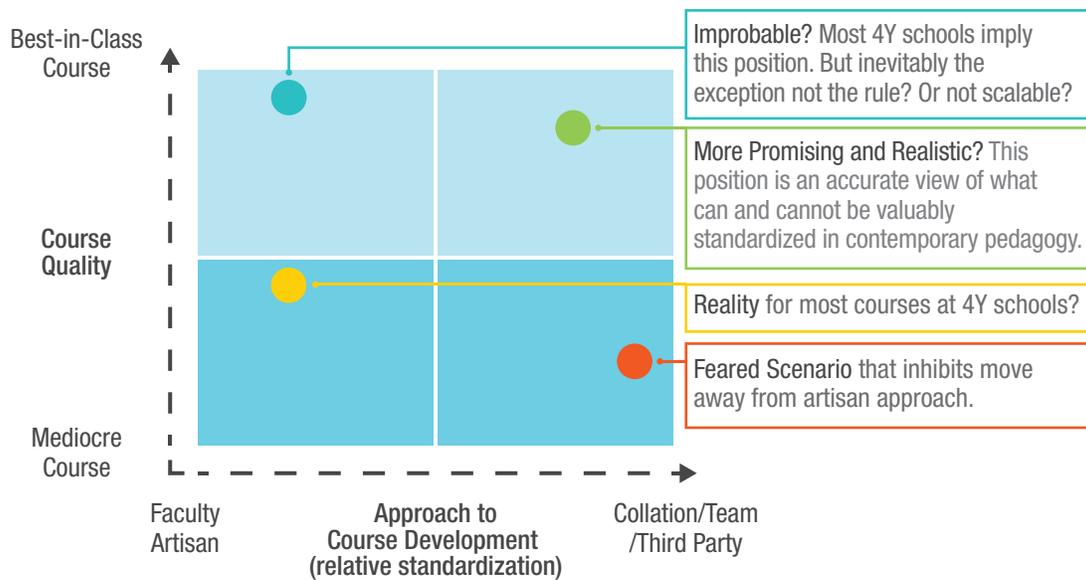
In Figure 3, the blue circle represents how schools conventionally position the value of strong faculty instructional autonomy – i.e., that independent, expert faculty produce best-in-class courses, online or otherwise. This assertion rings hollow in a mass higher education system. It seems improbable that all 1.5 million faculty in the United States are equally best-placed to play such a central role in the development and delivery of their courses. To assert this is to imply that greater collaboration among faculty, both within and among institutions, cannot produce, on average, a better-quality student experience and

greater efficiency, which seems illogical. In the days of few institutions, a small profession, large geographies, and cruder mass communication, faculty as artisan was both reasonably logical and practical, but today none of those features and therefore none of those constraints apply. In reality, the current model is represented, on average, by the yellow circle – i.e., that very high faculty autonomy typically results in middling quality, failing to take sufficient advantage of best-in-class materials and tools inevitably found at relatively few schools and firms.

The red circle represents fear of the consequences of greater collaboration – i.e., some sort of dumbing-down to mediocrity – but this often represents more assertion to influence debate against change than evidence of past missteps.

The green circle should be the aspiration to strive for best-in-class materials, automate where appropriate, and enable reuse both by students in their own time and by different faculty. The general rule should be that the more standard the content, and the less "prestigious" the institution and faculty, the more standardized the online course should be. There will always be significant value in live input from dedicated faculty. Standardization cannot anticipate every vicissitude of the individual classroom. The green circle represents sustained faculty autonomy but confined to instructional elements that cannot productively be prepackaged largely from third-party materials, cannot be automated, and cannot be conducted as a team.

This is not to suggest that third parties should somehow dictate how or what colleges and universities teach online. Rather, colleges and universities should take responsibility to review current online course production, map availability of best-in-class open education or commercial resources, and consider scope for judicious automation and team development and delivery. Each school needs to better blend the best of external content with a local but institution-wide twist. Pedagogic differences between institutions should be deliberate and strategic, not the result of ultimately random inconsistency.

The broader benefits of greater standardization include:

- ▶ Improved pedagogic transparency, surfacing weak points and prompting faster and better solutions.
- ▶ Greater scope for departments and institutions to build more tangible, meaningful pedagogic brands, not least online.
- ▶ Improved ability to scale at lower cost.

CONCLUSION FROM PART 2

There is no lack of consensus as to what constitutes sound pedagogy, regardless of delivery mode. The problem is rather implementation. Conceptions of faculty expertise and institutional autonomy, inherited from a more elite past, inhibit the extent to which schools and instructors can take best advantage of good practice. As a result, most online students are not able to gain much benefit from isolated islands of excellence typically defined by the innovations of individual faculty. Schools waste considerable time and money reinventing mediocre variants of common classes, rather than using best-in-class open educational resource or collating efforts across faculty and institutions.

Too often, faculty spend excessive time on aspects of course development and delivery that might be better collated or automated, and as a result are able to devote too little time to live, in-the-moment, idiosyncratic, individualized pedagogy and support essential to a rounded student experience and for which technology or collation cannot substitute. Unless online higher education confronts this cultural conundrum, or rather until individual departments and schools make different decisions about the means to innovate, much strategy will prove lackluster.

In Part 3, the report turns to the recent flowering of new vendors focused on online pedagogy. Can this new class of companies help schools take online to the next level?

ABOUT EDUVENTURES

Eduventures is the industry leader in research, data, consulting, and advisory services for the higher education community. For 20 years, college and university leaders and education industry providers have looked to Eduventures for innovative and forward-looking ideas, for insights into best practices, and for help with making the strategic and operational decisions vital to their success. More about Eduventures can be found at www.eduventures.com.