

# THE CHANGING ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT: WHAT ROLE WILL EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PLAY IN THE SURVIVAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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## INTRODUCTION

Our special session will look at the rapid changes in traditional face-to-face academe and discuss the role that experiential learning should play in academe in the future.

## THE PROBLEM

Articles with titles such as “The Disposable Academic” (*Economist* 2010 a) and “Will America’s Universities Go the Way of Its Car Companies?” (*Economist* 2010b) present cause to speculate about the academe which many of us have experienced for some time. Many of us grew up with the “Sage on the Stage” model (Bowen 2102), and some of us have not adjusted to students having more access to knowledge on their smart phones than can be obtained from the former receptacles of knowledge, the instructor and the library. The f2f format known to even the most creative ABSELeers over the years is being threatened by new technological opportunities, rapidly

increasing costs, and a movement from teaching the elite to the responsibility for training and retraining workers throughout their careers (*Economist* 2014). Hall (2004) noted that the three pillars of traditional instruction are fixed location, fixed time, and fixed learning pace. When viewing students, especially non-traditional ones, as the consumers of educational offerings, one has to admit that new online technologies can provide much more convenience at a far cheaper cost. At the extreme, consider the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) being offered by world-class American universities such as Harvard, MIT, and Stanford; those of us in ABSEL believe profoundly in the value of education, making it hard to argue against the provisions of access to great scholars to individuals around the world who have never had such access before.

Dire predictions have been made for Academe as most of us in ABSEL know it. Clayton Christensen at the Harvard Business School, who coined the phrase “disruptive innovation,” predicts that, in 15 years, half of all universities will be out of business (Heckinger 2013). Sebastian Thrun, a professor at Stanford University and co-founder of the online MOOC Udaci-

ty, told Wired that he expects there to be only 10 universities in 50 years (Leckart 2013). Koh (2013) predicts that the cuts will be seen by non-elite colleges, leaving f2f venues to the elite only. This does not bode well for ABSELErs, most of whom are employed by good (but not elite) schools.

## SESSION COVERAGE

The session will start with a short review of the changing environment that academe is facing. This introduction will include a brief discussion of recent popular press materials such as “The Future of Universities: The Digital Degree” (*Economist* 2014) and reactions to updated teaching formats (Bowen 2012). We will then focus on the economic environment facing colleges and universities, and pressures to reduce costs by, in many cases, implementing technologies that deviate from the traditional f2f approach. The strengths and weaknesses of online education and traditional f2f education will be presented, followed by a discussion of the challenges possibly presented by MOOCs. Finally, after we have hopefully made the case for the necessity of experiential learning regardless of the pedagogical format, we will discuss the fit of experiential learning with the various formats and make the case strong attention to experiential learning will have a profound effect on the nature of academe in the future.

## THE ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT FACING ACADEME

As noted in the introduction, projections of the future of our costly traditional f2f format are not very optimistic. American universities will soon receive more funds from tuition than from government, and tales of the rapid increase in tuitions (at a rate faster than medical costs) are common. Student debt is now \$1.2 Trillion (*Economist* 2011). Almost 80% of American students commute (live off campus) (Bowen 2012). MBA applications are dropping rapidly at non-elite (top 15) schools; it is a well-known secret that MBA programs have been cash cows for most universities for decades.

This environment is putting severe pressures on academic administrators to cut costs. The growth of online education reflects these pressures. Online education can reduce the fixed costs of the university (the number of faculty, buildings, parking, restrooms, etc.), and provides much time and place convenience (Heckinger 2013). A more extreme use of technology is the consideration of offering course credit for completion of MOOCs, and some universities have tried that. The Vice Chancellor of San Jose University will discuss the MOOC experience there and provide an evaluation of the process. Other cost cutting approaches that have been suggested (*Economist* 2011) include not charging students for the costs of the university’s research function (Terwiesch & Ulrich (2014) estimate the cost of creating a top tier journal article to be \$200,000 per author), mimicking Europe with three-year undergraduate programs and one-year MBAs, fewer tenure-track faculty and more adjuncts, larger class sizes, and increased teaching loads. These latter alternatives are not expected to be greeted with enthusiasm by faculty.

Using improved technology to make education more effi-

cient (though not necessarily more effective) appears to be administrators’ preferred modus operandi. However, the newer technologies also have some warts. They provide far less opportunity for face to face interaction, which many faculty members see as a critical element to undergraduate and graduate instruction. Surveys of faculty indicate that most faculty members prefer to teach in f2f environments; to some extent this may well reflect a status quo effect. However, studies of those who have taught both in classrooms and online indicate preferences for f2f teaching.

The existing academic system receives criticisms beyond its high costs and inconvenience in terms of time and place. Evidence indicates that there is little improvement from sophomore to senior in terms of critical thinking (NPR Staff 2011). One issue is that students study far less in 2015 than they did decades ago. In 1961 students spent 24 hours/week studying compared to 11 in 2011 (*Economist* 2010b). Part of this can be attributed to faculty, some of whom respond to research pressures by requiring less from students. Approximately 50% of students say that they have not had one class that required 20 pages of writing (NPR Staff 2011). In his evaluation of online education, Jenkins (2013) stated, “When our primary objective becomes making degrees as cheap as possible, rather than providing the best education possible, we’re missing the mark as educators and doing no good for the future of our students or our nation.” Thus we suggest that one should investigate how the currently-dominant f2f mode of education can be made more effective prior to moving to predominantly online modes of education. As Bowen (2012) noted, we need to adjust our classroom to focus less on content and more on topics such as applying material to new contexts, developing intellectual curiosity, challenging personal beliefs, growing oral and written communication skills, and reflecting on the significance of content.

How well traditional academe is providing the benefits suggested by Bowen above is arguable. So what are the benefits offered by traditional academe that surpass those offered by online education? The college experience provides great memories for most alumni. The *Economist* (2014) referred to this experience as creating social capital: students learn how to debate, how to present themselves, make contacts, and roll joints. An even crasser perspective is that traditional college students spend their “young and stupid” years in the relatively benign atmosphere of a college campus, as opposed to the “mean streets” of urban-world where silly antics may result in far greater repercussions.

The traditional system has the advantages of status and credentials at this point in time, but Bowen (2012) notes that those advantages are likely to be only temporary. A more meaningful advantage is that practical skills such as social, emotional, and behavioral competencies are much harder to learn online than in classrooms (Sternberg 2013; Talbert 2013). We argue that classroom settings provide easier access to the efficient “hands on” environment needed for successful application of most experiential learning pedagogies. The panel will discuss this issue, as well as successful applications of such approaches both online (such as the inexpensive simulation games developed at Harvard) and in classrooms, and provide evaluations of their relative strengths and weaknesses.

The Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are attracting millions of students. For example, Coursera has drawn five million students so far (9% from Africa, 12% from India; Fowler 2013). One huge advantage is reduced cost. Terwiesch and Ulrich (2014) estimated costs of \$1513/student in the f2f MBA program at Wharton; the MOOC version cost \$32 per student. And the lectures are most often delivered by renowned scholars. However, MOOCs have not had dazzling success. Less than 10% of first-time MOOC subscribers finish their courses. Only half of those signing up even watch the first lecture (Biemiller 2013). Credentials are an issue; at this point in time, a Udacity certificate would not get you a cup of coffee (Kolowich 2013). However, with time, that may change if industry chooses to value such certificates in the hiring process. In general, Fowler (2013) reports that online students perform less well than f2f ones, and the gap is even wider among those with low GPAs, men, and African Americans. Thus, at this time, the feedback on MOOCs is quite mixed. The use of Super Text (chunked, short videos professionally designed) as described in Terwiesch and Ulrich (2014) will increase student interest levels and should lead to higher course completion rates. The place and time convenience advantages will clearly benefit non-traditional students globally. However, the roadblock caused by the lack of interaction provided by MOOCs (Fowler 2013) will limit greatly the acquisition of social capital. Early MOOC experiences led Udacity's Thrun to comment that students need more personalized support to use a university-level online course (Kolowich 2013). As noted earlier, the Vice Chancellor at San Jose State will discuss that university's experience with offering course credit for MOOCs, providing a much more vivid perspective of the process than the statistics reported above.

### EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING'S ROLE

What does this say about the role of experiential learning? Audacity's Thrun has said, "We need to rethink how to teach. Organizing the course around exercises and mental challenges is much more effective than around lectures" (Fowler 2013). It would seem to us that has been ABSEL's message for 40+ years. Maybe we have not preached that eloquently enough to have made a real difference, but given the challenges facing academe today, maybe the message will be far better received.

ABSEL has been discussing how to incorporate experiential learning with new technology for a long time; in fact, simulation gaming was at the forefront of technology when ABSEL was founded. As technology changed, many ABSElers have discussed the possible interfaces with online technologies (Fritzsche and Cotter 1992; Gold 2001; Gosen 2003; Hall and Dudley 2005; Smith 2005). But the efforts have been only marginally successful. The final part of our session will focus on what needs to be done both in terms of content/process and in terms of promotion of the need for these pedagogical alternatives.

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