MOOCs and other Fads:  
The State of Transforming Higher Education

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Executive Summary
In early 2013, we have moved into a different phase in the transformation of higher education. Educational leaders now recognize that the higher education model is broken. What’s new is that we are now in a phase where institutional leaders take stabs at, try, and test new ideas. It is also a phase where there are some ‘hits’ and lots of ‘misses,’ including fads that will be here today but gone tomorrow.

MOOCs are one of those fads. MOOCs fail at meeting the three requirements for transformation of higher education: pedagogy, finance and function. The biggest problem with MOOCs is pedagogical. MOOCs have a disastrous completion rate. One of the highly publicized Stanford MOOC courses had a 14% completion rate. This is heading in the wrong direction in terms of completion rates. And of course MOOCs have no sustainable financial model, and it is
unclear how MOOCs would function in a new model of higher education. But there are other fads being promoted:

- That the elite universities will lead the way with online learning
- That for-profits such as Mozilla Badges and the Khan Academy constitute education
- That educational institutions should merely be accreditation organizations
- That we can jump to learner analytics without starting with teacher analytics

And then there are real long-term changes being initiated, mostly by practitioners and innovators at the local level. These real long-term positive innovations include:

- Hybrid or blended courses
- Flipping the classroom
- Moving from text-based to multimedia online courses
- Open design classrooms and school buildings
- Grading based solely on learning and knowledge, rather than on behavior or gender characteristics and neurology
- Using cell phones in class…and many more.

Moving into this current phase of trial-and-error is overall positive. It means we have moved out of the phase in which educational leaders have to be convinced that we need to change.

We have not yet moved into the next phase, which will be discovering a comprehensive model for higher education in this century. That next phase will come soon, as by 2020 we will have a comprehensive new model for higher education.

The New Phase in Transforming Higher Education

Within a week, three people sent me an article about the latest idea for changing higher education. Three is a trend. In each case, my honest response was that the person who sent me the article was doing more and more exciting things in changing higher education than the ideas in the article.

What these articles illustrate is that we have moved into a different stage in the transformation of higher education. Innovators have been and will continue to develop innovations in education. What’s new is that this is the phase where institutional leaders, those who have been mainly on the sidelines so far, now take stabs at, try, and test new ideas. It is also a phase where there are some ‘hits’ and lots of ‘misses.’

Moving into this phase is positive overall. It means we have moved out of the phase in which educational leaders have to be convinced that we need to change.

It also tells me we have not yet moved into the next phase of discovering a comprehensive model for higher education in this century.

A Brief History of the 21st Century

To recap the history of the 21st Century, when a society moves into a new economic era, all of its institutions become obsolete and have to be transformed to meet the requirements of the new economic era.

So higher education is not alone in being ‘broken.’ It is not alone in its inability to be ‘fixed.’
And it is not alone in the process of being transformed into something very different - a new model if you will. All other institutions, from Wall Street to Wal-Mart, are also obsolete as they also were created to serve the last century - the Industrial Age.

Education went through this transformation exactly 100 years, when society moved from the agrarian age into the industrial age, so we have very good guide of how, and how fast, the transformation happens.

All of this transformation happens within a short period of time, between the start of the century and 1920/2020. It has to happen that quickly. Society and the generations of the new century cannot wait, cannot survive with obsolete and broken institutions.

The technological innovation is completed in the first decade, the reforming of the infrastructure and institutions in the second decade. We are now in the second decade.

Web-based online learning was created in the 1990s not too long after the invention of the World Wide Web by Tim Berners-Lee in 1992. And in last decade, just about every technological feature of online courses was created. While we will see gaming and simulations become more prevalent later in this decade, they were clearly invented in the last decade. In the last century, just about every invention had been made by 1911, with the exception of television (which was being worked on by 1920) and the questionable contribution of the atomic bomb.

With all of education, including higher education, in this century, the web is the driving force, both technologically and in its sheer power in changing values, behavior, the economics, the finances, and even the mission of education.

By 2008, educational leaders such as President Mark Yudoff of the University of California and Carolyn Martin, then Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, were saying that higher education was “broken.” The problems and challenges, such as boosting completion rates, are pretty clear now and pretty well-acknowledged by education leaders.

The solutions and the whole - a comprehensive model to replace the factory model of education - are not yet clear now.

Thus we have moved into the stage of trial and error, of stabs, tests and experiments. The solutions are and will continue to be discovered. But there will also be many fads and nonsucceses. There will be the steam-driven and electric cars. There will be the phonograph using cylinders. There will be DC as well as AC. There will be Esperanto. For every Henry Ford, there will be another 2,000 people whose ideas didn’t make it.

**Higher Education’s Drivers of Change**

In higher education, there are five main kinds of people driving change:

1. **Generation Y**, our students, ages 13 to 33 in 2013, who are creating most of the new practices in education as well as most of the inventions and economic transformations
2. **Business leaders**, people in the real world who have come to understand the new economy and
the requirements of higher education to meet the needs of business moving forward

3. **Early adopters**, those educational practitioners - both teachers and administrators - at the local level who first embrace and risk adopting new educational practices, sometimes even creating or enhancing them

4. **Innovators**, a motley and unorganized array of cutting-edge thinkers and pioneers in both the educational and for-profit sectors who create, build, write, speak, and consult

5. **Leaders**, those senior decision-makers in institutions and those who influence decision-makers in institutions

If one is still in the pyramid of higher education, one might reverse the numerals, with Leaders being at the top of the hierarchical pyramid and Gen Y students on the bottom; but that’s not really the order of how change happens. Change happens from the bottom up. The fact that leaders are talking and even taking action now is a sign that we are clearly in motion in transforming higher education. The fact that leaders are stabbing in the dark means we have not yet agreed on a new model.

The real change is coming from innovators, taking cues from the behavior and creations of Gen Y Students, with the encouragement of business and those real changes being put in practice by early adopters. Like discerning the future of the gas engine from the steam engine, the real changes occur along with the fads, the AOLs and Netscapes and MySpaces of higher education. Some fads may contain some long-lasting contributions. For others, there may actually not be a pony in there. Let’s look at the current buzz and trend concepts.

**Three Recent Articles**

The three articles:
  Kirschner’s article marks the end of the last phase, the phase of identifying that the model for higher education is broken and needs to be transformed.
  The article exemplifies the phase we are now in, the phase of trial and error, hits and misses.
  The new program is one of the trial-and-error programs being tested.

The three innovators who sent me the articles:
* Hugh Hammett, a Vice President of Empire State College, an institution that has been on the cutting edge of both proposing and implementing changes for several decades
* Les Howles, an online media expert at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, for my time and money the foremost expert on online media in the nation
* Julie Coates, my brilliant co-author and educational researcher who has been lead researcher
on our work in proposing a comprehensive model for education in the 21st century

Each one of these innovators is actually doing more than the high-profile educators with MOOCs and other fads.

And then there was a fourth item sent to me by a school teacher in San Antonio, a memo from the principal that evoked real excitement because it constitutes real change.

The Fad of MOOCs

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), the fad of the moment, fall into the category of stabbing in the dark. It is a long shot, as it has not yet succeeded pedagogically, has no business or financial model, and how it might function in a new model is ever so unclear.

Massive

I am not opposed to large online courses. In fact, in the original edition of Teaching Online in 2000, I predicted classes of 1,000 students. The notion was so heretical at the time, it distracted faculty from the other techniques and strategies of teaching online, and so it was left out of subsequent editions. But it’s there in the record.

For the record, only ten years ago the Executive Director of FIPSE, the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, the nation’s leading agency for educational innovation, stated quite firmly that the maximum number of students that should be allowed in an online course was 30. He was not alone. Everyone in higher education subscribed to this idea, and it was mandated by just about every institution until of course classes had more than 30 students and academic achievement did not decline, and in our study of online courses taught by Certified Online Instructors (COIs), academic achievement actually was slightly higher with larger online classes.

Not only did I support the notion of large online classes, I taught one. I will declare I taught the first MOOC, an online course for 1,500 faculty members in higher education about teaching online, conducted in 2000.

I argued then, and now, that there is the potential for new concepts and ideas that arises, mainly collaboratively, from a larger number of students than can be achieved with a smaller class.

I totally agree with a recent MOOC professor of Stanford about the benefits of MOOCs for the instructor and the institution.

But the MOOC highlighted by National Public Radio had, according to its Stanford instructor, a completion rate that I figured is 14%. If we strung MOOC courses together and gave a degree (MOOCs are noncredit), the completion rate would be in the single digits. This is not making progress. This is going backwards.

MOOCs inherently have low instructor contact and interaction. “What’s frustrating in a MOOC is the instructor is not as available because there are tens of thousands of others in the class,” noted another online expert, Dr. Ray Schroeder of the University of Illinois in “The Year of the MOOC,” The New York Times, November 2, 2012.
This is the fatal pedagogical flaw for MOOCs as they stand now. The completion rate is so low that it damages, rather than improves, the completion rates for higher education.

**Free Online Courses**

The problem with MOOCs from a business model point of view is that there is no business model. We have been through this before. In the 1970s, those of us in the Free University Movement debated whether Free University courses should be free, or should have fees. No one won the philosophical debate, but what happened is that all but a handful of free universities (think “continuing education” programs) had to charge fees to survive financially.

There was never any difference in learning discerned, but obviously there was no sustainable financial model for free courses.

This is the fatal business model flaw with MOOCs as they stand now.

**Not Functional**

And then there is a third reason why MOOCs, as they stand now, are not viable. They do not have a clear role in a new model for higher education. They do not fit. There’s no explanation of how they get integrated with face-to-face or hybrid courses, student counseling, SMOOCs (small open online courses), majors, graduate work, and so on.

Some other fads:

**Inferior Courses from the Elite**

Related but not exclusive to MOOCs is the fad for the Ivy League and other elite colleges and universities to make some of their online courses available to a wider audience.

As soon as MIT put up one of its online courses, a professor from the British Open University derided the MIT course as being of inferior quality, raising the issue of branding, transparency and the distinct possibility that the elite universities could be exposed for such inferior course and teaching quality.

In a face-to-face course, it’s easy to hide inferior teaching. In the online world, it’s really hard to hide inferior teaching. If the elite universities really have elite online teaching, step up and show us so the rest of us can adopt these superior teaching techniques.

**For-Profits Faking Education**

Another fad is for-profits faking education. One example is Mozilla Badges; another is the Khan Academy.

Kudos to Salman Khan for creating 3,600 micro lectures that are excellent content objects - discrete and succinct learning aids or tools. But a content object, or a series of content objects, is not a course, not a curriculum, and clearly not an “academy.” Webster says an academy is a school or association of scholars or a place of higher learning.

For-profits are continually trying to gain credibility with learners by posing as educational institutions and trying to gain the credentials to assist in the promotion of their for-profit mission.

The reality is that the general public values nonprofit educational institutions far above the for-
profit educational ventures and misadventures. For-profits periodically pioneer new educational formats and designs. But for-profits sole concern, which they are legally bound to place above all else, is profit. Profit in the education sector can be had from the top 20% of high-earning citizens. But in the education world there is no profit from serving citizens in the bottom 80% of wealth. Christopher Whittle tried with K-12 schools, and failed. The University of Phoenix has probably peaked, growing only by tapping into the federal government’s student loan and grant subsidies, as long as politicians ignore the for-profit’s miserable default and graduation rates.

**Educational Institutions Become Merely Credentialing Institutions**

One concept is that educational institutions drop or diminish their teaching and learning role, and instead focus on their role as a credentialing institution.

Another take on this is that business or the private sector creates a credentialing role, taking it away from educational institutions.

Both concepts are fads.

Educational institutions will not diminish their teaching and learning roles because every study shows that the most important factor in a person’s learning is the teacher. And teaching, unless it is heavily subsidized by governments and taxpayers, is not profitable as a stand-alone business except for a few niche audiences and niche subjects.

The private sector has no credibility, will have no credibility, and should not have any credibility in credentialing. Mozilla Badges will not be replacing educational institutions. The general public, and not even the for-profit sector itself, will accept credentialing from a for-profit whose sole mission, by law, is profit. The majority of Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs) will be credentialed by a nonprofit. The public trusts government with public and personal safety and health. And CNA certification, like many other certifications for low-paying but important jobs and occupations, may not be profitable.

What is not a fad is the direction towards a new better measurement of learning, and thus credentialing. The time-based Carnegie Unit or Student Hour is now obsolete. It has so many problems, it is no longer relevant. One of those problems is the lack of transferability.

The new better measurements of learning will be outcome-oriented and will also have transferability capabilities.

**The Three Requirements for Transformation**

There are three requirements for any innovation to contribute to real lasting change in higher education:

1. **Pedagogically**, it has to work. That is, it has to actually improve student learning.
2. **Financially**, it has to work. It has to be feasible and financially sustainable.
3. **Functionally**, it has to contribute to a new comprehensive model. It cannot be a fragment, an isolated activity, it has to fit in and be an integral part of a larger new model.
The Proulx Article

The Proulx article illustrates the current phase, a muddled mix of trial and error, hit and miss. Here’s an analysis of his main points.

1. Growth in Online Education will be particularly strong In the Top Tier.

The “top tier” lags so far behind community colleges and state universities in online learning that if you measure “growth” as a percentage, anything the elite universities do will be a quantum leap for them. One of my alma maters is the third-ranked liberal arts college in the nation, offering zero online courses as of today.

LERN provides the leading certification for online faculty in higher education, the Certified Online Instructor (COI), and the numbers of faculty being trained from “the top tier” are very small compared to community college and state university faculty.

Growth desperately needs to be strong in the top tier universities if they are to remain relevant in this century, but let’s not imply or create the impression that any online leadership is going on from the elite universities.

2. Expect to See More Innovation Around “Flipping the Classroom.”

The Flipped Classroom is one of the truly wonderful educational concepts that has emerged in the last year or so. It is one of the possibilities that hybrid (sometimes called mixed or web-enhanced) courses make feasible. Some educators use the term to mean the same educational process as hybrid, mixed or web-enhanced classes. But for a number of K-12 teachers, flipping the classroom means the student listens to the instructor’s lecture or presentation or other content outside of the classroom and classroom time, and then the teacher devotes more of the classroom time to assisting students doing their homework, classwork and assignments, thus helping them learn more. The distinction is that homework is done in the classroom, not at home, thus “flipping” homework and information transfer.

This meaning of the Flipped Classroom originated with K-12 teachers. And K-12 teachers, not higher education faculty, are embracing it. As someone who teaches hundreds of faculty members in higher education every year and visits campuses all over North America, I can tell you the Flipped Classroom is light years away in andragogical development for the faculty. It is a dream I and others share that faculty will focus more on helping students learn and less on teaching content. The Flipped Classroom will not become trendy in higher education in 2013, although I fervently hope I am wrong.

Shifting higher education from pedagogy to andragogy is a long-term project with prospects that are not a matter of when, but if. Elementary school teachers are already more concerned about their students than their content, and that’s where the action is for the Flipped Classroom. To suggest the Flipped Classroom will be embraced by the nation’s professors in higher education - this year - is wishful thinking.

3. Next Year’s Buzz Words are ‘Hybrid Program.’

This pronouncement illustrates how far behind the “top tier” colleges and universities are. Hybrid has been the buzz word for years now. Hybrid is a long-term solution to both improve
student learning and reduce higher education costs. Every in-person course on every campus should be hybrid. But the buzz has come and gone. The task now is moving beyond the early adopters and making hybrid the rule, the standard, the default for traditional F2F courses.

4. The Race Will Be On For A New Instructional Model.
   Again, the race for 21st century teaching methods and techniques has been on for several years now. But we are not yet at the stage where a new instructional “model” can be discussed. We know. Educational innovators are proposing models. And a few practitioners are testing models. But there’s no ‘race,’ very little discussion, and there will be huge attitudinal barriers before we get to models. Julie Coates and I have proposed such a model, and in our seminars for college presidents, they still have a hard time understanding and implementing 21st century teaching methods, much less models. Don Collins, a high school principal in New South Wales in Australia, has created a model for the physical layout of schools. It is a serious contender for the model of what schools will physically look like in this century. But we have not heard one American educator discuss, much less, implement, this model. When there is a ‘race,’ Collins’ model should win, but we need two to race, and right now U.S. education is hard pressed to bring one such model for a physical school layout to the starting line.
   By around 2016, new models will emerge and be tested. But, with any race, we ought not get the cart before the horse.

Learning Analytics
   Analyzing learner data will clearly become a regular ongoing activity to assist learners. Proulx writes, “The beauty of teaching analytics is that teachers will have real-time information on how students learn and can augment future plans accordingly.”
   But Proulx needs to focus more on the analytics of teachers, not students. Coates has pointed out that poor teaching will not yield valid learner analytics. One of the top three problems with online teachers is that they fail to sufficiently interact with their students, according to Dr. Mary Dereshiwsky of Northern Arizona University, creator of the concept of ‘continual engagement’ and author of the new book Continual Engagement: Fostering Online Discussion.
   Sometimes the instructor doesn’t even show up in his/her own online course, according to too many online students. Before we study learner analytics, we need to study teacher analytics and reduce the prevalent mistakes most online teachers make.

Flex Option
   Another recent development is the announcement of the University of Wisconsin’s new Flex Option program, a different model and delivery system for people to earn a degree from the University of Wisconsin.
   What is interesting about Flex Option is that it is a new program, not just a new concept or idea. It has many positive attributes. What is equally interesting is that it has a fatal flaw.
   The fatal flaw is that students have to take self-study online courses without a teacher or other students with whom to interact and learn from.
   All of the research shows that:
The teacher is the most important factor in a person’s learning. Without a teacher, there is not as much learning.

Self-study online courses have a high dropout rate, and thus low retention and completion rate. The Flex Option program is supposed to increase completion rates, not lower them.

The Flex Option program becomes one of those hit-or-miss tests and pilots, this one sponsored by a major research university - one of the top universities in the nation and in the world.

The Flex Option program could be fixed easily by offering online courses regularly (we suggest four times a year) with a teacher and interaction with other students. This is the model for successful online learning that has been implemented in thousands of colleges and universities over the past 12 years, so we know it produces positive results.

An Example of Real Change

MOOCs and other poorly conceived experiments will become fads. Other experiments with merit will be refined and improved. And then there is real change, where we just have to implement it.

One such example is this memo sent to teachers from Peter A. Martinez, Principal, MacArthur High School. With regard to grading, he tells his teachers, “We should always act in the best interest of our students, and I rely on your professionalism to ensure that we do the right thing. I believe that in cases such as this, we need to look beyond numeric averages and ask ourselves, ‘Did this student show mastery of the content?’ If a student can show mastery of at least 80% on a comprehensive exam, they probably should not fail just because they didn't turn in the homework. Remember that, no matter how difficult a student may have been, grades are not punitive measures and should not be used to ‘convey a message’ or ‘teach a lesson.’”

In the factory model of education, grading was based in large measure on behavior such as homework or attendance or even poor conduct. In the new model of education that will emerge by 2020, grading will be solely based on learning and knowledge. Here’s one educator at the local level taking a big step forward, a step that will have positive consequences beyond just his school.

Summary

We have moved into a different stage in the transformation of higher education. Innovators have been and will continue to develop innovations in education. What’s new is that this is the phase where institutional leaders, those who have been mainly on the sidelines so far, now take stabs at, try, and test new ideas. It is also a phase where there are some ‘hits’ and lots of ‘misses,’ including fads that will be here today but gone tomorrow.

Moving into this phase is positive overall. It means we have moved out of the phase in which educational leaders have to be convinced that we need to change.

We have not yet moved into the next phase, which will be discovering a comprehensive model for higher education in this century. That next phase will come soon, as by 2020 we will have a comprehensive new model for higher education.

For more on LERN’s work with online learning and faculty development, see [www.TeachingOntheNet.org](http://www.TeachingOntheNet.org)