

The New Learning Environment is Personal

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In a traditional sense the learning environment is qualified as the institutional setting for the teaching and learning to take place. This comprises the students, the teachers, management, the services and all the buildings, the classrooms, the equipment, the tools and laboratories that constitute the social and physical environment. This ignores the fact that learning is not confined to the institution, but is taking place all the time and everywhere also in connection to the institutional curriculum and even more so in an interconnected world. The factory model of mass instruction that worked fine for ages cannot cope with the rapidly changing landscape of higher education (HE) due to the increasing demand for HE, the changing technology, the changing expectations of the students, the demands of the global workplace and the Europe 2020 ambition to become a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy (EU, 2013). Although most institutions are trying to preserve their legacy model, a good number feel forced to review their educational policy and to date most schools are involved in what can be labeled as 'reengineering the learning environment'. This chapter wants to augment the discussion on the characteristics of the 'new learning environment' and the consequences for higher education (HE).

The learning environment in transition

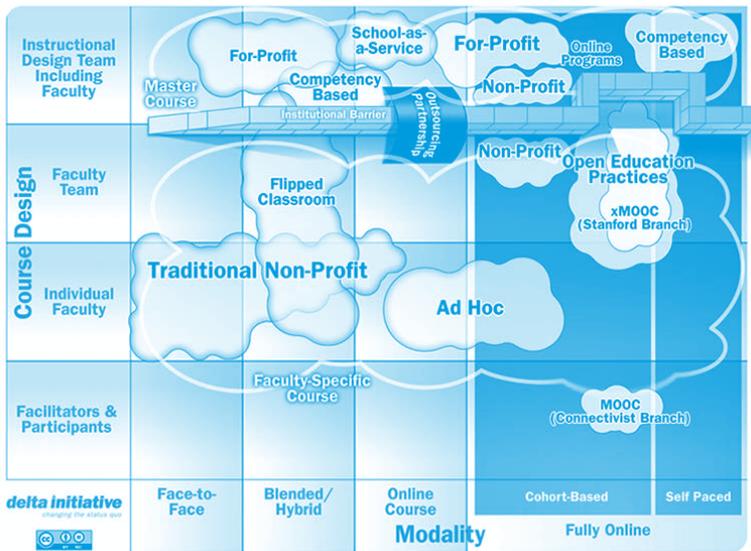
As written before in this book, institutions are experimenting or actually moving to blended and fully online environments and contribute their share to open educational resources while wrestling with something like Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), a recent and somehow overestimated expansion of the open education movement. The variety of environments that seem to develop is a challenge for the schools from an organisational and pedagogical perspective and certainly for the staff and students. There is not much research yet to proof that these innovations work well in general and if these are a viable solution for the challenges HE is facing. A side effect of this new interest in educational innovation and educational technology is the false public discussion about the dichotomy of traditional vs. online which ignores the variety of many residential learning environments versus online models and blended or hybrid approaches.

The three major developments in the learning environment perspective are, next to the existing residential one, blended learning, often qualified as a mix of classroom and online activities and seemingly the most common choice. Secondly fully online learning as being the online alternative for the traditional classroom bound courses and thirdly open education, with open educational resources, open educational courseware and the MOOCs as the learning environment that receives most attention to date. The reason is that MOOCs can be seen as an extension of existing online learning approaches, in terms of open access to courses and scalability. MOOCs aim to open up education and provide free access to university level courses for as many students as possible (Moropoulou & De Vries, 2013). No barriers there, but there are concerns about the pedagogy and quality of the numerous new delivery models and the lack of systematic research. So the question still is: can the new technologies and the new pedagogical insights help to make education more productive, serve more students, develop better courses and achieve a higher completion rate? The urgent question therefor is the level of readiness of institutions to cope with these changes. The pace of transformation in HE has been slow and most institutions have only started to scratch the surface of online learning, which is highly demanding and requires a dramatic change and therefor an innovation capacity rather uncommon in HE.

The characteristics and key trends

The emerging landscape of different learning environments is, omnipresent, changing rapidly and pervasive; therefore Hill (2012) tried to capture the primary models to reduce confusion in the public discussions. The overview in figure 1 shows the models ranging from face-to-face to fully online. A few observations: Course design has a very prominent role in depicting the models. In this landscape the primary models are: face-to-face, blended and hybrid, online courses and programmes, fully online programmes, educational partnerships, open education practices with the open educational resources and lately the different kind of MOOCs. The more traditional models require less teamwork to develop than the blended and online courses, for the simple reason that the face-to-face environment consists of an individual teacher with a fixed cohort of students.

FIGURE 1. Educational Delivery Models, 2012



In any of the other models, course design and flexibility are major issues. The face-to-face has no room for flexibility from an organisational point of view; the pedagogical flexibility though depends very much on the competencies of the teacher and is mostly ad hoc and not transferrable. The cohort based instructive MOOC is an online endeavour, cohort-based, but with a restricted flexibility on the organisational and pedagogical level. The for-profit and not for profit initiatives represent another dimension, which is rather new in the European context. The fact is that the competition is no longer just around the corner, but is vividly present on the internet 24/7.

So where are we going from here? Although we cannot predict the future the assumption can be made that an analysis of emerging educational technologies helps to identify key developments. The key features summarized below were published in the Educause Horizon Reports (Johnson, a.o. 2012, 2013) and is the result of a thorough discussion looking at short and long term developments:

Openness. Concepts like open content, open data, and open resources, along with notions of transparency and easy access to data and information is becoming a value.

The already mentioned MOOCs. These will be widely explored as alternatives and supplements to traditional university courses.

The global workplace demands skills from college graduates that are more often acquired from informal learning experiences than in universities.

There is an increasing interest in using new sources of data for personalizing the learning experience and for performance measurement.

The role of educators continues to change due to the vast resources that are accessible to students via the Internet.

These trends summarise what is happening in the increasingly busy world where learners must balance demands from home, work, school, and family leading to the need for flexible and mobile learning opportunities. People want easy and timely access not only to the information on the network, but also to tools, resources and real-time analysis and commentary. In other words people expect to be able to work, learn, and study whenever and wherever they want to. This coincides with the development of browser based software that is device independent, so you can communicate, collaborate and learn with an array of devices at the moments of need. The overwhelming change taking place is increasingly challenging our roles as educators. Information is everywhere and therefore sense-making and the ability to assess the credibility of information are paramount.

Conclusion: The new learning environment is personal

One of the consequences of living in this connected world is that students are no longer a student number that nicely fits in the cohort oriented organisational schedule, but is an individual demanding for active, student oriented learning approaches allowing to take control of how to engage and related to intrinsic motivation coming from their interest and their communities. The new learner is an increasingly self-directed individual connected with the surrounding world in numerous ways on a very personal base.

Therefore the future learning environment is personal.

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