

Higher Education Innovation & Open, Connected Learning: Back To The Future

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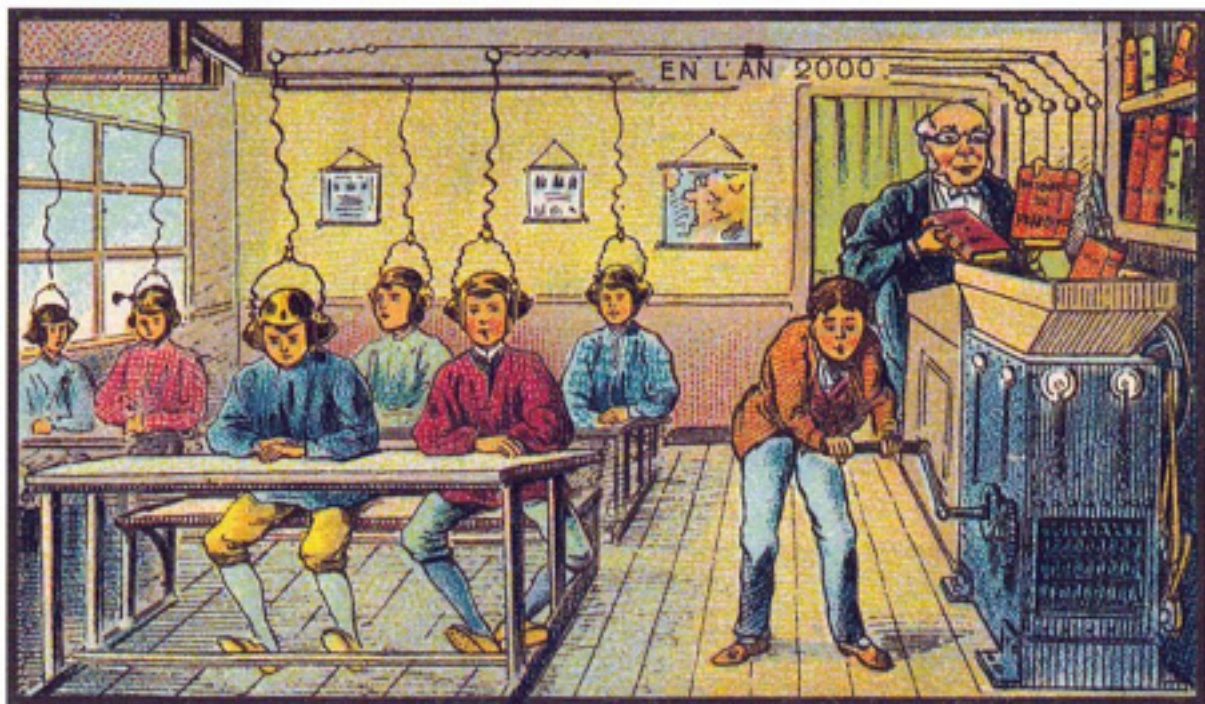
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This article focuses on three points. First, the myth of education consisting of delivery of content to students and the fact that their tabula rasa can be filled with knowledge. Second, that such delivery can be mechanized, perhaps even at large scale, and consequently can authorize the use of technology-powered narratives borrowed from vendors. Third, that part of said narrative leaves unsaid but nevertheless states that learning happens with little agency from students.

After detailing such issues I will show there exist proposals to solve the wicked dilemma of our Higher Education institutions, and will hopefully show that a huge innovation in itself would be going a little back in time and reclaim the power of the open Web and get inspired by its principles to produce open, connected education that effectively uses the Web as the revolutionary force that it can be.



At School

Innovation in Higher Education, at least in the US, has mythicized the robotic delivery of instruction. No matter how, the dominant narrative focuses on some content which must then be delivered appropriately to students. Failure to do so results in non learning. It is my opinion that this discourse takes out learning responsibility from students, who are, after all, namely, those who study. The studying part of the learning equation is thus removed from official language and the mythologic vision the student is left with is that she will learn without owning the process of learning. At the same time, all the attention goes to learning and not studying, as though learning happened just because conditions (method, environment, agents) are right and each plays its part well. There is so little “studying” going on in Colleges that “there is no compelling understanding among students of why they are there” (Riley 2011.) It seems as though there is no agency nor ownership of the learning process in our students—and neither are we being effective at enabling it.

The obvious conclusion is that this is a model completely centered around the instructor and the content *delivered*. There is no student being an agent of his own learning in this narrative. To make things worse, this model is reinforced by the spread of the so-called Learning Management Systems (LMS) over traditional education, given that traditional education has been converging towards e-learning and is now very much blended everywhere and has more and more functions and components moved to the Web.

Audrey Watters (2014) describes the issue with alarming clarity: “In an LMS, students are not in control of their content, their data, their connections. ...the course is behind a wall. Everything is meant to take place therein. At the end of the course, the student loses access to the course, and to any of the content or data they’ve created. There is one instructor. Maybe two. Maybe some course assistants. They grade. They monitor the forums. The instructors are the center. The content is the center. The learner is not the center.”



Unfortunately, it does not seem much attention is being given to this view. Education experts continue to do the apology of the LMS and this or that software provider, and to keep the connubial union between content and learning tight, so do consenting instructors. Now, substitute the word “LMS” for “content” and you may see the gravity of this problem. The problem is not the LMS itself, but the metaphor of content as the absolute center of all education, while the core of education should be the students and their agency, with all the creative, discussion and construction activities that are demanded. The director of MIT’s Media Lab, Joichi Ito believes education is “not about centralized instruction anymore; rather it is the process establishing oneself as a node in a broad network of distributed creativity”.

Consider instead the finding by Arum & Roska (2011b): 45% of students showed “no significant improvement” over one year of study (freshmen in fall 2005 through spring 2007). 36% after 4 years of college “education”. “American higher education is characterized by limited or no learning for a large proportion of students.”

Thus, Higher Education seems to be suffering a major crisis in spirit and in practical terms. Who are we educating if students do not learn? Are we so self-indulgent that we believe the paper-filling we call learning assessment means actually that somebody is learning?

Seth Godin (2016) puts it remarkably well when he asks whether graduates (or middle-career people who look for a change of job) are prepared:

- to “show a history of generous, talented, extraordinary side projects”; or
- whether they are “experts at something that actually generates value”; or
- whether they “connected with leaders in the field”

Godin asks: “Does your reputation speak for itself? Where online can I see the trail of magic you regularly create?”

Our current Higher Education system is rarely if at all able to produce graduates who can answer positively such questions. Instead, it focuses on “being judged on visible metrics, doing well on the assignments and paying attention to deadlines, but waiting until the last minute, why not” (Godin 2016).

Instead of stimulating rigorous thinking and discussion, faculty are often simply employees who deliver content, like a postman delivers the mail, to someone who is without content. Instead of “moving away from educational assembly lines toward intellectual ecosystems of interest and curiosity,” as Gardner Campbell suggests, faculty are often just passive borrowers of others’ narratives. Chomsky (2003) invited to think in institutions “committed to the free exchange of ideas, to critical analysis, to experimentation, to exploration of a wide range of ideas and values, to the study of consequences of social action or scientific progress and the evaluation of these consequences in terms of values that are themselves subject to careful scrutiny.” Instead I believe we are “delivering” content as though faculty were merely content producers and students, content consumers.

Note that the “delivery issue” is clearly evident in the English language, but other languages show the same behavioral attitude: In Spanish we say “enseñar”, originally meaning “to show”, or worse, “dictar un curso”, literally to read a course (the persona of the lecturer is reminded here.) Even the word “aprender” is connected to “aprehender” which is to apprehend (some content!). Faculty unfortunately not only do the mailman’s work, but we also collect big data for the proper assessment of learning.

Watters (2014) in the end suggests a solution, and adds: “The Web, of course, does not work this way.” Her observation is the key to the real innovation in Higher Education: to develop and own a narrative synchronized with the very technology and medium that has triggered many of the changes in education as well as in society, which in turn have provoked some of the crises we are experiencing: the World Wide Web.

In fact, in order to respond to the needs of XXI Century’s diverse students, many analysts, researchers and practitioners agree that Higher Education must cultivate the values that brought to life the Web, likely the highest technology of our history.

Gardner Campbell (2011) famously incited: “Let’s shutter our ‘learning management systems’ and build ‘understanding augmentation networks’ instead, moving away from educational assembly lines toward intellectual ecosystems of interest and curiosity.” In his TEDx talk (Gardner, 2013), he claimed about producing “wisdom” out of a college experience. How do we score with that?

Institutions must not only open up their ivory towers, as I claimed at the past Virtual Educa 2015 in Guadalajara, but they must also fully embrace the culture that created the Web in the first place. Dave Winer, the person who practically invented blogs, says (Winer, 2015): “We should aim to recreate the environment that made the Internet itself spring into existence, in academic institutions.” That environment did put openly the Web’s main technical specs in the public domain (CERN, 1993).

Only through a true open Web can Higher Education bring back to the open the essential characteristic of the University, which is the weird composition of ideas flowing freely, creative educational production and professional careers forming.

The Web of today is a series of beautiful, walled gardens, where unfortunately we are pushed towards superficiality and tunnel vision. Free creativity and expression is limited due to ads and business plans aiming to “monetize” our every action. Hence, there exists a serious risk of losing the open Web’s initial features and transform it in something quite contrary to the purposes of education.

Consider the surprising similarity between such walled gardens and another typical environment of our universities: the LMS. The Facebooks or Instagrams of today’s Web are isles of segregated activity. In Higher Education, the Learning Management System stands as a metaphor of today’s teaching and it carries a surprising similarity with such walled gardens and silos. How can we liberate our courses of the LMS and creatively harness and embrace the power of the Open Web and its loosely-joined tools?

Brown et al. (2015) state “The LMS has been highly successful in enabling the administration of learning but less so in enabling learning itself. Initial LMS designs have been both course- and instructor-centric, which is consonant with the way higher education viewed teaching and learning through the 1990s.”

In fact, a Learning Management System is one system that closes its clients/ students in an “idyllic” environment of activities, tasks, assignments, fora, and multimedia documents that do not speak the language of the Web —they have few external links, for once. Moreover, the LMS insist in the metaphor of a closed circuit between professor and students: at each semester’s end they shut down students’ work, which remains forever dead within an inaccessible backup copy. Contrast this with a fully alive Web page or a blog, with links that come from without and other links that open up a fan of virtual voyages of diversity, and the circulation of open ideas. I believe there is today the need to overcome the limitations of today’s main pedagogical narrative and the trend to reduce to machinery the constructions of a learning experience. The imposing narrative of a system completely centered around the binomial instructor-content must be at least complemented—if not substituted—by one centered around the student, open 24/7, visible from every corner of the world, and perhaps with (limited or unlimited) participation capacity from people everywhere. Also, very importantly, widely open after the semester has come to a close. In a few word, substitute, or complement the silos of the LMS/Facebook with the Open and free Web based upon globally held standards.

Higher Education must embrace the cause of the Open Web. Open culture allows students to collaborate on digital constructions with no hindrance and to remix them freely. Faculty is able to build upon the work of colleagues, worldwide. Freeing our work from LMS’s tunnels would allow us to discover and enjoy the “loosely joined” educational “indie” technologies that can actually enhance student engagement.

Also, the learning experiences must be connected. The Connected Learning Alliance ([clalliance.org](http://clalliance.org)) proposes 6 principles of course design (2016), among which I want here to stress the following:

1. Openly-networked: “Connected learning environments link learning in school, home and community because learners achieve best when their learning is reinforced and supported in multiple settings. Online platforms can make learning resources abundant, accessible and visible across all learner settings;”
2. Shared purpose: learning experiences should enable all to “share interests and contribute to a common purpose” through social media and Web communities;
3. Peer-supported: “Socially meaningful and knowledge-rich ecology of ongoing participation, self-expression and recognition.”

In addition, consider the principles set forth by the Mozilla Foundation as a Web Manifesto (<https://www.mozilla.org/en-US/about/manifesto/>), and let me conclude the presentation with a reflection stemming from some of them that apply to the case at hand:

1. “The Internet is a global public resource that must remain open and accessible.”



2. "The Internet must enrich the lives of individual human beings."
3. "Individuals must have the ability to shape the Internet and their own experiences on it."
4. "Free and open source software promotes the development of the Internet as a public resource."

One last principle, perhaps the most important for institutions whose mission involves the common good:

"Magnifying the public benefit aspects of the Internet is an important goal, worthy of time, attention and commitment."

Instead of importing narratives from vendors or other interested players, and shutting our educational dialogues within inert silos, we in Higher Education had better define and nurture our own narratives, and take inspiration from the ideals, architecture—and the practical lessons learned— of the free, open Web.

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