Let’s Unbundle the Course

Higher education is under pressure: Pressure to improve on-time graduation rates. Pressure to double the number of college degrees and certificates produced annually. Pressure to increase the educational attainment of citizens (e.g., our state, Indiana, ranks 42nd in higher education attainment). Pressure to control costs and better use resources. Pressure to be distinctive in the face of increasing competition. Pressure to respond to rising student expectations. Pressure ... pressure ...

These pressures are pushing colleges and universities to develop and refine new educational models that transform the models from even the recent past. Richard A. DeMillo’s book 
Abelard to Apple: The Fate of American Colleges and Universities describes the massive changes faced by higher education. Although many of those changes are driven by the factors listed above, DeMillo also notes that the changes are being intensified by the “enabling technology curve” that is doubling capability and capacity at equal costs. He argues that most colleges and universities will struggle to define what they will be in the future given these forces of change.1

Higher education leaders generally agree that responding to these various pressures requires an increased emphasis on innovation. Many also agree that technology-mediated learning will play a crucial role in that innovation. The dilemma is determining how learning mediated by technology can encourage innovation. Here at Ball State University, we believe that higher education must look beyond the technological delights of automating the classroom and search for a more adaptable component—a component that provides grist for the innovation mill. That grist, we believe, is the course.

For decades, the college/university degree has represented the graduate’s demonstration of specific skills and abilities, as well as overall knowledge and understanding. Assembling that knowledge and understanding often involved diverse and disassociated content, but it was made coherent by the course, usually based on completing particular assignments in the classroom, laboratory, or studio. The course was—and still is—recognized as the fundamental component of the degree.2 It became the basic element for an entire system of delivery; even today, it is how we manage time, staff, resources, credit, and value.

Unfortunately, this definition of the course—and of the degree as the aggregation of that coursework—often becomes fixed, with little flexibility for redesign or modification. This rigidity has become a major limitation in the ability of higher education to respond to the forces of change.

Ball State’s new strategic plan, which takes the university through the year 2017 and to the cusp of its centennial, calls for us to “provide distinctive, high-quality experiences to all our students, whether undergraduate or graduate, whether traditional or online, in which theory and knowledge are tested through practical application.” This goal has a number of implications for Ball State when it comes to treating the course as the grist for the innovation mill.

Primary among them is the need to make the course more adjustable to respond to the pressures being exerted on higher education. A more versatile course will require Ball State to “unbundle” various aspects of the course, bringing clarity to which instructional components are appropriate for technology-mediated learning and which are more suitable for other delivery systems. The paradox of unbundling the course for better technological delivery is that it will reinforce our principle that not all learning should be dispatched with technology.

Unbundling the course will be a rigorous exercise in institutional creativity, and it will require a willingness to break through many barriers that surround the proprietary rights of the course and the role that technology will play in delivering instruction. Higher education leaders will need to take pragmatic steps to achieve some flexibility when defining, managing, and resourcing courses mediated by technology. We must engage in structured dialogue to develop concrete options, ones that will take the creative ideas that bubble up and convert them into a new set of best practices. But how do we do so? By keeping in mind some overarching objectives, many of them espoused by Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown, as we work to “marry structure and freedom.”3

First, we should (engage in a process of institutional self-discovery. The pressures mentioned earlier, especially those from students and their families, require that higher education institutions differentiate themselves. We must identify our institutional convictions as we help our communities, our states, and our world solve problems. Harnessing the creative and focused energies of the faculty and students is paramount. Faculty and students must work together, with both earning “credit” as they assemble a synthesized experience that advances scholarship and student learning, respectively.

Second, we must become obsessed with accountability. This will
require a singular focus on learning outcomes. We must establish a shared understanding of the institutional cost of creating and delivering various models of learning experiences. We must communicate clearly about the efforts that go into “designing” those educational experiences and how those efforts guide what we charge for learning. After all, legislators, donors, students, parents, and the general public are demanding evidence that illustrates timely degree attainment, graduation rates, and professional placement. But most of all, we must focus on specific learning outcomes for every student. This focus requires not only well-defined expectations but also a coordinated institutional effort in using technology to capture those learning outcomes. That data will need to be normalized across the institution, or even with similar colleges and universities, to identify successful learning processes.

Third, we need to commit to hiring strong operational leadership. Any vision must have strong leaders to accomplish it. To achieve the marrying of structure and freedom, passionate operational leaders need to use their skills to help their institution implement that vision. They should demonstrate the capacity to follow the vision as they develop and implement ideas and plans. They should have the ability to focus on causes and not symptoms when solving the problems that are sure to arise. So a culture of change cannot protect the past; rather, it must embrace the edges of the experiment. Creativity inspires change. We are convinced that the only way to demonstrate their creativity and must reward them when that creativity inspires change. We are convinced that the only way to foster a steady breeze of change is by encouraging professors who not only embrace that change but also lead it, inspiring their colleagues to do likewise.

Finally, we need to create social networks. Learners need to discover their passions because passions foster deep learning based on personal motivation. Social networks allow students to accelerate their learning by interacting with like-minded colleagues who have the knowledge they need to pursue their passions. These networks allow students to submit their information and thoughts. Colleagues can give critical feedback, and everything is interconnected, leading to new outcomes. The knowledge created shows students that we are greater than the sum of our parts. The learning generated in social networks could be the most meaningful learning in which students participate and can be a lifelong resource for them as they pursue their future careers.

To achieve truly deep learning experiences for students, higher education leaders must integrate the common tenets of the course with learning communities, collaborative projects, research, service learning, study abroad, and many other broad intellectual experiences. We can unbundle the course by building new learning models that break the barriers of when and how we learn, making learning fluid in time and not necessarily tied to quarters or semesters, attaching curricular and co-curricular components by creating integrated, flexible knowledge packages, and linking multi-semester immersive experiences to professional work-preparation tracks that enhance a student’s emotional intelligence in the workplace. Unbundling requires synthesizing experiences to untether students from location and physical limitations while simultaneously assessing their learning no matter the students’ location or the data type.

Notes
5. Thomas and Brown, A New Culture of Learning.

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