Higher Ed Disruption in Context

Technology has fundamentally and visibly disrupted numerous traditional industries. Variety reports that for U.S. teens, YouTube stars are more popular than the biggest celebrities in film, television, and music. Uber and Lyft have caused protests in Paris and lawsuits in Boston and Chicago. Airbnb has been valued at an amount greater than that of either Marriott International or Hyatt Hotels. The new Tesla is so good it earned 103 points on the Consumer Reports 100-point scale. Even with all the recent turmoil in health care, more is on the way: automated anesthesiology is already in limited use in the United States with plans to expand, eventually replacing doctors with machines. These are just a few examples, and we haven’t even begun to feel the real impact of the maker movement.

Numerous articles have cited highly reputable sources pertaining the inevitable disruption of higher education. In EDUCAUSE Review a year ago, my predecessor as the New Horizons department editor, Mara Hancock, wrote: “We have been continually looking over our shoulder at the ‘Disruptor Dragon,’ waving its spiky tail and breathing its fire of disruption and, hopefully, transformation.” She made a thoughtful and inspired call for collaboration between those who educate and those who benefit from an educated populace.

When I look for a role model to retain control through disruption, I look to the film industry. The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) is not a government organization, but a trade body. For better or worse, this has allowed the film industry to self-regulate from the original Hays Code of the 1930s to the rating system we all know today. By hiring well-known government figures such as Jack Valenti, Dan Glickman, and Chris Dodd to lead the MPAA, the film industry has retained both its high-profile position and a large degree of autonomy that the higher education system lacks. The disruptive tech world has largely followed this self-regulatory model as apps ignore local ordinances and reshape business models yet faithfully comply with the approval process of Apple’s iTunes App Store. It’s difficult to believe that disruptive technology will be concerned with accreditation.

On the other hand, it’s easy to believe that higher education is special and immune to the numerous disruptive technologies shaping our world. After all, the oldest colleges and universities have survived revolutions and predate current governments. Although Second Life, MOOCs, and even badges have publically been called “disruptions,” higher education institutions have integrated these tools into existing business models without the painful changes indicative of a true market disruption. Perhaps higher education’s unique benefit to society, combined with the talented and motivated early adopters throughout its faculty and staff, has allowed it to incorporate technology rather than be disrupted.

We can exhaust ourselves by looking for the specific technology that could be the downfall of higher education—the technology that each institution must purchase, integrate, and continually upgrade or else risk losing brilliant minds to another college or university. In reality, the disruption is more likely to come from technology thinking than from the actual technology. Looking at the aforementioned examples, we can clearly see the shift in thinking that is facilitated by the technology. Few people get to star in a Hollywood movie, but why can’t everyone have a shot? Getting a taxi can be challenging, so why can’t I easily call one to exactly where I am? If a car doesn’t have an engine, how could it be redesigned given existing constraints?

In retrospect, it’s easy to identify these questions for successful disruptions in our current way of thinking. They seem obvious after the fact. But it’s easier to focus on the physical object (the technology) than on the idea it represents. And for all of the disruptive innovations that have succeeded, there are countless examples of realistic-sounding innovations that have failed. Me? I’m still waiting to buy a flying car.

As we look toward the future of technology, we need to remember that information technology as a field is in its infancy when compared with the long institutional memory of a college or university. And even the role of information technology in the educational context is evolving rapidly as digital resources replace analog and as data-driven decisions replace tradition. The technology itself is not the eventual source of disruption. Disruption will come from the culture that surrounds tech entrepreneurship—including a high tolerance for failure.

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Technologies, we can proliferate technology and maker culture throughout our organizations, and we can prove why higher education is truly unique and different from all of those other industries already toppled by tech entrepreneurs and venture capital.

Notes

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