Tower Records Was Doomed: The Music Industry Was Not

Technology is a tool, not a strategy. It is clear that most campus CIOs understand this, as demonstrated by their top concern noted in surveys: getting faculty to integrate technology into classrooms. I suspect CIOs’ deeper concern is getting faculty to rethink the entirety of teaching to take advantage of some of the incredible things technology can do. Why is that so hard?

Technology is disruptive. So people naturally look for a way to keep doing what they were already doing. For example, in my new car with keyless ignition, I was still taking the key out of my pocket for the first few months. Old habits die hard. I would get in the car and then wonder where to put the key while I was driving so that I wouldn’t forget it when I left. Eventually, I started leaving the key in my pocket—but that required realizing that the new technology is no longer a key. It is a personal identity tag that tells the car who I am. Once I changed my assumptions, I could drive the car just by getting in. The real potential of new technology comes only when we totally rethink our systems around it.

Think about how resistant the music industry was to technology. Initially, digital technology was used to make new recordings that could then be sold as analog records (marketed as 4D technology!). It should have been obvious that the real product was sound (not albums) and that digital technology would allow music to be bundled into different units and distributed in new ways. Even when CDs were first introduced (just another hard-copy bundle), people moaned that the cover art was an essential part of the product and that CD cases were too small for cover art. Our clue should have been that we called this the “record” industry rather than the music business.

Of course, the pirates were the first to figure this out. Once you have a digital file of music, you can share it with anyone with any hard copy. Call them what you like, but pirates are practical. As Napster was showing how this could be done, the record companies continued to resist. Twenty years ago, the suggestion that the real solution to Napster was simply to offer a better music service was inconceivable. At the time, I pitched the idea that if consumers could rent all the music they wanted for a monthly fee, they would not need to buy any hard copies. We had new technology, but we also had a bricks-and-mortar distribution, and the “record” industry wanted to figure out how to save Tower Records rather than come up with an alternative to the current music-delivery system.

In higher education, for-profit colleges may be playing the role of the Napster pirates. Yes, there were and are many bad players, but some have also tried many new and obviously unthinkable things that technology has made possible. True to form, the rest of the sector has fought back by trying to regulate away this new competition.

Just as those in the music industry discovered their product was actually music and not all the packaging, we in higher education are about to face the same choice. Are we selling athletics, libraries, dorms, and campus life, or are we selling branded credentials and alumni networks? Perhaps we are selling learning. If that is the case, then the size and shape of the packaging might easily change with new technology. Do we need semesters, grades, credits, classrooms, office hours, and departments?

Can we keep learning constant and the time involved variable? Maybe, like Lasik doctors, we could even price higher education based on learning outcomes (like 20/20 vision per eye) instead of on the time spent sitting in classrooms?

Residential campuses and especially residential liberal arts colleges can and do offer a type of learning that cannot be duplicated online. But as learning online gets better, we will have to get better too, and we will have to be clear about the extra learning that is received for all that extra expense. The Internet and its amazing content are disaggregated and decontextualized. The successful individuals, businesses, and institutions of the future will be either integrators or specialists. In higher education, we probably need to do both.

When there was less competition, we could all be the same, just regionally different. Today, however, we don’t need more virtually identical curricular and learning environments. A diversity of approaches to learning will create more chances for success and survival. It will also iner ease the chances of finding a college or university that will work for each individual student.

A few big research institutions will be able to claim the best and most specialized physics or philosophy departments, but most of us need to become really good aggregators. Having local versions of the same content that students can get (for free) online does not create value for a college or university. Most of what students will need to learn for the jobs of the future is still
waiting to be discovered, so the mission of higher education institutions should be to create self-regulated learners. We talk a lot about critical thinking, but if it is so important, why don’t we put more effort into measuring critical thinking and demonstrating that our method for teaching it really works?

The future of higher education institutions resides in our ability to integrate all of the learning on a campus. If we can connect the learning in the classroom with what happens in athletics, residential life, and student government, if we can meet and support students where they are (socially, emotionally and technologically), if we can monitor students’ progress and well-being over their years on campus, and if we can design comfortable environments that encourage risk, then we will be doing something online courses can’t do. We will be adding value. Technology has a huge role to play here, but the process will require a complete rethinking of everything we do and how the pieces fit together. We need new systems and structures, not just new technology.

Meanwhile, the technology will get better, and someone (probably pirates and hackers) will be busy becoming even more disruptive. Like those in the music industry, we have a choice: we can hire more lobbyists, or we can reimagine our real product.

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