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Blurring Lines — Learning Belongs in the Library: Three Reasons This Must Eventually Be So



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This column was born one year ago when I was struggling with the outline of a presentation I needed to give on the future of the university and the library from my perspective. Perspectives are easy to come by, and I suspect the only reason anybody cared to hear mine was I spent the first half of my career developing classroom teaching material and the second half developing eBook collections for the library market. My career has been equally split, if you will, between the two major hubs of content delivery to the university: the classroom and the library. This vantage point led me to identify six poles of activity we needed to be watching to identify innovative people and products that will point the way toward our future (see my September 2013 *ATG* article: “Content, Services, Solutions and Space, Blurring Lines in the University,” p.40). My column, *The Blurring Line*, has explored people and organizations innovating on these six poles and allowed me the opportunity to peer regularly into the minds of innovative others. In this, my final column of the current academic year, I want to return to an exploration of my own thoughts on where we are collectively heading. In particular, I want to explore and lay bare for comment my view that learning content absolutely belongs in the library.

1. Course content should be part of the university operating budget and part of student tuition — What do I mean by this? The price paid for required learning material has been going up much faster than the rate of inflation, as has tuition, and the price is borne by the individual student and/or student’s family. Any analysis of college affordability considers tuition, room and board, and learning materials (typically textbooks) as the primary drivers of affordability. And this is borne out in the headlines we read. The governor of Florida, **Rick Scott**, trumpeted the \$10,000 degree in his state-of-the-state address this past February. The governor of California, **Jerry Brown**, pushed through legislation in 2012 to make open-access textbooks freely available to all students if faculty adopt the open access e-textbook.

Making learning content institutionally available is not a new concept. Courseload has made faculty-selected textbooks more affordable through bundling the cost of the e-textbook with tuition as course fees. Print textbooks have always been available in the library in greater or lesser numbers. And digital publishers, like **Flat World Knowledge**, with a willingness to experiment with business models have given fixed-fee site licenses to universities to access entire collections of e-textbooks.

But a more integrated, flexible, and persistent solution is for the university library to host learning content that is perpetually owned

and delivered without usage restrictions. This is a solution with economic and practical merit. Faculty reserve the right to select and modify course materials as they see fit. So a solution that presents a wide array of materials to select from (such as an eBook collection or a library database) makes practical sense. From an economic perspective perpetually owned content in the library allows for economies of scale and the power of central purchasing to lower costs. And as universities are pressed to create affordable degree options, an integrated tuition and course materials model just makes sense. The creators of educational content know institutional-ownership of learning material is inevitable. Libraries and university administrators just need to push harder and from a common footing.

2. Learning is becoming increasingly IT based, so digital learning items should be mingled with learning management systems under one IT roof — The institutional ownership of learning content is inevitable, I believe, for the economic reasons cited above, but also because the content is increasingly becoming integrated with the platform on which it is delivered. The learning management system (LMS) revolution that began in the late ’90s is now ubiquitous. Most universities have made a long-term commitment to a particular LMS, and faculty to a greater or lesser extent have embraced the platforms for the delivery of course content; especially for online and hybrid courses. However, the ease of use of the LMS and efficacy of the LMS for delivering course content is not matched by the ability to quickly and effectively identify learning content to populate a particular course in the LMS environment. Big educational publishers provide content, based on course adoption, to build out a course. And companies that work with faculty and program directors to design and build out courses have proliferated recently. But what of the professor or program designer who wants to access an array of rights-cleared, multi-media learning content to build a course or enhance an existing course in an LMS? New entities like **SIPX** have emerged to offer faculty access to rights-cleared content for online courses, and the **Copyright Clearance Center** is moving into this space as well via its articulation of the *TEACH act*. But wouldn’t it be preferable and infinitely more effective for the university to house a diversity of perpetually-owned, multi-user learning content types?

Bottom line: the university has an LMS that operates as part of its IT infrastructure, with varying degrees of external support provided by LMS operators. But the content needed to build out a wide variety of courses in the LMS environment must be appropriated by individual professors, operating under unique circumstances while addressing permissions

and rights concerns in an ad hoc manner. By hosting abundant and deeply-indexed learning content in the library, the university can merge the availability of the LMS with the availability of content to ensure course creation is effective, robust, and without rights or permission concerns.

3. Digital learning environments are producing myriad data that the university library is well-situated to archive and leverage to improve learning — In more recent years the evolution of learning content and LMS environments has been toward personalization of learning paths (adaptive learning), and the generation of individual and aggregate data to inform how teaching can be made more effective via short-term adjustments for the individual learner and longer-term adjustments to courses and curriculum. If platforms and products with these robust capabilities are improving learning, then we are in the midst of a fundamental shift toward a data-driven and personalized learning experience. But then who owns and/or deploys the data?

As consumers of digital content in the era of the Internet we are all subject to wide “ownership” of data about us and our uses of digital content. This is a contentious subject that extends well beyond the perspective of this column. But, at a very minimum, the university should be on a path toward greater ownership of data generated by its students and faculty engaged in teaching. By centralizing the ownership and integration of the learning platform and the learning content, the data that flows from this environment is more easily harnessed and leveraged by the university. University library data repositories hold data in perpetuity, and doing so is central to the mission of the university. Extending this mission to the data generated from student learning and then leveraging it to improve learning is a critical extension of this mission.

The IT department and the university library are moving ever closer. At many universities the roles of Vice President for Information Technology and Dean of Libraries are merging. IT capabilities are central to the hosting and administering of the LMS. The library’s unique strength is hosting and making discoverable content: learning or scholarly. When IT and the library work together to deliver courses with university-owned content and evaluate the data generated, the university will be empowered to increase efficacy of courses delivered, lower the cost of obtaining a degree and reduce the time required of faculty and course developers to create effective, multi-media courses with rights-cleared, perpetually-owned learning content. 🌱