

Getting Strategic About Online Learning

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In the fall of 2012 universities and colleges in Ontario submitted mandate statements to the Government of Ontario for review. While each statement is different, there was one consistent theme: a growing strategic commitment to seeing online learning as a central component of institutional strategy. Rather than being a marginal activity, online learning is seen as a critical feature for the future of the institution. Eighteen of the 21 universities and 21 of the 24 colleges see online learning in this way.

This mirrors developments in the United States. In 2012, 69% of academic leaders of US public and private post-secondary institutions saw online learning as mission critical for their organizations^[1], a significant rise on previous year's reviews (it was 50% in 2009^[2]). Given that online registrations are growing at an annual rate of 10% and conventional registrations at between 1 and 2%, this is not surprising. Over six and a half million US college and university students take one or more online course as part of their program of studies each year.

Given the growing strategic importance of online learning, how can strategic intent be converted into action? More specifically, what roles can each category of influencer play in a college or university to make online learning truly successful?

These are important questions. While students show an increased satisfaction with online learning – it secures a satisfaction level in excess of that shown for face to face learning - only 30.2% of chief academic officers in the US believe that faculty accept the value and legitimacy of online education - a rate which is lower than recorded in 2004^[3].

Six Barriers to Be Overcome

There are six major barriers to the strategic growth of online learning in a post-secondary institution. These are:

- **Getting to Scale** – In order to have a major impact, an institution needs to be able to scale its online course offerings. Moving from a few students taking online courses to a few thousand students completing entirely online programs requires substantive technology logistics; changes to advising, admission and registration processes; changes in financial and administrative processes; and changes in faculty workloads – for which many institutions are poorly prepared.
- **Quality** – In order to guarantee quality of the learning experience, systematic processes for peer review at each stage of the design, development, deployment and delivery stages are needed. Many institutions have not created sufficiently rigorous and efficient processes to enable such quality assurance. What may be needed is a rethink of all aspects of quality assurance for all forms of teaching and learning in the institution – rather than having a separate process for online learning,
- **Design and Development** – Faculty indicate that, often but not always, they have little training and few supports for quality design and development of online learning that will lead to high levels of student engagement and successful student outcomes.
- **Reward and Recognition** – Reward structures and processes for faculty and instructional design staff are disconnected from the time and effort needed to create quality, effective online courses.

If such work is to be strategic, then rethinking reward and recognition – especially the time allocated for online course design and development – needs to be a priority.

- **Student Engagement and Service** – Student concerns are that many online courses are overly passive and that service standards (turnaround time for queries, peer to instructor exchange, turnaround time for assessment as well as help desk support) need to be much better so as to create a culture of commitment, engagement and service.
- **Governance** – Making sure the right people are at the table when decisions about teaching, learning, programs and technology are being made – significant rethinking of academic governance may be needed to take into account technological development, the use of third party materials and intellectual property issues.

Strategic Roles of The Five Key Influencers

So what can be done and by whom to overcome these barriers and secure online learning as strategic component of the post-secondary education system in Ontario? How will institutions translate their strategic mandate commitments into action?

Here we suggest key roles for different influencers in a college or university. The intention is to encourage and support reflective practice by each of these influencers and to enable a conversation about change and development at the institutional level.

Our influencers are shown in the diagram below:



Figure 1: Key Influencers for Turning Strategy into Action

Let us say a little more about the concerns of each:

- **Learners** – By their registration behaviour, learners are driving the focus on flexibility for learning, for which online learning is just part of the response. Equally important are transferability of credit

within an institution and across institutions, prior learning assessment and credit for work-based learning. Learners are concerned with quality, flexibility, cost and their experience of the online courses, student services, academic support services and help-desk support. In addition they are concerned with credit recognition for their learning wherever it occurred. The key challenge is to use all of the tools in the institutions tool kit to respond to the growing demand from learners for flexibility and recognition

Faculty & Instructors – There are many committed online learning course developers and instructors amongst the faculty and it is their efforts which has enabled Ontario to offer over 18,000 online courses and 1,000 fully online programs at colleges and universities. They have legitimate concerns about quality, support, reward and recognition, intellectual property, conditions of service and payment. Within all post-secondary institutions there are some 10-15% of faculty who do not accept online learning as a legitimate form of instruction^[4]. Faculty and instructors are the leading edge influencers and only when a critical mass of faculty and instructors engage in online learning will we be able to truly say that online learning is strategic and core to the business of colleges and universities.

- **Academic Administrators** – Deans and Heads of Departments are at the front-line of faculty and student concerns about online learning. Issues of intellectual property, quality, workload and pay impact the speed of development and deployment and issues of peer support and service impact students and their relationships with faculty. Issues of service are also evident in daily concerns expressed to academic administrators, many of whom have little or no experience with designing and developing online courses and programs and only limited exposure to best practices.
- **Business Managers** - Registrars, librarians, those engaged in professional development work, instructional supports, marketing, and academic computing all have roles to play but often feel disengaged from the decision making at the faculty or strategic level which most affects their business processes. For example, year round offering of online courses has impacts on registration, finance, library and technology services. These managers are often seen as creating barriers to the more rapid deployment of online learning when in fact their intent is to ensure the integrity of such offerings.
- **Institutional Leaders** – Presidents, Vice Presidents and executive level officers are pre-occupied by cost-constraints and fiscal issues, reputation and brand and competitive position. While several also understand and seek to fulfill their mandates – for example, a commitment to Northern and First Nations communities – fiscal imperatives often drive decision making. Taking a medium to long-view also suggests that some “risk capital” needs to be invested in online learning to get from where many institutions are to where they ought to be. It will require a heightened vision of where they wish to take or lead their institution

Part of the challenge within an institution is that that the influencers see themselves being asked to change what they are doing in a fundamental way while continuing to do what they have always done. The analogy used is trying to rebuild an airplane while flying it to a destination which appears to keep changing^[5]. In order to make online learning effective in securing their future, institutions will also need to explore what they will have to stop doing, what they will have to change and what

they will have to redesign. The mandate statements make clear that online learning is seen, not as an add-on, but as a significant change to the way the college or university functions – some difficult decisions about what changes and what goes will need to be made. What is clear is that we are in a stage of transition. We can either do it well or chaotically.

How the Five Core Influencers Can Convert Strategic Intent into Action

Given this context, what are the actions and activities that key influencers can undertake to convert strategic intent into action? What do they have to do to turn ideas into practice? We offer some suggestions here:

Learners

- Engaging in learning activities with instructors, peers and the body of knowledge they are expected to know so as to improve mastery of knowledge and the development of skills – show commitment and engagement in online learning;
- Providing reflective and thoughtful feedback about the process of learning and engagement so as to improve online learning;
- Rethinking how they learn, when they learn and how they leverage technology;
- Developing their learning passports or portfolios so as to capture all of their learning – both from work, prior learning and the learning they complete at the institution;
- Getting engaged in course and program design;
- Demanding excellent service.

Faculty & Instructors

- Using online learning to rethink pedagogy and the approach to student learning / engagement and rethinking their own teaching – the challenge isn't to “put what I do in class online” but to create an online learning experience that is better than the classroom;
- Exploring best practice examples in their own discipline and sharing their findings with colleagues;
- Using third party resources so as to reduce the time to create a course but also to increase quality;
- Rethinking the coaching, guiding and mentoring role of the faculty member – recognizing that online learning requires more than instruction;
- Working with excellent students to design powerful learning experiences online;
- Seeing assessment as the feedback opportunity students have been waiting for, not just a grading exercise – providing feedback quickly and efficiently;
- Making use of the substantial analytics built in to all learning management systems to track competency development for each student and to see what needs to change in the next offering of the course;

- Designing into every course opportunities for remediation.;
- Design prior learning assessment;
- Supporting the fast track learner.

Academic Administrators

- Understanding and responding to the challenge of student engagement in the design of online learning – making the key drivers quality of the experience and learning outcomes;
- Developing the supports needed for quality online learning course development – professional development, instructional design assistance, intellectual property management and third party resource finding and storage as well as rigorous peer review;
- Ensuring that the technology infrastructure used for learning is appropriate for learning and that adequate, benchmarked supports are available;
- Systematic evaluation of online learning focused on the experience of learning and learning outcomes;
- Developing a focused approach to growth and scalability. This will require taking time to learn about the challenges faced by other “players” in the system – intellectual property managers, student advisors and help-desk providers, technology managers, librarians and others.

Business Managers

- Leveraging the flexibility that online learning permits, especially for differential use of time and new ways of awarding credit – more flexible registration systems, more frequent registration periods and courses of variable length;
- Responding to the technological challenges of online learning and providing adequate supports for the varied technology and learning needs of learners and faculty;
- Developing appropriate service standards and supports for all learners – on campus and off;
- Providing effective platforms;
- Evaluating online learning supports and services in a rigorous way and developing continuous improvement practices.

Institutional Leaders

- Seeing online learning as core to the strategy of the college or university and making appropriate investments to turn talk into action;
- Focusing on online learning not as a cost saver or business efficiency measure, but as a learning focused strategy to increase student choice, flexibility and effective use of learner and faculty time;
- Supporting investment in quality program and course development;

- Enabling the development of pedagogically focused development which strengthens student engagement and evaluating progress, not just in terms of volumes, but in terms of quality, student engagement and learning outcomes.

Each of the five core influencers has a critical part to play in turning strategy into action, but there is also a need for teamwork.

Too often, faculty members have been given the challenge of creating an online course with a real deadline and little support. Yet there are key roles for instructional designers, librarians as “curators” of third party materials, technology managers and experts and editors in this process. All dedicated online institutions use course teams comprising of these experts to create each course. They also use peer review of the design and at each stage of development to “test” their assumptions about relevance, accessibility, functionality, efficiency and robustness of their course. When the first student receives it, a quality online course has been seen and reviewed by many people all focused on ensuring that the student experience is the best it can be.

This should be the focus for all in the college or university: quality experience for engaged students who produce outstanding learning outcomes. A key role for the President of the institution is to engage all in understanding this vision and the possibilities to which it gives rise.

A Rethink of Governance is Required

This last point raises issues about governance. The implications of the team approach to the design, development and deployment for online learning involving faculty, instructional designers, marketers, editors, intellectual property managers, librarians, technology expertise and students creates de facto a new method of oversight for courses. This has implications too for the governance of programs. While academic concerns will remain, how these are resolved requires a rethink of governance within and between academic units.

Also, as faculty members may not be the only persons teaching the courses they have created as part of a course team, issues arise about both the supervision of adjunct faculty or sessional staff teaching courses designed by others but also the role of such staff in governance. Institutional leaders need to consider what changes, if any, they need to make to governance models and practices at all levels of the organization to better reflect the strategy they are pursuing.

Some institutions are recognizing this and changing their governance models for academic decision making to fully engage all who have a role in design, development, deployment and delivery of learning in all aspects of decision making. Others have retained governance models built for other purposes and hope they will be sufficient for new purposes for which they were not intended (e.g. making decisions about technology investments for learning management systems or learning analytics). Whichever route is taken, the issue of governance needs to be reviewed.

Three Simple Truths

These are interesting times for colleges and universities. In a climate of austerity, they are being asked to change and transform to take account of shifting demand, demographics and resources. There is a lot of “noise” in the system about how this can be done, what the transforming steps might be and how

technology and analytics can help the transformation process.

Some simple truths need to be kept in mind. Three seem most important:

- **Learning is always about relationships** – the relationship between the learner and knowledge, learner and the instructor and between the learner and his or her peers. Memorable learning links to relationships. Online learning must be seen as being about enabling and strengthening relationships.
- **Learning is about commitment** – learners and instructors as well as institutional leaders and academic administrators need to be committed to the task of learning and teaching. Online learning has to enable this commitment to be demonstrated. If we see online learning as a distribution platform or a way of reducing cost we are in danger of reducing commitment.
- **Learning outcomes stem from learner engagement** – powerful learning occurs when students feel engaged with the work of learning. Online learning needs to be designed to enable this to occur. If its text and video connected to machine marked quizzes how can I become engaged? This is why instructional design is so important – online learning will be transformative when it truly is more engaging than any other form of learning.

As we learn our way to the next generation of our colleges and universities – one which embraces online learning – we need to bear in mind these core truths. If we lose sight of them, we lose sight of why we created these institutions in the first place.

[1] See http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/survey/changing_course_2012

[2] See http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/survey/learning_on_demand_sr2010

[3] See http://sloanconsortium.org/publications/survey/changing_course_2012 and also Allen, I. Elaine, Jeff Seaman with Doug Lederman and Scott Jaschik, *Conflicted: Faculty and Online Education*, 2012, Inside Higher Ed, Babson Survey Research Group, 2012.

[4] See <http://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/changingcourse.pdf> esp. at page 27.

[5] To see what this looks like, look at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M3hge6Bx-4w>