Brave New World:
The Challenges of Online Higher Education 2014

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Abstract What challenges do online educators face in five years? The way people learn is changing rapidly and, with four distinct generations engaged in online education, it's critical that we understand the expectations and needs of each generation. The author offers insights into generational divergence and how this is likely to affect online education in the future. How can we meet the demands of the varied population we serve? What can we be doing today to prepare our distance education programs and infrastructure for the future?

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With technology evolving at an alarming rate, the way people use technology is moving even faster—add in the phenomenon of four generations in the classroom, and it's no wonder that those of us who support online higher education have our hands full. Online enrollments have grown much faster than overall higher-education enrollments over the past few years. According to a 2008 report published by the Sloan Consortium, "Staying the Course: Online Education in the United States," enrollment in online courses grew 19.7 percent during the period 2002-2007, compared with a 1.5-percent growth in the overall college-student population. The study also found that more than 20 percent of American college students took at least one online course during the fall 2007 semester. Those figures suggest tremendous interest in online teaching and learning.

And online learning has flourished in large part because of that demand. There's no doubt that knowledge of online learning best practices has created an exponential growth in the effectiveness of this delivery modality. The continual acceptance and adoption of current technology, such as live classrooms, asynchronous discussions and instant messaging, reflect the dynamic nature of online learning today, as it changes in response to the needs and demands of our students. Still, it is critical to our continued success that we ask ourselves if our ability to deliver high-quality online programs is advancing as quickly as the knowledge and expectations of our students.

At Boston University, the majority of our online programs are geared to meeting the needs of learners at the graduate level. Our typical student is between 30 and 50 years of age, works full-time, has a family, and is an expert multi-tasker. It's easy for us to assume that our students are focused exclusively on their online education, but the reality is that online courses must compete with a host of other technologies and priorities for students' attention. Given that time- and activity-challenged learner profile, we understand that there will be many factors that will be critical to our success in continuing to build the credibility and reliability of the online-delivery modality.

Our observation of our online students shows us that these adult learners tend to be practical problem solvers. They are autonomous and goal-oriented, often asking "why?" at every turn. They have a wide range of motives for seeking out online learning opportunities—among them the desire for professional advancement, the desire to make a difference, and a personal or work-related interest in the subject. Our students range from those who are fully comfortable with technology and the concept of online learning to those who are nervous about their ability to succeed in the distance learning environment. With a twenty-year or greater age range likely in any given online classroom, we must serve different generations of learners equally effectively.

We can plan for this **generational divergence** if we recognize the qualities that characterize each generation and understand that each generation is moving in a different direction. In the population we serve we find representatives of all the following widely recognized generations:

> **Baby Boomers** – Usually defined as those born between World War II and 1964, Boomers grew up with the good life. Their traditional parents wanted them to have the best—including a better way of life—resulting in the creation of the "Me" generation. Boomers thrive on constant change and they value possibility. They see hard work as the way to get to the next level. Though they can be self-absorbed and overeager to be the one in the spotlight, they also value teamwork and non-conformity and appreciate group activities and rewards.

> **Generation X** - Born in the late 1960s and the 1970s, Gen-Xers grew up with uncertainty, with many of them being survivors of divorce. As a result, they tend to be more entrepreneurial in their approach and not as trusting of large institutions as Boomers and other earlier generations. They have been characterized as cynical, questioning and cautious. Independent in their thinking, they constantly seek information and prefer managing their own time and solving their own problems. Though they are skeptical of authority, Xers value lots of feedback and use it to adapt to new situations. They are tech-savvy, favoring quick pieces of information, and prefer email over meetings and long correspondence.

Millennials (also known as Gen Y) – This group is comprised of those who grew up during the high-tech revolution. Born between 1980 and 2000, they're a generation nearly as large as the Baby Boomers and they're charged with potential. They are the first entirely tech-savvy generation to enter the workplace. They're sociable, optimistic, talented, well educated, collaborative, open-minded, influential, and achievement-oriented. They've always felt sought after, needed, indispensable. Providing frequent and systematic feedback in real time (as it happens) is critical when working with them.

In addition, we also have some students who are **Traditionals**. These adult learners were born before 1945 and witnessed world wars and a boom in technology unlike has any that had ever been seen before. At this point in their lives, they are typically motivated by a pure desire to learn.

This much diversity in age, lifestyle, and attitude in the online classroom means that the motivation among students in one class can vary greatly. In most online learning classrooms today, Gen-Xers probably form a slight majority, with Baby Boomers a close second. But when we look ahead to 2014, we need to anticipate the increasing impact of Millennials in the classroom. We can do this by balancing the pedagogical approach we choose with appropriate use of technology—to the extent that institutional constraints allow us.

Fortunately, many of the tools we are already using will fit this population well. But we need to plan now to manage the expectations of older students, preparing them for change. We can do this best by allowing students a measure of autonomy within the classroom, and by focusing on the deliverables that meet the online learning objectives, and not on the means of getting there.

It can be argued that online discussions, which have been for years the primary mode of engaging interactively in online courses, may actually help students think more critically than face-to-face discussion sessions. There will be research for years to come on that topic, but one thing we know for sure is that discussion boards allow shy students to voice their opinion in a non-threatening way. At Boston University, although the online courses are essentially asynchronous, we have enabled many forms of synchronous student communication, including assorted chat tools and a live classroom feature where students can make presentations to the class in real time.

These tools fit well with the motivation of both our current and anticipated student populations—meeting their needs for autonomy and immediacy, and allowing them to experience the self-actualization and social interaction that our increasing population of Millennials will demand. Going forward to 2014, we must recognize that multi-tasking will be a way of life for our students, and that they will prefer doing to knowing and trial-and-error to logic. We will find that they are highly literate in the new mode of assembling pieces of information to form their own perception and understanding.

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As this suggests, students have come to expect that courses will be structured in a way that allows, invites and enables their input. Findings recently released from the Speak Up project indicate that students in the coming years will continue to take more accountability for their own learning. As technology has enabled students to become more participatory learners, there are four elements that will be key to their success as students. These elements, known as the 4-Cs, are:

1. Contribution

2. Communication

3. Collaboration

4. Creation

In fact, the process of content development will be as valuable as the end result, suggesting that tools such as wikis, blogs and other collaboration tools will continue to grow in use.

The student of 2014 will have grown up with the Internet and cell phones. They will be comfortable communicating electronically with each other and with a wide array of other populations. As online educators, we need to continually enable that type of communication, and make it more robust.

We hear a lot about the increased need for portability of education, and while we have found that podcasting—once everyone's likely next step—is not the answer, we are still exploring the use of tools such as Twitter. But there are practical applications that we can focus on now that will serve us well moving forward.

Prioritizing the course development process will be a significant step in this evolution. The changing role of faculty begins in this development process, when the new division of labor requires faculty to partner closely with skilled non-faculty professionals who can help them incorporate the appropriate technology and plan for engaging all types of learners. Once the course begins, faculty often find that they must relearn their traditional skills in the new environment—managing a class, being accessible to students, and most of all, creating a "presence" in the classroom all require that faculty learn new ways of practicing familiar skills.

But we as well as faculty must accept this new paradigm and move toward it if we are to be ready to meet the increasing numbers as well as the increasing diversity of online students in 2014. Given these anticipated changes, it will be critical that as online educators, we evolve in three ways: we must become more student-centric, more focused on the changing technological environment, and even more actively engaged with our faculty partners than we are now.

What does it mean for us to be more student-centric? Primarily this means creating a more flexible structure for learning, one in which students can build connections with others while acquiring the tools they require for success in whatever motivated them to seek online education in the first place. At the same time, we must be preparing for the demands of a growing international student population, with all the demands that this new segment will bring. And we must do what we already do increasingly well: we must continually institute new retention strategies that strengthen our students' engagement and affiliation with the institution.

It seems at this point that the current drive in technology is toward making online education more portable, more available to students in a variety of environments. As we pursue this goal, our guiding principle should be to identify tools that facilitate and enhance the four Cs. These tools will be those that enable more communication among students and between students and faculty, and those that enhance students' ability to build and do—in other words, to contribute, collaborate and create their own understanding.

We must also strengthen our already strong ties to our faculty partners and be prepared to offer new faculty both the tools they will need and an understanding of the existing best practices in online course development. While this certainly means enhancing our communication and information sharing with faculty, one of the best ways to achieve this needed orientation of faculty is to engage new faculty with experienced online educators—that is, by faculty teaching faculty.

What other design considerations will be important to consider in the coming years? There are a number of things that we are already doing that we can push to do more, and do better. These include:

- **Feedback** – Students will value positive reinforcement at accelerated rates. They want access to responses that tell them how they are doing and how they can do it better.

- **Action** – Gen Ys/Millennials appreciate the challenge of opportunity and accept challenges. They want to be challenged to learn on their own, and not be lectured to.

- **Structure** – Millennials grew up in a culture where parents paid a lot of attention to them. Their events were structured and scheduled. Multi-tasking is a way of life for them and they are good at it. Education must fit somewhere in that schedule and it is unlikely to be their sole focus at any one given time.

- **Friendship and connection** – Learners say they want to study with people with whom they feel a connection. They like being friends with fellow students and will group themselves accordingly. Social networking groups exist outside the classroom to provide the platform for global, virtual friendships to form and grow.

- **Technology** – Many of the students of 2014 will not be able to remember life before technology. They expect immediate information retrieval no matter where they are, as well as portability and tools that enable them to collaborate and communicate.

- **Globalism and Diversity** – It's likely that, with friends and classmates all over the world, future learners grew up seeing things as global, connected, and open for business 24/7.

These elements form the very core of what attracts students to online education, and we will solidify their commitment to this delivery modality only if we enable these elements for them. As students continue to grow more sophisticated in their learning styles and motivations, so must we, as educators, adapt the online environment to meet the needs of tomorrow's learners.

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