DOES ONLINE LEARNING HAVE A ROLE IN LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES?

An Interview with Council of Independent Colleges President Richard Ekman
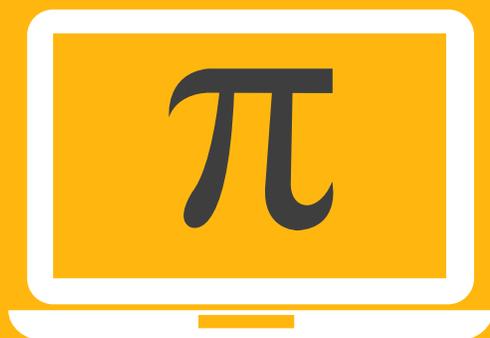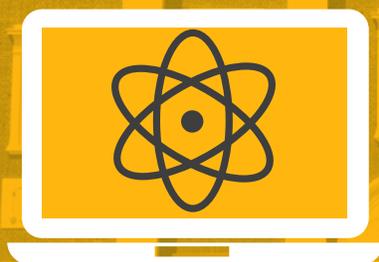
ITHAKA S+R

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Ithaka S+R is a strategic consulting and research service provided by ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to helping the academic community use digital technologies to preserve the scholarly record and to advance research and teaching in sustainable ways. Ithaka S+R focuses on the transformation of scholarship and teaching in an online environment, with the goal of identifying the critical issues facing our community and acting as a catalyst for change. JSTOR, a research and learning platform, and Portico, a digital preservation service, are also part of ITHAKA.

Background

In 2014, the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) launched the Consortium for Online Humanities Instruction. This partnership of twenty colleges and universities is exploring how online learning technologies can address the needs of liberal arts colleges while still reflecting their core values and missions. Consortium members are each creating two new online or hybrid courses which will be offered first at their home institutions and then again to students throughout the consortium. This effort is supported by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and Ithaka S+R is working with CIC to manage the program and evaluate its accomplishments. Rebecca Griffiths, Ithaka S+R's Director of Online Learning, interviewed CIC President Richard Ekman about his goals for this innovative initiative.

Please describe the motivations behind this initiative. What problems does it aim to address for your members? What unique challenges and opportunities do you think online learning presents for liberal arts colleges?

When MOOCs appeared on the scene suddenly about three years ago, we (like everyone in higher education) tried to figure out how we should position ourselves. The early arguments for MOOCs were threefold: that they would relieve the burden on senior professors teaching giant introductory courses; that they would enable great universities to reach out to the far corners of the globe and make their intellectual content available to others who wouldn't otherwise have access to it; and third, that this would be a way of identifying talent worldwide and recruiting those students to our universities.

Initially, I thought that the most important thing CIC could do for our members would be to develop a special relationship with edX or Coursera that would give our colleges special access to courses that were originated on these MOOC platforms. But at a certain point I realized that I was barking up the wrong tree, that the giant lecture course wasn't the problem. This technology had a different potential for us, which was to address the problem of sustaining advanced courses with small enrollments. Given the change in finances of colleges and universities, many of our colleges are having a difficult time balancing budgets even under the best of circumstances. So we thought we would try to find ways to use this technology to lower costs and improve instruction for advanced courses.

Why the focus on upper level humanities courses?

Upper level humanities courses are essential in a college that thinks of itself as anchored in the liberal arts, both for majors and even for those taking the courses to fulfill general

education requirements. So it wasn't hard to decide that upper level humanities courses needed some help, and we thought that this technology would provide a way to do that.

How much of your original vision was about creating a consortium versus simply using technology to redesign courses?

CIC has a history of creating consortia on particular issues about which our members have a lot of questions—and not so many answers—as a way of piloting new approaches, discovering some things, and providing a mechanism for institutions to share with, and learn from, one another. We thought that a consortium would work as well on this subject as it has in other areas. So we announced the consortium and were astonished by the number of institutions that were interested! We received close to one hundred finished applications, which is a very high level of interest for something that requires a team at an institution to put a proposal together. We were torn as a membership organization: on one hand, the consortium has twenty slots and it would be nice to have only twenty applications so that you don't disappoint any member. On the other hand, as a measure of the popularity of the topic, as well as ensuring that you're going to select really strong institutions to participate, it was gratifying to receive more than twenty. There were, unfortunately, a lot of disappointed people.

We learned some things from the applications that I didn't anticipate. We learned, for example, that almost every one of the nearly one hundred institutions already had years of experience working with online education. However, very little of it was in the liberal arts. It was almost all in the professional fields that those colleges also sometimes teach. That meant that we didn't need to be so concerned about the most rudimentary aspects of running an online program because experience and motivation were already in place.

Were there any other surprises?

The application form was very clear in saying that we were looking for online or hybrid courses that would be good alternatives to traditional courses in upper-level humanities subjects, and we received many proposals for just that—the Shakespeare course taught online instead of in the traditional classroom, for example. But we also received many proposals for new courses that were fresh syntheses, intellectual constructions that were quite creative and imaginative but frankly did not correspond to courses for which they could substitute in the traditional curriculum. And that created a dilemma for us when we were doing the selection process. We accepted into the consortium some concepts that were clearly substitutes for traditional upper- level courses and basic humanities majors, but we also accepted a number with more creative conceptions of courses where there was not a clear substitution of an online course for a traditional course. We asked ourselves whether the instructions had been clear. And we concluded that our

instructions were clear but that for whatever reason people interpreted them in a way that gave vent to more creative impulses than just creating a course from traditional material.

Another surprise in the review process was related to the question we asked about sustainability: Once the course has been piloted, how did the writers of the proposals think that the courses were going to be sustained? The majority of applicants said that they expected that once they developed their courses, people from other institutions would come flocking to them. Almost no one imagined a scenario in which most of their students would go to another institution to take online courses. We'll see once we launch the courses what the flow of traffic actually will be.

What about on the cost saving side of it? What do you see as the potential for the technology and the consortium model to save costs or find new efficiencies for institutions?

We imagined great cost savings coming from this project in several ways: the first was to enable a college to drop a traditional course in order to replace it with an online course that would then enable a second, third, fourth, or fifth institution not to offer that online course or to offer it cooperatively with the college that had taken the lead in creating that course. We envisioned some efficiencies that way. So far we have not seen that borne out, but it might come. These are early days, after all. The second way in which we saw the potential for cost savings was through the multiple iterations of a course, once the one-time costs of developing it had been completed. That will obviously also take time to see how it plays out.

What we did not anticipate was the reluctance of some to think about cost savings as a main goal of the project. I can't imagine that these are institutions where no one has talked about budget cutting, given the climate these days. Nonetheless, a number of the people involved in the consortium had assumed that there will not be any cost savings, that there is little reason to focus on saving money, and that any savings in one aspect of the course would allow time or money to be devoted to enriching the same course in other ways. At the moment we don't have a clear view about how we should handle that question with institutions in the consortium where cost cutting has not already been a major topic of discussion on campus.

What do you see as the most challenging aspect of the project so far?

This great variation in expectations about cost sharing as a goal of the project has been one big challenge. A second challenge that we are just beginning to see the edge of has to do with actual implementation. Institutions have slightly different calendars, different

credit granting mechanisms, and different procedures for handling students from other institutions. There are a lot of issues—essentially registrar issues—that we are going to be facing in the next few months. We had not fully anticipated the full range of issues. Use of different platforms for offering courses is a third area in which we did not fully think through the need for consistency.

There are lots of examples of agreements between small numbers of institutions to share courses, but this is the only example I know of where twenty institutions are entering into a cross-enrollment arrangement. Do you know of any others that are at this scale?

The long-time group based at Regis University in Denver, the Online Consortium of Colleges and Universities, involves a large number of institutions.

Do you have any insights as to how the initiative has been received within the partner institutions?

Yes, very positively. There is no question that the immediate participants—the faculty members and administrators who have been involved in the course development and those at the consortium meetings—are quite enthusiastic about it. They are learning a lot, they are finding it interesting to work with one another, they are excited about offering their own courses, and there is some evidence that the people back home who are not directly involved—to the extent that they know about these projects—are also enthusiastic and hopeful that it will lead to some good results that will guide those colleges in the future as they make choices about the possibility of further online and hybrid instruction.

This project is designed as a two year pilot. Are there longer term outcomes that you are hoping to see?

It would be wonderful if all of these colleges decided all of these courses were a great success and they led to a seamless mechanism for any student at any one of the twenty colleges to sign up for courses at any of the others. It would also be fortuitous if the flows of this traffic balanced well and could be in equilibrium forever. CIC is not likely to be able to run a consortium indefinitely, so our role will be limited to the two years and perhaps a year or two beyond that. But we don't see our role as doing more than creating a "best practices" demonstration from which many other colleges can draw lessons.

Are you able to say whether you see the potential to expand the consortium?

Given the level of interest, we would like to do more to help other colleges get involved and we have thought about several ways of doing that. The first is to try to create a second consortium, to do something very similar that is informed by the lessons learned in this one. The other thing we thought of doing is to extend this particular consortium so that the most experienced colleges can draw additional institutions in. These are all very early ideas, and we are not far enough along to know what approach makes the most sense. But as a membership organization that wants to help as many of our 633 members come to grips with what is a central phenomenon in higher education these days, we think we ought to try to do more than simply carry out this two-year experiment.

Is there anything else that you would like people to know about this initiative?

My guess is that we are going to find that different fields will discover different ways of using online instruction to their advantage. We made no judgments in advance about which fields or topics within fields we want to feature in these forty courses. If we were going to do another consortium we might be somewhat more directive about which topics and fields should be included, and we might look for concentrations of multiple courses in the same or similar fields. And we would also be more conscious of not creating what is essentially competition between courses within the consortium. For instance, a course in a language field, where oral instruction is an important goal, would use the technology very differently from, say, a history course, where easy access to documents in digital form provides another way of enriching the experience for the student. We are still learning how this technology will be used to advantage differently in different fields and courses.

You describe one of the motivations for this initiative as creating courses that could substitute for existing courses, but we have heard from some members that this is viewed as one of the more problematic aspects of the consortium, in the sense that people in other departments worry about competition from these online courses offered elsewhere. Do you have any advice for department chairs or the administrators who are trying to manage these tensions?

I think it depends on who is in a department. If you assume, for example, that every small college English department of six people has a Shakespearean, the temptation might be to eliminate most of those Shakespeareans and have one course that serves the interests of all the institutions. But practically speaking, that won't work. No college is going to let go of their Shakespearean and use someone else's course. It is just seen as too fundamental a course. On the other hand, most English majors will include a

required course on Beowulf or Old English, and there are not many experts on the faculties of small colleges in those subjects. You often have someone teaching these courses who really isn't an expert and doesn't have much of his or her professional identity tied up in it. So if there were a Beowulf course that all of these colleges could use, my guess is that they'd do it. And the faculty member who had been teaching that course could use her time for some other purpose.

So maybe the secret then is identifying those courses like the Beowulf example that are required but for which there are relatively few experts in the field, so it wouldn't be seen as direct competition.

That might work. And as you go through the different fields of the humanities you could guess which of those fields or topics those are likely to be.

It's been interesting to see the thought processes of the faculty members in deciding what courses to propose. Should they offer a course that is going to have maximum appeal to students at other campuses? Should it be something that is taught widely, a sort of standard course like modern Chinese history? Or should they do something very unique and special that wouldn't be available elsewhere?

Let's take modern Chinese history. Very few small colleges would have a Chinese history expert on the faculty. A lot of them are now teaching Chinese language Level 1 or 2. If they are not using an adjunct Chinese native speaker to teach these courses, maybe they have someone who has a PhD in Chinese language and literature who also can teach the Chinese history course, if there is one. But it's unlikely that they have someone on the faculty whose main field is Chinese history. As the college curriculum becomes more international, and as it is recognized that each college cannot have an expert on every culture of the world about which it wishes to provide instruction, the shared online or hybrid course model may provide a solution to a genuine problem.

In big universities you often have the same problem. Even a history department of forty people, as Harvard or Berkeley would have, is not going to cover the history of every country in the world.

Next steps

CIC consortium faculty members are now putting finishing touches on their courses in preparation for a spring 2015 launch. They will then have an opportunity to refine their courses before offering them a second time—and opening up enrollment to students

from all the other consortium members. These faculty members and their administrative team members have built up to this point through engagement in a series of national and regional workshops and online forums organized by CIC and Ithaka S+R.