The Business of Disruptive Learning: A Research Proposal

Nicole Christen

University of British Columbia
DISRUPTIVE LEARNING RESEARCH PROPOSAL

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Technological advancements are enabling innovative flexible learning initiatives, such as massive open online courses (MOOCs), in post-secondary education. New levels of open access to educational content (that was previously restricted to students in a set program at a specific institution) have the potential to reshape the entire industry of higher learning (Hellweg, 2013). The term “disruptive learning” has been coined from this emerging upheaval to the system. Along with having educational implications, disruptive learning is also a business anomaly, creating both anxiety and opportunity (Hellweg, 2013; Lewin, 2012a).

With top universities rapidly implementing flexible learning strategies and joining consortiums to develop MOOCs (Coursera, n.d.; edX, n.d.; Udacity, n.d., University of British Columbia, n.d.), an analysis of the driving force to embrace these changes is an important undertaking to properly evaluate this trend. MOOCs and other flexible learning initiatives do not have a proven business model for sustainability, nor are they based on extensive research that backs the pedagogical benefits of this approach. Rather, innovators and leaders of MOOC ventures agree that this educational delivery system is still very much in the experimental stage (DeSantis, 2012; Hyman, 2012; Korn & Levitz, 2013; Lewin, 2012b; Young, 2012).

Statement of Problem

If flexible learning initiatives are not based on proven models or solid research, then anxiety will likely be observed among those implementing such endeavors. Taking this into account, there is a need for inquiries into the unknowns of flexible learning ventures; however, underlying anxieties must be first be exposed and articulated. I
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propose a research project, using a qualitative interview design (Turner, 2010), which will provide a broad analysis of the anxieties involved with the adoption of flexible learning initiatives.

Special attention will be given to the anxiety drivers that are creating pain points at an institutional level. I will focus primarily on post-secondary education, with the understanding that the approach and resulting framework (described below) will be applicable to other educational levels and settings. For the sake of maintaining a clear focus on the business aspects of disruptive learning, educational theory and the desires of students will not be explored in depth.

The findings of this research project will be used to create an initial framework, open for additions and revisions by students at the University of British Columbia (UBC). The possibility exists for this framework to be opened to contributors outside the UBC community in the future. Due to the emerging nature of flexible learning, and in the spirit of constructivism and open learning, a regenerative framework that can evolve over time is critical. The best platform for this framework (wiki, webpage, Google doc, etc.) will be determined over the course of the research and will be designed in such a way that it can be moved elsewhere, if needed, to adapt to future technological change.

**Literature Review Summary**

As mentioned previously, MOOCs are a novel educational delivery system. No successful precedent exists for MOOC providers and investors to emulate as they implement and market these online courses (DeSantis, 2012; Hyman, 2012; MacLeod, 2006). MOOC providers are testing various monetization strategies, but there is no evidence for the long-term sustainability of any such experimental ideas. Additionally the
launches of MOOC platforms are expensive endeavors, with millions of investor dollars being poured into these ventures (DeSantis, 2012). From a marketing standpoint, those in charge of leading or adopting flexible learning ventures are likely hesitant to publicly articulate their anxieties surrounding these initiatives. With that said, openly identifying the anxieties around flexible learning and articulating specific concerns may allow for faster and more effective problem-solving and research, increasing the chances of long-term sustainability of such educational ventures in our digital age.

Given the risk, why are higher learning institutions joining and developing flexible learning initiatives? Why not wait until a sustainable model has been proven? Rubin (2013) points out that current business models in post-secondary contexts are no longer effective due to the technological changes and needs of digital learners. Do decision makers in higher learning settings feel that the potential for loss is reduced, given the inefficacy of traditional models?

Additionally, Lewin (2012b) highlights the fact that tens of thousands of learners from around the globe are enrolling in MOOC courses. Are universities and other institutions fearful of being left behind if they wait too long to engage in these ventures? Do the benefits of being an early adopter outweigh the risks?

**Methodology**

The first step of this research project will be to identify influential resources and institutional and corporate leaders who are at the front lines of flexible learning. Following a similar approach to Halverson, Graham, Spring, and Drysdale (2012), citation trends will be analyzed within Google Scholar. Key terms that will be searched and will compose the main categories are: MOOC, flexible learning, disruptive learning,
and online learning. Influencers will be organized according to total number of citations, citations within each category, cross-categorical citations, whether citations are recent (within the past 6 months, 12 months, 24 months, and 36 months), and their relationship to the topic (innovator, investor, researcher, reporter, or resource). The results of this part of the methodology will be used to select potential candidates for the interview stage of this research and to begin forming parts of the framework that will result from this project. Additionally members of the UBC community who are involved in local flexible learning initiatives, and recommended by the faculty supervisor of this research project, will also be contacted for interview purposes.

The primary methodology for identifying anxieties and pain points surrounding flexible learning will be qualitative interviews. Two qualitative interview approaches will be used: the general interview guide approach and standardized open-ended interviews (Turner, 2010). The general interview guide approach will be used for recorded face-to-face and phone/Skype interviews, and will be reserved for 5-10 top influencers. Standardized open-ended interviews will be administered via email, or through online survey software, with the goal of interviewing 25-50 people (depending on the number of influencers that are identified in the first step of this project). Due to the sensitive nature of the topic of identifying anxieties, balanced by the possible desire of some interviewees to be acknowledged for their expertise, all participants will have the option of being named or remaining anonymous.

Prior to the administration of interviews, several pilot interviews will be conducted in each interview style to ensure the line of questioning is clear and that no flaws or limitations are present with the interview design (Turner, 2010). If weaknesses
are identified, then necessary refinements will be made prior to the formal interview process. Questions will be formed using guidelines suggested by Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009), McNamara (2009), and Turner (2010). These questions will be centered on a hypothetical university situation to better encourage openness among interviewees.

This is an applied research project aiming to interpret problems within the business sphere of flexible learning, framing them for future research (Roll-Hansen, 2009). The results of this research will not be statistical in nature. Rather, interview results will be grouped into themes based on patterns that emerge during the interpretation process (Turner, 2010). Recommendations and strategies by Gay et al. (2009) will be used to safeguard the validity of the data during collection and interpretation. The anxieties, pain points, or other observed themes will be categorized into the final framework, described previously, to serve as a regenerative engine to spur further research in the field of flexible learning.

The timeline for this research project will be roughly two months in length, with the goal of being completed by Sunday, August 11, 2013. The first step of the project, identifying influencers for interview purposes and contacting prospective interviewees will be completed by June 30, 2013. Pilot interviews will be conducted by this date and refinements to the questions will be made prior to July 1, 2013. Additionally, the platform for the resulting framework will be selected and set up with a tentative, initial design. Interviews will commence on July 1, 2013, and will be completed by July 15, 2013. Data analysis, interpretation, and framework design will be completed between July 15, 2013, and August 11, 2013. Additionally, a research paper reporting the process
and results of this project will be written during this time and submitted on August 11, 2013.

**Significance and Rationale**

This framework will be of specific value to UBC considering the flexible learning initiatives that are being planned, researched, and rolled out over the next five years (University of British Columbia, n.d.). My research project will provide a springboard for exploration that can be applied to the current launch of flexible learning strategies at UBC and to higher learning, in general. Additionally this research has potential for significance in identifying emerging business models, along with potential business opportunities, that meet the changing needs of numerous higher learning institutions.
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