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Content and Context: In Search of Credentials

Submitted by John V. Lombardi on May 10, 2012 - 11:48am

Blog: [Reality Check](#) ^[1]

The determined effort to ensure that everyone has a post-secondary credential of some kind spawns a wide range of new educational products. Most will eventually produce revenue for the provider and deliver a certificate or diploma of value to the purchaser. These efforts, whether the open course experiments of famous universities like MIT and Harvard, existing distance education initiatives, free coursework aggregators, or other related initiatives put college content into a low cost or public domain venue. The American Council on Education's endorsement of these initiatives recognizes this entrepreneurial environment as a mainstream opportunity.

In addition to the long-standing engagement of community and technical colleges and various distance education providers, these contribute more alternatives for people in search of some form of credentialing differentiated from a traditional college or university degree in time, context, expense, and content. While there is much hype and self-congratulation in some of these activities, they reflect both unmet and newly created needs. Inspired by other previously unknown Internet needs such as Facebook or Twitter, the promoters of these knowledge products of varying character anticipate delivering a credential with brand associations that provide derivative as well as actual value at a price accessible to large numbers of people.

As is usually the case when new business opportunities appear, many entrepreneurs rush in, each with their own product to meet the expected new demand. Traditional suppliers of higher education seek an appropriate response. Should they try to commercialize their brand by also publishing courses online? Should they partner with an aggressive and effective for-profit or foundation-funded not-for-profit enterprise to leverage faculty intellectual property into credential producing products for large audiences? Should they offer academic services to validate learning acquired through non-traditional means leading to credentials or college degrees?

Traditionalists expect that these initiatives will continue the dilution of the faculty-driven teaching and learning process of a real college education. Others worry that transforming learning materials into commodities and endorsing consumer paid testing

processes for quality control will result in low-level engagement, thin learning, and debased college degrees. Some see the emergence of brand marketing as a device to extract the stored value of university names by labeling a much wider array of products of presumed consumer interest, albeit with some significant danger of diluting and cheapening carefully cultivated brand quality.

This reflects the further disaggregation of the college enterprise into its primary components: content, context, and now credentials. The traditional college experience, defined in its pure form by a residential four-year college experience, integrated context and content into a product of high value to many consumers delivering a specific degree. However, the changing economy, the expanding demand for specialized skills, and the substantial investment required to pay for college contexts have all contributed to a demand for context-free post-secondary content.

The Internet has made content instantly and cheaply available, but more importantly it changes the scale of higher education. When we require the integration of content and context, we also limit the ability to achieve significant economies of scale. When we free content from context, however, we can serve content to large consumer groups at a price that decreases with the addition of each customer, since the incremental cost of serving content to additional consumers is close to zero.

The expansion of post-secondary content delivery has been limited to some extent by the challenge of credentialing. While we can separate out content from context relatively easily in many important academic disciplines, the challenge of credentialing is less easily met. Traditionally we connect content and credential in the same package: we teach and then test whether the student learned what we taught. We create structured packages of content that through a sequence of teaching and testing produce a certifiable degree credential. However, the Internet world makes a required connection between content and credential unnecessary. Instead, entrepreneurs begin to create credentialing services that validate cumulative learning or skill capabilities wherever acquired.

In this operational model, the consumer chooses a credential, acquires the skills defined by the credential from any or multiple providers (perhaps free courses from Harvard or MIT), and validates the learning and skills through testing procedures of the credentialing entrepreneur. The result is a certificate or degree. Illustrative Internet models already exist in other businesses.

Take for example the notion of news. News previously came to us within the context of printed paper, packaged and delivered at structured times and places. The Internet broke the link between context and content for the news. In the beginning, online news was free, delivered by name brand providers like the *New York Times*. Once the model of free news stabilized with a significant user base, paywalls translated free to consumer purchased news. Similarly, we may find that free courses from name-brand universities will become paid either through charges assessed by the credentialing enterprises or priced directly by the university content providers.

The impact on traditional colleges and universities will differ. Those institutions that package content with context will become increasingly specialized players, serving particular constituencies of 18-24 year olds with specific goals. Context may well become an elite specialty product for some, and it may also become specialized around

disciplines requiring physical assets for instruction such as laboratory sciences and many health related professional programs. At the lower and middle of the academic prestige and selectivity ranks, institutions will need to find ways to compete directly with the content and credentialing marketplace. The special blend of content and context of selective colleges and universities will, nonetheless become even more valuable, more elite, and more sought after by those preparing for graduate and professional degrees and anticipating leadership positions in high compensation occupations.

Predicting the future is necessarily risky, but the separation of content from context and the rise of independent credentialing are disruptive processes that appear fully launched, even if the ultimate stable structure is as yet unclear.

[John V. Lombardi](#) ^[2]

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