Planning a Campus to Support Hybrid Learning

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Our goal in the recent Ocotillo workshops was to explore a new approach to campus planning might best support a progressive vision of hybrid learning. We emphasized the notion that *learning is fundamentally social*, and that the Maricopa colleges should focus on providing a powerful social context for learning.

We concluded that, as hybrid pedagogy evolves, significantly less space per student need be devoted to classrooms, while well-planned "mixed-use" space for informal, active and collaborative learning should be developed or added to. The adjacencies and relationships of such spaces to each other and to classrooms, their general atmosphere, as well as the organization of services they offer, will become increasingly important.

In this vision, the campus becomes more of a community resource for learning, more of a workplace, and less of a traditional "school". The vision reflects the fact that the majority of Maricopa's students are working people. Well-integrated online learning, sometimes taking place on campus, and sometimes off, at least for some segments of the community college population, will pick up some of the more traditional roles of schooling. Learning will permeate the larger community, in homes, cafes, libraries and other gathering places; it will not be confined to the campus. With energetic and imaginative development of computer-based learning, reinforced by a rich, engaged and collaborative on-campus experience, capital investment can be reduced, the quality of learning can be improved, and the community as a whole better served.

Hybrid Learning

The term "hybrid" is used to cover a range of educational approaches. Our concept of a hybrid approach totally integrates on-line learning, typically off-campus, with campus-based learning to the point where one mode could not exist without the other. This is distinct from the many recent developments in campus-based learning where computer-supported learning supplements, or even replaces, traditional classroom instruction. (A well-known example is the "math emporium" at Virginia Tech.) It is also distinct from the multitude of distance learning opportunities that now exist, some high-tech and sophisticated in approach, some low-tech and basic, which provide opportunities to those who cannot easily reach a campus, or those who find distance leaning more affordable or more suited to their style of learning.

"Communities of Knowledge" and "Social Capital"

Learning is about much more than rote mastery of a stated curriculum. There is often, indeed almost always, a hidden agenda, which is to create a "community of knowledge", a group with shared expertise, shared understanding and common values.

On traditional residential campuses, such communities are built in a 24-hour environment. The classroom alone may be a less efficient system for developing a "community of knowledge" than other components of the 24-hour experience, such as serendipitous hallway conversations, late night discussions, study groups, social events, etc., but takes its place as a component in a comprehensive experience.

Notions that this "hidden agenda" theory of education is only relevant to elite students at selective liberal arts colleges are false. The corporate world is becoming increasingly aware that the problem-solving, analytical, socially aware skills that develop in communities of practice are increasingly important in all areas of the labor market in a service and information-based economy. By-the-book education is not enough.

In reality, the great majority of higher education students commute, and many of them are part-time, with jobs and family obligations often competing for attention. They don't have access to the "community of knowledge" available to full-time residential students. The challenge is to give these students the opportunity to gain membership in a such a community, rather than leave them to accept the notion that the classes they take at their community college are simply a perfunctory step to gaining the necessary credentials for a different job or a pay raise.

Building "communities of knowledge" or "communities of practice", as John Seely Brown calls them in describing the workforce, is essential to rebuilding what Robert Putnam, in his book Bowling Alone, has called "social capital," the collective strength that grows from well-organized communities. Public institutions of higher education, relying as they do on tax dollars, have an obligation to consider the larger goals of building the fabric of a civil society.

Knowing vs. Being

Often, what goes on in the classroom is a kind of ritualized transmission of information, with emphasis on the teacher's explaining (knowing), rather than on the students' learning to do (being). On a traditional campus, this has a less significant impact on learning as classes are one component of a much larger context, and can even be inspiring, if the teacher is charismatic, or has a unique approach to making complex material comprehensible. In contrast, a routine classroom experience on a commuter campus is often not supplemented by the larger context that helps to create the "community of knowledge," stunting the full integration of knowledge.

If much of the transmission of information could be moved away from the classroom to an on-line environment, time spent by commuter students on campus could be more precious and concentrated on building "communities of knowledge". In other words, campuses could be used to achieve what campuses do best: building learning communities, and reinforcing the meaning of learning.

The existence of a strong, face-to-face learning community will help overcome some of the perceived limitations of distance learning, and could reduce the resulting high dropout

rates. On-line learning will take place in the context of a strong place-based community, with the particular course put in the context of a larger learning community on the campus.

The intended result is a kind of reciprocity, where what happens on the campus becomes much more effective because some of the traditional classroom material is handled more efficiently and more flexibly on-line, and what happens on campus makes the distance learning component more effective.

Campus as Classroom

If we acknowledge the "hidden agenda" in higher education, we have to conclude that the whole campus is a classroom, a complex, interwoven system for learning. Courses taking a hybrid learning approach will require different thinking about what happens in a classroom, and consequently about how a classroom is organized and designed, also about the physical context in which the classroom is situated.

Classrooms themselves may need to be rethought when hybrid learning takes hold, and may need to provide a greater variety of learning opportunities. We can learn from looking at the best elementary schools how a rich setting for learning can be created, and may be able to apply some of what we learn to the college level. The classroom can be thought of more as a workshop where things are made (as a chemistry lab for example).

The immediate environment of a classroom also becomes important. It is often on the way out of a class that a sudden realization strikes home and the most powerful conversation of the hour takes place, perhaps with the teacher, perhaps with a fellow-student. If there is no place to sit and talk, the conversation may die and the moment will be lost. The hybrid learning setting must capitalize on the relatively brief time spent by students on the campus, and must nurture these moments. There must also be places where students can gather in an informal study group. These areas need to be semi-public, not tucked away. They need not be wholly quiet, and often a little ambient noise and conversation adds a sense of vitality to things. William H. Whyte has taught us in his Social Life of Small Urban Spaces that people like to stop and have conversations right in the thick of things. Buildings are determined to be "efficient" by planners on the basis of assignable space, such as classrooms or offices, and the net square feet of a building are compared to the gross square feet. But often it is the unassigned space, the circulation space, where the most learning per square foot happens. This space needs to be thought through as carefully as the classroom space itself, as this is the space that will determine much of the learning experience of students. The overall feeling of buildings must be carefully scrutinized too. Is the big reception area at the entrance a welcome or a guard post? Is the building one which I can make my own, or is it telling me how to behave, and even how to think? If all learning is fundamentally social, as we postulate, and the on-campus component of hybrid learning is focused on giving learning meaning by putting it in a social context, space that seems to insist on silence and reverence may be counter-productive.

Beyond the classroom is the larger campus. A real learning campus requires a relative density, and this is hard to achieve in Arizona, where land is cheap and buildings tend to be single story. The older campuses of the Maricopa system are quite spread out, so that the paths and spaces between tend to be about travel rather than arrival. The journey from the parking lot to the classroom is a challenge more than an experience. Ideally, everything should be within a ten-minute walk circle, and the clustering of buildings should make outdoor spaces into a series of outdoor rooms. For part-time commuter students parking needs to be convenient, and this will eventually mean structured parking close to the core of the campus, though it may be hard to move to structured parking when students are used to parking free.

In many situations, classroom time will be replaced or supplemented by time in a resource center, perhaps the next generation of the Glendale tech centers, integrated with or adjacent to the one-top-shopping student services, perhaps a development of the library/tech center/student center/food court/student service area that we looked at the Johnson Center at George Mason University. These new centers must be real magnets for students, and must be able to draw members of the community for more than just class attendance time. A real learning community requires a range of interwoven activity: solitary study and reflection, group learning, interaction with teachers, social time. Conventional campus planning may not provide the answers, and we may need to look for new models that better support the development of a learning community for commuter students.

Financial Implications

There may be major opportunities for reduction in capital investment on commuter campuses. If classroom use is dramatically reduced, and students are building communities of knowledge in more informal settings, it should be possible to achieve far more "learning per square foot". We can already see this high efficiency of learning per square foot in the tech centers at Glendale. This concept of highly efficient learning can be expanded to many components of experience that make up a learning community. On the other hand, investment in the development and continuous improvement of strong hybrid course materials may well increase operating costs, and the challenge of shifting funds from capital investment to operations will be considerable.

Next Steps

Any successful development of hybrid learning will require significant development effort at the curricular level, as well as major administrative effort. The first step must be to test in broad terms the hypothesis that hybrid learning will lead to better learning at lower cost. This means looking at how space is currently used, and hypothesizing, in a broad-brush conceptual fashion, how facilities growth in the future might be managed more effectively if a hybrid approach to learning were to evolve. It also means imagining, with the help of faculty at the various colleges, some scenarios in which particular parts of the curriculum might be adapted more completely to the hybrid

approach, and thinking through the different building and campus characteristics that such courses would suggest. Ideally, pilot projects will be funded and publicized.

While this work must be highly collaborative, and needs inventiveness and flexibility as well as careful attention to data analysis, it also requires shepherding, or leadership, at a system-wide level. A rich and effective approach to furthering the concept of hybrid learning at Maricopa must draw on and encourage the distinct strengths of each of the colleges, while looking for opportunities for interwoven and mutually supportive development. Ideas and experiences, and even resources, must be shared.

These investigations, if undertaken quickly and in such a way as to develop trust, will provide important input to the master planning process now under way at all the colleges. They should also become a component in planning for the bond issue that will fund the system's capital improvements.

The Maricopa system's existing national reputation for innovation and commitment to excellence in teaching and learning is a good indicator that it can be a pioneer in developing what is almost certainly the next wave of real progress in higher education resulting from the rapid evolution of new technologies.