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Innovation in the Classroom: The JMU Experience...So Far

Innovation in the Classroom: The JMU Experience...So Far

Dr. Timothy Walton

Introduction

Technology has tremendous impact on people's personal lives—but also professions.

A century ago, as the automobile was becoming increasingly popular, there were questions about what would happen to all of the blacksmiths. Over the last few decades, in the age of the Internet, there have been similar concerns about what has happened to travel agents, not to mention secretaries with typewriters, journalists, and many others.

What I want to talk about today is whether university instructors, including those teaching intelligence analysis, are the blacksmiths of the early 21st century: folks who provided a valuable—even indispensable—service for a long time, but were swept away by technological change.

How JMU got concerned

For those of you who are not familiar with James Madison University we are a state school, in Harrisonburg Virginia, in the beautiful Shenandoah Valley, with about 20,000 students, and a commitment to undergraduate education and direct contact between faculty and students.

We've been committed to the classic model of higher education in the United States, and we think we're probably typical of a lot of schools.

But make no mistake; this classic model-- bricks and mortar, lectures, and final exams; not to mention fraternities and football—is under serious assault by economic reality and technological change: online-only universities, blended classes, asynchronous distance learning—and especially the newest entrant: massive online open courses (MOOCs), etc.

As you may have heard, MIT and Stanford, among others, have already embarked on the MOOC sector of this online world, offering a large number of classes for free. Does your school have more name recognition than those two; can you beat that price? But on the other hand, have MIT and Stanford figured out a way to deliver actual academic credit—as opposed to just a certificate or even less—or determine who is actually taking the courses, not to mention who takes the tests and how well they do? And can these big universities continue to offer a substantial array of classes at no cost to the students?

Many questions and issues

Other questions abound:

- Who's the audience (People who just want to learn, or folks seeing some kind of professional credential? Do you really want your doctor or lawyer to have just an online

degree?)

- Is online work useful for background or an introduction, making classroom time more useful and valuable by being devoted to thinking, advanced work, laboratory experiments, interchange with the instructor and other expert guest speakers, assessment and feedback, etc.
- Are online classes fine for training, or skills-based classes (how to do a specific task), but less so for education (how to address any problem)?
- What's the sustainable, long-term business model for spending the resources to make an effective online class (sound content, quality video, constant updating, etc.), and—as in the case of the MOOCs--not charging for it?
- And—not least important from the point of view of students—is there still some value for those other university experiences outside the classroom, such as fraternities, sports, clubs, learning to deal with alcohol and drugs, etc.—not to mention meeting a future potential spouse?

We, of course, already have strong participation in IAFIE from intelligence-oriented, online-only institutions that charge tuition; and I believe they have an indispensable role in providing access to educational services for those who would otherwise not have the money or time to be full-time students at a bricks and mortar institution. So it's not a competition for the same potential audience.

Rather the issues are:

- What is the distinctive role and contribution for each kind of intelligence classroom: online and bricks and mortar?
- Are economic trends endangering the ability of bricks and mortar schools to continue to make their contribution?
- What can traditional institutions do about that?

The challenge to higher education that is being hurled at us by online education is already starting to appear in the mainstream press,¹ a sure indicator for intelligence analysts that this is not the future—but is already embedded in current reality.

Traditional schools who do not anticipate the wave of change that is coming will be overwhelmed by it. This is just as true in the intelligence classroom as in others. What I want to suggest today is that we—as experts in intelligence analysis—are much better positioned to survive this than professors of Latin, or medieval history, or fine arts (among many others).

¹ David Brooks, "The Practical University," *New York Times*, April 4, 2013; Thomas L. Friedman, "The Professors' Big Stage," *New York Times*, March 5, 2013; Thomas L. Friedman, "Revolution Hits the Universities," *New York Times*, January 26, 2013; Gillian Tett, "Welcome to the Virtual University," *Financial Times*, February 1, 2013.

Let's be clear, I love and value these scholarly endeavors—especially fine arts—but the academic market, economic trends, and technology are dooming them to minor roles; not least because they probably have so little idea about how to recognize the threat or respond.

James Madison University is starting the process of grappling with a new future, and increasingly we in the Intelligence Program at JMU believe that innovation and creativity are an important part of responding to the challenge. At this point, we have more questions than answers. So I want to open a dialogue, in the IAFIE context, of how intelligence education can respond, perhaps even prosper, in the coming world of more and more online instruction. I don't pretend that we have all of the answers. I just want to give you an interim report; and hear your ideas.

As a start, we propose using some of the classic analytic techniques, including problem definition, checking assumptions, and scenarios to chart a path toward survival in the coming environment. We all know what the implications of an “intelligence failure” are.

I actually think this challenge is useful, because it is forcing us to ask profound questions about what are the purposes of a university.

Problem definition

At the heart of the problem, I believe is the traditional business model of American higher education, which is being challenged by fundamental economic trends.

Classically a college education, at a bricks and mortar institution, was the ticket to a good job and a middle class lifestyle: kids, house, cars, vacations, the whole bit. And those kids would go to college and continue the cycle. There was an idea that more or less everyone could eventually achieve this, although people who thought about it seriously realized that this would be impossible for 100 percent of the population. In “the good old days,” the thought was, nonetheless, the majority would be able to get a college education.

Then came the financial crisis of 2008—and the resulting gutting of the incomes and savings of much of the American middle class, the traditional consumers of higher education. This is not the appropriate forum for me to go into the details, but if you are in doubt, just research the statistics about the trillions of dollars—yes, that's a “t”—of income and wealth that were destroyed (yes; acknowledging that there has been something of a recovery, at least in the stock market—but how many middle class families are benefiting from that?).

The economic shocks of 2008, the reverberations of which are still with us, have put us in a new world of decreasing government support for education, rising tuition, and thus—most crucially—an inability of a substantial proportional of the population to be able to pay for the classic model of high education.

In a related problem, the American economy is—more or less—grappling with the housing and stock market bubbles; but still unresolved is the huge amount of loans students have taken out to try to pay the increasing expenses of the traditional, bricks and mortar, model of high education. Now, many students are finding that they have huge debts, just at the time when they cannot find

well-paying jobs that will enable them to repay that debt in a reasonable time (so that they can also get a house, have kids, etc.).

And, of course, many complain that education is not properly focused and there is a shortage of good service providers who do not need a college degree, such as plumbers and auto mechanics, among many others. Education in America is a mess! (I'm not even going to dwell on students who can't read or write well.)

Assumptions check

It's time to perform that invaluable analytic undertaking: an assumptions check. Among the assumptions of the old model was that:

- Higher education produced more or less value for money.
- Many students could—frankly—get through college without working very hard.
- There was a way to pay for this. Either (1) students' families could afford the bills, or (2) students could take out loans.

But high unemployment and student debt have exposed that these assumptions were false. Only a much smaller percentage of the American population can afford the traditional model.

Many, and perhaps most, students—and their families, who are paying the bills—are looking for ways to get qualified for a job with the least possible expenditure. Convenience and low cost are overwhelming most other considerations when looking for higher education. And that is what is behind the rise of online education, especially the free MOOCs, that has caught the attention of the media.

All of this is raising hugely significant issues about the value—we're talking dollars here, not sentiment—of other aspects of the university experience including:

- Accountability (yes, grades as even a rough measure of what was learned).
- Personal contact with instructors with wisdom and experience, including as models of how to think and act responsibly (i.e., not just the content of lectures).
- Abstract attitudes toward life and learning (we call them “habits of mind” at JMU), such as curiosity, tolerance, persistence. etc.

Call me crazy--a Neanderthal, a Luddite, or whatever—but I think accountability, human contact, and the habits of mind embodied in a liberal arts education are important and have value in life; and much more importantly in intelligence analysis in defense of national security.

And students are going to have to work harder to get the skills and attitudes that will help them to prosper in a fast-moving global economy where the competition is intense: what you get out of an education is largely determined by what you put into it.

Scenarios

So how do we, in the future, preserve the value of bricks and mortar higher education in America—and particularly as it applies to intelligence education—in light of the challenge of online education? Can both emerge stronger and more focused on their natural constituencies?

What are some scenarios—possible pathways ahead—that can hopefully help us to understand the range of possibilities?

So some of things we at JMU are working on as ways to expand resources, improve competency of students in problem solving, and confront other issues posed by the online revolution include:

Gaming and simulation

If online education, not to mention the games that so many young adults spend so much time on, are so seductive, is there a way we can shape intelligence education to attract students—and more importantly still retain the essential educational objectives?

At JMU, we have a simulation of the outcome of Iranian nuclear program in which the students research the goals and viewpoints of the various actors, and then try to achieve those goals in interaction with other student actors, who, of course, have their own goals and viewpoints. The learning objectives are not only to understand the very different ways in which others see the world, but also to understand that to accomplish your goals you cannot just act on your own but have to take into account the perspectives of potential allies and adversaries, making compromises and adjustments along the way.

Corporate partnerships

If federal, state, and local governments can no longer afford the financial support that can keep tuition affordable, is there an alternative: corporations. We have found that consulting firms, both large and small, value graduates from our program and are willing to put their money where their mouths are by providing scholarships, support to innovative to instruction, and other things that we are doing. And they hire our graduates—even in today's tough job market.

For what I trust are understandable reasons, I'm not going to give you a list of companies that help us; but I do want to encourage you to build your own list.

Local government partnerships

Students—rightly—love internships as a way to add heft to their typically light resumes. Working for the summer at a big federal agency can get a student experience, contacts, a security clearance, etc. The problem, of course, is that in the era of budget cuts and sequestration, internships are among the easiest things to cut. We're finding it harder and harder to get students into internships in Washington—perhaps you've had a similar experience.

So, sadly, students have to look at unpaid—volunteer—activities as an alternative. Admittedly, this does not help on the financial part of the problem; but it does help on the experience side. For example, our students help the Harrisonburg police department to use geospatial technology, matching reports of crime and other incidents to specific localities, to assist in planning to make the best use of limited resources, such as officers, squad cars, ambulances, etc. The students don't get paid for this; but they get the invaluable experience of working on real problems, and helping the local community. They also get something constructive to put on their resumes, and topics for projects that we make sure they get academic credit for.

As I have suggested, all of these offerings today are just a start. This is important; and we need to be talking about this.

So over to you: Is the online challenge real? What are you doing about it? Is it incorporated into your long-term planning?