

Running Head: Developing a Model for More Interesting Distance Education

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Introduction

The famous French poet Valery was noted for writing that, “The trouble with our times is that the future is not what it used to be” (McClellan, 1998, p. 106). In other words, the future that was, is here and now for us to thrive upon or to which we will fall victim.

This is certainly true in higher education where there is a rush in our country to overhaul academe. Legislators’ talk of accountability smacks of a desire to impose a standard on higher education that would dictate every practitioner applies an even-handed smattering of viewpoints. This is not to say instructors shouldn’t offer opposing viewpoints for inspection by students, but should the manner with which this occurs be a mandate of the state?). With the re-examination of the higher education re-authorization act (including in many cases the so-called Students’ Bill of Rights), there is a renewed interest in higher education, what it means to our country and its people and how we can best administer learning institutions in an age that transforms as fast as bits of data on the information super-highway. The old halls are threatened by commercialization of education and student demands for an educational product that looks more like something one might pick up at the mall.

Everything about higher education is being challenged, from pedagogical techniques (i.e, the move from teaching centered to learning centered processes) to the need (or ostensibly the lack thereof) for tenure on our campuses; from desirable leadership styles (e.g., the move to transformational leadership) to mode of delivery (note the rise of online degree programs). The hallowed institutions of yesteryear, with ivy

covered brick facades and courtyards home to upper-middle and upper class white males have given way to a multi-cultural collage of socio-economic equity that stresses our ability to keep pace with new models for education that can handle the overwhelming system transilience.

Many institutions will become obsolete and will close their doors for lack of viability. Among these will most likely be small, private, non-profit institutions whose meager endowments and significant operating budgets won't allow for the transition to delivery systems that would make them competitive in an expanding global market. Others will adapt to the change and will, over time, experience a metamorphosis that is profound and meaningful (Levine, 2001 & Carlson, 2004).

These changes have not gone unnoticed by researchers and practitioners within higher education. Newman (2000) writes that:

Over the last half-century, higher education grew in size, resources, and importance. All the while, it maintained a remarkably stable structure. Now, powerful changes are under way, driven by the entry of new providers, rapid advances in technology, demographic shifts, and the globalization of markets...that typically...[have]... been open only to indigenous institutions. As higher education's environments become increasingly competitive, the reins of government are loosening worldwide in favor of market-driven decision-making—a trend that alone would disturb the tranquility of a stable, confident system (p. 16).

In other words, the fact that higher education is becoming more market driven is, alone, enough to break the backs of some institutions. Unfortunately, many competing

challenges to academe are heaped on like multiple, gooey toppings on a disgustingly sweet dessert that no one could possibly digest in one sitting.

All this change has had a profound affect on the fundamental purpose of higher education which is also in a state of flux. Chikering and Stamm (2002), while attempting to define the purpose of higher education, came to "...believe that it has to be to prepare students for responsible and satisfying lives in a pluralistic democracy" (p. 30). They quote the "1999 'Presidents' [college and university] Fourth of July Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education...[which states that]... we must teach the skills and values of democracy, creating innumerable opportunities for our students to practice and reap the results of the real, hard work of citizenship" (p. 30). They go on to illuminate their notion of how this can be accomplished by stating that:

If the aim of strengthening critical-thinking and problem-solving skills is not agreed on and widely shared, then pedagogical practices will usually settle for information transfer and memorizing. If developing integrity is not an articulated desired outcome, then issues of value and internal consistency that pervade daily behaviors, institutional policies and practices, and all occupations will be left unexamined (p. 30).

Returning to Newman (2000), we find a similar statement of a somewhat more general nature. Whereas Chikering and Stamm pinpoint the need for preparation to enter the 'pluralistic democracy' Newman states that, "The most enduring role for the university has been the socialization of young people for their roles in society" (p. 17).

This very idea of socialization is what is currently under such attack by conservative politicians and religious leaders who believe that predominately liberal

faculties are imposing a socialist agenda of moral relativism on our college and university students. This may be true in a minority of cases, but the general purpose of higher education remains a universal symbol; a beacon by which the majority of responsible faculty members are guided.

To somewhat compound this touchy issue, there is an increasing demand for degrees to carry some semblance of utility and increase the student's ability to land a lucrative employment position (or at least a position) upon graduation. That is, some institutions have taken a more vocational tack in administering their educational product. To be sure, there is nothing wrong with obtaining a degree in an effort to increase one's ability to land a job. On the other hand, this should rightly be viewed as just one of the aforementioned 'roles' in societal participation to stand among many. As Newman (2000) continues, there are "...three types of socialization: to the community, to the life of the mind, and to a profession" (p. 17). This is profound and we must not lose sight of its wisdom in our quest for fancy salaries.

This author would argue that the most fundamental purpose of institutions of higher learning is to cultivate thought; thought about a range of issues including one's place in society with regard to one's community and one's profession. Arthur (2004) states that:

Universities are for...establishing ways of finding out the truth so that we can identify and uplift so that we can identify the burden of goodness. They are for the inculcation of wisdom. Ultimately, they are for taking sides. This may make them sound partisan and given to proselytizing, unless it is stressed that they are concerned with promoting a method of choosing allegiances, not with urging

loyalty to any particular point of view. It is very evident that the burden of goodness facing us today is not some single, simplistic either/or choice. Rather, we have to negotiate an ongoing series of often highly complex and difficult decisions (pp. 146 – 147).

Again, in its purest form, this promotion of diverging viewpoints for the purpose of establishing (or re-establishing) one's 'way of thinking' is encapsulated in the phrase 'cultivating thought'. It is the purpose of higher education to cultivate thought that will enlighten the user to opposing viewpoints. This is not to say that everything that one learns from friends, relatives and one's home environment is useless information. Some is likely very valuable. The important objective is to cull through these childhood teachings and disseminate the useful from the not so useful and to understand that what is useful to me is not necessarily useful to another. That is, it is the purpose of higher education, via cultivation of thought, to develop tolerance to the fact that, whether we want to admit it or not, we do live in a pluralistic world.

As an example I point to my personal experience as Director of Campus Activities at McKendree College in Lebanon, Illinois. One fall we received a male student from East St. Louis as a freshman. This young man had grown up in a very rough neighborhood and his posture, body language and oral discourse were indicative of a life on the streets where it was very useful to be aggressive. At a small, private institution of higher learning it was a recipe for failure, and fast. It was our job as student affairs professionals to guide this young man to a different perspective; to cultivate thought about his current set of behaviors and reflection about how he could behave differently and in a way more conducive to success in a higher education setting. Fortunately, he

embraced the challenge and learned to act in ways more respectful of his new surroundings. This didn't eliminate his past experience or his ability to function in that realm if he so desired. It did broaden his capacity for a flexibility that allows one to adapt to varying situations and circumstances.

The function of this paper is to set forth a new theory (i.e., the Theory of Necessity, Utility, Efficiency and Cultivated Thought) for use in understanding online educational institutions and the on-line education process, the purpose of which—it should be noted—is no different than 'brick and mortar' institutions. In addition, the author will describe a new model (i.e., the Escalation Model) for pedagogy within the online educational environment that stimulates and supports this theory.

In the first case, the argument will be made that online education is very well positioned to carry out the stated purpose of higher education; that is, to cultivate thought (and all the implications thereof as described above). Further, the Escalation Model for Online Learning, it will be argued, very effectively cultivates thought and promotes exchange of thought between participants in an on-line environment because it makes the work more interesting (and fun). Finally, there will be an evaluation of these new creations in an effort to point to possible implications and uses.

The Theory of Necessity, Utility, Efficiency and Cultivated Thought

As has been established in the previous section, it is the belief of this author that the most fundamental purpose, or function if you will, of higher education is to cultivate thought. The educator plants seeds in the minds of his/her students and waits for those seeds to sprout and grow. Sometimes the plants that result don't look exactly as the educator expected, but a plant has grown just the same and the student has moved from

one place in thinking to another; from one perspective to some other. This is the fundamental goal of education, to move students' thinking from one place to another via cultivation of thought. For arguments sake, we will assume that instructors are spreading a variety of seeds of varying types to ensure the harvest will be bountiful and diverse even though there are certainly those among us (hopefully a very small minority) who do practice bias. As stated above, one purpose of this paper is to put forth a theory regarding online institutions of higher education that describes how they, in fact, very effectively achieve this fundamental mission. I call this the Theory of Necessity, Utility, Efficiency and Cultivated Thought. In short, it follows this chain of logic:

- 1) Students initially pursue online, distance education out of *necessity*.
- 2) As a result of participation by *necessity*, students develop a preference for the *utility* of distance education.
- 3) Distance education is marked by *utility* because it delivers education in an *efficient manner*.
- 4) This *efficient manner* of delivery is marked most often by *questions posed* in an online course room.
- 5) *Questions posed* in such a manner are *pure* in form (like a seed).
- 6) These *pure* questions cause students to *cultivate thought*.
- 7) *Cultivating thought* is the primary purpose of higher education (and online higher education).

There is not nearly enough direct research on student motivation to select online degree programs over more traditional brick and mortar institutions. My guess is that each online college and university has some data gathered from entrants regarding their

reason for selecting that particular institution. I called two online universities and requested such data which both declined to provide, citing privacy issues. In both cases, they indicated that they did collect such information, but that it was not legal for them to disseminate for public consumption. Aside from each institution conducting internal data gathering, there doesn't seem to be a great deal of direct, scholarly investigation.

There is, however, some peripheral work in this area. Much of this is conjecture without substantiating data, but is likely accurate in its assessment of online degree programs. For instance, Miller and Lu (2003) surmise that:

...students are enrolling in record numbers in courses offered through electronic media. The 'anytime, anywhere' mentality of this course delivery makes sense to working adults who need flexibility completing degree programmes [sic] or taking courses that update their working skills. For others, namely those from lower economic classes, e-courses provide the flexibility to maintain part-time jobs, do not require travel time and resources to physically travel to campus and, in many cases, provide course-by-course progress toward degrees and credentials that might otherwise be barriers to completion (p. 164).

It is certainly true that students are enrolling in online degree programs in record numbers; the rate of growth is currently 20 per cent per year (McGrath, 2004, p. 64). It is also logical to think that—despite the fact that little substantiating research exists—the flexibility of online degree programs is appealing to non-traditional and minority students who lead busy lives (Showing Up for Class, 2003, p. 150). Williams (2002) argues that, “[Online course] websites also enable flexible study in terms of time, place and pace...” (p. 265). There is certainly ample reason to believe that students are choosing online

degree programs out of necessity. My own situation serves as anecdotal evidence of this very argument. I became interested in pursuing a doctoral program in higher education administration. Upon investigation, I learned that there are no programs within reasonable driving distance of my home. I began investigating online degrees, found they exist and enrolled in a program. Without this online program, I could not pursue this advanced degree. Thus, I entered by necessity.

One study does provide hard evidence to substantiate this anecdotal experience. Christopher Newport University (hereinafter CNU) has been operating an online program for about ten years, during which they have copiously tracked their students via satisfaction and/or informational surveys. Richards and Ridley reported on this data gathering program in 1997 when the program was still quite young. They found that 86.9 per cent of all respondents claimed they had “No alternative...;[that they were]...precluded from taking the classroom equivalent [in a traditional setting] by work and class schedule conflicts and other time constraints” (p. 493). So, while there may not be a broad base of evidence to make a strong claim that students enter online degree programs by necessity, it seems likely that this is very often the case.

The notion that students develop a preference for online degree programs is, again, a less than well studied phenomenon. In the CNU report cited just above, twenty-eight of 155 respondents “...stated that their most recently completed online course had a strong influence on their decision to take their current online course” (p.494). This is hardly a staggering number. Most likely, a large number continue in online programs because their geographic location and personal circumstances necessitate they continue (which is why they began in the first place). Certainly a fair number have made a

financial commitment thus do not want to lose the credits they have already completed by transferring to another institution, land-based or otherwise. In addition, I believe (and, frankly, I have not thus far found much research to support this) that many—once they are brought to online learning by necessity—come to enjoy the utility of the mode.

This utility is, in my opinion, marked by such phenomena as asynchronous participation (i.e., come to class when it is convenient; complete assignments around family and work schedules) which was mentioned previously here, the mode of delivery (via the internet) and, most importantly to my argument, the pedagogical style (question, answer and dialogue in written form). This utilitarian feature (i.e., questions posed for response and dialogue) is the preeminent example of the efficient manner with which on-line degree programs are delivered. It is the cornerstone of current technology and is fundamental to the outcomes of programs found on-line as well as central to the purpose of higher education which, again, is cultivation of thought.

In support of the claim that the question/answer/dialogue method that characterizes many current course rooms is efficient and smacks of utility which causes students to develop a preference for on-line learning I cite the following from Williams (2002):

Advantages of asynchronous conferencing are in its flexibility, and the way that students have time to consider and construct their comments and questions before sharing them. CMC [computer-mediated communications] also makes it easier for shy or quiet students to join in as they cannot be ‘talked over’. The permanence of electronic contributions (as opposed to face-to-face comments) means that the information can be used by students for revision, and can be

accumulated to build a resource which may also be useful to future students (p. 266).

As to the postulate that questions posed in an online course room setting are like seeds, I'll leave it to you to make a final decision as to the efficacy of this argument. I will, hopefully, augment your thinking with my own if you allow. To carry over the metaphor, let us think about seeds, germination and pollination. The assumption is that questions posed in an online course room are like seeds that the course instructor (via the curriculum development team—who are the pollination experts or seed creators in this metaphor) places in the minds of the students. Once placed in the ground a seed requires two things, water and light, to germinate (Moyer, Daniel, Hackett, Baptiste, Stryker & Vasquez, 2002, p. A82). Once placed in the mind of a student, a question requires two things, time and thought to develop.

Now, the next step in the logic is that such questions that, metaphorically, can be thought of as seeds, cultivate thought. According to the Random House dictionary (1992) one aspect of cultivation is its ability "...to promote the growth or development of; foster [something] (p. 330). In this case, what we are intending to promote the growth or development of is thought that is transforming over time. So we pose questions in the online environment that can be thought of as seeds. We are farmers who plant the seed of a question into the minds of our students. Once planted this seed, with the assistance of time and the students thought, grow into a new plant or idea. Along the way we can provide some additional light (literally; to shed some light on the subject) and water (to keep the stream of the idea flowing) by responding to posts of the students with queries that promote further thought over more time. Thus cultivating thought is an operation

that occurs in the physical action of the course room instructor (s/he posts the question for review by the students), the intellectual action of the student (s/he makes thought about the question at hand), the physical action of the student (s/he provides a written response), the intellectual action of the instructor and fellow students (they make thought about the student's response), physical action by the instructor and fellow students (they provide a written response to the response) and so forth as desired and/or needed by the participants. The key is to remember that it is not necessarily a result of the on-line environment. Thought can be cultivated just as well in a face-to-face setting. It is the fact that this medium does so in such an efficient manner between times and spaces to the advantage of the student isolated by constraints on time and geography.

The next question is, "How can we enhance our ability to promote rich sets of responses (or how do we cultivate more thought) among and between instructors and students in an online environment?" This is the subject of the next section.

The Escalation Model for Online Learning

Now, the preceding several paragraphs may seem to presume that high amounts of interaction necessarily have a positive impact on the level of achievement of learners within an online—or for that matter a traditional—course room setting. This is not particularly the case (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvacek, 2003, pp. 71-74). In some instances increased levels of interaction seem to have a positive affect on achievement but, in fact, achievement there may have been influenced by other factors like the age of learners (distance learners are often older and, presumably, more self-directed). The important issue here is not whether, ultimately, the achievement levels (most often measured by scores) are greater when interaction is high, but whether,

indeed, higher levels of interaction cultivate more thought, a question which has yet to be investigated as far as I can tell from a survey of literature in this area. As has been pointed out earlier in this discourse, high levels of achievement can be obtained simply by memorizing information and regurgitating it via exams. Achievement does not necessarily denote high levels of thought (at least other than exercising the memory cortex) on the part of students and, assuming once again that cultivating thought is the highest and purest purpose of higher education, we need to measure the effect that varying levels of interaction have on the ability of a medium (or techniques utilized within the medium) to cultivate thought.

Simonson et al. (2003) state that, “The instructor needs to focus on selecting instructional strategies that engage all the learners in active learning. The emphasis on keeping the learners engaged in learning ensures that students will be in tune with the class” (p. 152). Santovec (2004) seconds this sentiment in her assessment of online education. “Successful online programs exhibit two specific characteristics...[one of which is]...faculty that actively engage their students” (p. 1).

There is a challenge with online course rooms, as there is in face-to-face settings, that less outgoing students will participate at a lower level and the interaction will be dominated by the more aggressive students. Williams (2002) indicates that, “The most significant problem with electronic discussion is a lack of participation” (p.267). Based on the research of a number of scholars, Williams goes on to describe the reluctance on the part of some online students to participate as driven in many cases by the students’ hesitation to put into public discourse in a permanent form a response that they feel may appear unintelligent or ill-informed (p. 267). Whatever the reason, it is incumbent upon

the instructor and the curriculum designers to put in place an environment that promotes interaction. Lim (2004) pulls together several pieces of research to make the following assertion:

Research studies have shown that learner engagement is paramount to learning success (Herrington, Oliver, & Reeves, 2003). Engagement here is defined as... 'the mobilization of cognitive, affective and motivational strategies for interpretive transactions' (Bangert-Drowns & Pike, 2001, p. 215) that occur during learning activities through interactions with others and worthwhile tasks (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998)(p. 16).

Such engagement must be promoted by the course room instructor. "The faculty member is becoming more of a guide or a coach...while students have gone from being passive learners to active learners and now 'synthesizers' of knowledge" (Carlsonm 2004, p. 35). This synthesizing of knowledge is akin to cultivation of thought; it is the result of such cultivation and is the folding in to the dough of ideas, the processed grains of knowledge, the flour of which—when mixed carefully with other change agents (e.g., course room discussion and instructor responses)—created the dough in the first place. Simply put, thoughts are cultivated, mulled over and assimilated or synthesized (or not) into the world view of the learner.

During the recent race for the presidency, it was clearly evidenced that 'hot' issues will produce a higher level of participation and a richer dialogue. Divisive social issues were continually brought to the fore front by both candidates. As a result, voter turnout this election was up approximately ten per cent, a staggering number on the

national political scene (Barone, November, 15, 2004, p. 33). This brings forth the reality that issues of concern to people will command more attention and bigger responses.

Recognizing this, I propose an alternative pedagogical model that focuses on ‘hot’ topics or at least attempts to evoke emotions regarding issues of concern to the course at hand. I have dubbed this the Escalation Model for Online Learning because, theoretically, thought is escalated as time passes by way of tensions that are fostered by the curriculum and the instructor and created by disagreement between and among learners. Using this model, the instructor would promote a sort of cognitive dissonance on the part of the learners by challenging their sensibilities. This dissonance would be further promulgated by the discourse of fellow learners who, stirred up themselves, would challenge their classmates. If carried out effectively, a sort of fervor would ensue as the thought processes of the students continued to escalate. Each escalation in fervor would produce further, rich shifts in thinking and the whole process would continue until the escalation reached a peak, the assumption being that students want to be challenged in this way. In support of this notion, in a recent issue of *Community College Week*, it was stated that, “Often, and surprisingly, their [referring to online students] urge was to learn something that was outside their current area of expertise...” (Online Courses, 2004, p. 15), the assumption here being that things ‘outside their expertise’ would spark more interest and conversation.

A key to this model would be the assurance that the emotions evoked be tempered by the fair and peaceful standards of etiquette that are common fare in the online environment. Toward the end of each course, the learners would go through an assimilation process during which they would spend time working with other students

and the instructor to synthesize the new thinking into their world view and determine methods by which they could utilize the newly assimilated knowledge by way of specific techniques.

In the furtherance of this proposition, imagine that we are beginning a new session with a group of on-line learners taking a course in speech communication. Let us assume that our online learning environment is following the current, standard practices of instruction. That is, the course room is student centered with an emphasis on collaboration and interaction. Also, let us assume that, as an introduction to the course, the instructor is fostering a high level of participation in the class by supplying the students with a standard for etiquette in the course room and encouraging interaction both publicly in the course room itself and privately via email or phone conversations with students who appear to be reluctant to participate (Curran, 2001, pp. 117-118).

So, the students in this online course have all agreed to be part of a study. The experiment will test the impact of the curriculum design and instructor influence in tandem to increase interaction in the course room and thus to cultivate thought. This course will be measured against a control course room that is using more standard forms of pedagogy.

Specifically, all of the questions in the test course room will be in a form that is intended to elicit opinions. For example, "Do you think that politicians are good communicators? Are they being straight with us when they communicate or is what they are saying just double-speak and spin? What communication theories best describe the type of communication that takes place between politicians and citizens? When descriptive responses are desired the associated question will always be embedded with

others that are intended to spur students' opinions. In addition, the instructor will always respond to students with a pointed question intended to further encourage interaction.

Each student will keep a journal. Every time a question (either an initial question that is part of the curriculum or a question from the instructor or another learner) elicits thought of an idea that is completely new to the learner or that brings about a different way of perceiving an old idea, the student will register this occurrence along with a brief description of the topic. To ensure that the students are not overburdened, this will become one of the assignments for this course with a weight of twenty per cent of the final grade. Students in the control course room will keep a similar journal without the additional stimuli of pointed questions from the curriculum and the instructor.

Two measures will be taken. One, did the introduction of the new curriculum along with the altered instructor emphasis increase the interaction of the test course room over the control course room? Second, did students register more entries in their journals in the test course room or the control course room, the implication being that if interaction and number of journal entries both go up in the test course room but remain relatively the same in the control course room, the Escalation Model has worked. And, it is the assertion of this author that this model would work and, as a consequence, would increase both interaction and cultivation of thought.

Conclusion and Possible Implications

At times, new things can be painful. Starting new jobs, entering an educational program, a new marriage; they can all bring about fear, confusion and pain among other emotions. They can also cause the kind of growth that results from cultivation of thought. Some people actively choose to put themselves into situations that can catapult

them into a new way of thinking while others avoid such life-altering situations like the plague.

The point here is that, regardless of the personal style of the individual, cultivating thought is useful in moving people from one place of thinking to another. Perhaps they go back to their original thinking after they have contemplated the new idea, but they are still changed if only that they are more tolerant of another who holds that point of view which they have examined and determined not to be useful to them in their life.

This is the fundamental purpose of higher education; to promote the cultivation of thought that will transform individuals into thinkers who look upon the unusual as a chance to learn rather than a chance to hate from a place of ignorance. If this is socialization then, in my opinion, it is a very useful tool. And since the world seems to become more complex with an increasing number of odd wrinkles every day, it is important that educators expose learners to as many new ideas as possible.

Distance education has the power to expose learners to a large amount of information, purely by virtue of the mode of delivery. This does not necessarily make it better than 'brick and mortar' institutions, but it does make it more efficient in that one respect. As such, it is incumbent upon educators to capitalize on this advantage and make it work to its maximum.

The model described herein is an attempt to propose a test of one possible avenue for promoting the technological advantage of online education. That is, the opportunity for increased interaction among learners. It remains to be seen whether this model is actually useful to online educators. Until the proposed experiment (or something like it)

is conducted, the whole argument is conjecture. On the other hand, it is observed that when insightful topics are raised by chance in this current course room, they have indeed promoted more dialogue. I have made a similar observation in other course rooms. The question is, does this cultivate thought and move students from one place to another?

Overall, there is not nearly enough useful, scholarly work on distance education and the real effects of online educational systems. There is a particular need for experimentation that expands the current boundaries of thought; that asks questions that may be painful to the current system, but will cultivate thought among educators who may be relying on old models that have outlived their usefulness. We must keep in mind that cultivation of thought is not reserved just for our students but for us to become the students of bolder ways of thinking that will advance the cause of education.

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