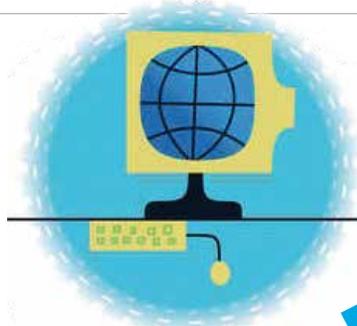


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The Last Classroom in America

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AS EDUCATIONAL LEADERS,
TRUSTEES MUST HELP PREPARE
THEIR INSTITUTIONS FOR
TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE.

HIGHER EDUCATION IS IN A STATE OF FLUX. The world around us is changing faster than at any time in recorded history. We are entering a new historical period in which machines — advanced computers, robotics, and genomic technology — are overtaking jobs traditionally done by humans. Our society is transforming from hierarchies, standard answers, and predictability to interlocking networks, multiple answers, and the need to be comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty. The question for us as educators is, are we changing as fast as business and the world, or falling further behind? Institutions of higher education have historically been built for stability, not change. It is not unexpected that we have been slow to meet rapidly changing expectations about learning.

As we look around the country, institutions of higher learning are struggling with declining enrollment, declining revenues, and optimistic, but as yet not fully realized, student success results. We see institutions genuinely struggling to move the student success and completion needle. However, over time, those results reach a plateau or don't move the needle as far or as fast as desired.

Perhaps that is because, like the ancients before us who believed that the sun revolved around the earth, we are bound by the confines of our educational beliefs. Therefore, we nibble around the edges of our current philosophies of education as opposed to transforming to a new model of engagement. If the world around us is transforming, then perhaps we need to transform, as opposed to reform, what we do.

As educational leaders, we must rethink what learning concepts, methods, and systems will be needed for a society and an economy in transition; where the advantages that humans have over radical technologies include the ability to provide the capacities for ideation, emerging pattern recognition, and complex communications.

While some colleges do strive to innovate, and some have done so, many continue outdated educational learning strategies thinking that if they just find the right tweak, miraculously better learning will occur. What is needed is no less than a complete reconceptualization of learning for a 21st century society that will be constantly changing, and increasingly interconnected and complex.

Emerging across the country are bold and innovative methods of approaching higher education known by various names, such as Transformational Learning and Future Forward College, which is occurring at Wake Tech Community College in North Carolina. These efforts don't nibble around the edges; they bite off the whole cookie. They are aimed at helping students learn differently, faster, and more relevantly.

How are these efforts different from longstanding methodologies? One good sign that transformational (disruptive) efforts are happening is that a new language has sprung up to explain its concepts. Do you remember before we used to "just Google it"? New language springs up to explain transformational ideas and functions.

In this new transformational effort, there are several innovative concepts that are slowly making their way into the collective conscious of higher education educators. Below are short definitions of each concept.

- **Trans-disciplinary learning:** connecting disparate ideas; teaching across divisional lines instead of learning in silos (think departments)
- **Complex adaptive systems:** looking at nature to see how natural things are organized and using those theories (such as chaos, complexity, and ecology) to better organize and improve what we do today for better results tomorrow.
- **Adaptive planning:** an alternative to strategic planning, which assumed that the world changed slowly enough to deploy long-term plans. We need to plan for quick and responsive changes, which occur more often than the once-a-year annual strategic planning cycle.
- **And/both parallel processes:** as we plan for transformation, we will not be able to throw the baby out with the bathwater. We need to build a newer, better system and slowly dissolve the old system.
- **Identify weak signals:** we need to recognize current

emerging signals that are precursors to strong emerging trends. We must teach to the future and not teach to the past.

- **Master capacity builders:** the leadership ability to focus on building capacities for transformation and dealing with emerging issues not previously experienced. It is looking to the future as opposed to looking to the past.
- **Unlearning and uplearning:** learning to let go of old wisdoms that no longer apply, and to think and act at a higher level of complexity.
- **Using new tools more effectively and quickly,** including "gamification," virtual reality or augmented reality, and smartphones and personal connection devices.
- **Self-directed learning:** we need to learn what we want, when we need it. Shift away from prescribed courses to ones that are hyper-individualized.
- **Interdependency:** moving from independence to interdependence as the norm. Teaching students to understand context and look for connections in knowledge, and to look to the future for newly emerging concepts and ideas.

Change is difficult. True transformation requires passion and deep commitment. It comes at a price in terms of an institution's time, energy, perceptions, and engagement. Change takes much effort in an already full day. Many organizations give lip service to change but would rather stay with the known rather than step into the unknown. Unfortunately, that option only allows that person or that organization to fall further and further behind.

Colleges of the future will need forward-thinking people to join in collaboration and be actively engaged in a new evolution of teaching and learning — people who care about higher education but who also understand that what we are doing is not working for a new society and economy whose patterns are just emerging. We will need people who are able to connect disparate ideas, people, and processes in order to rethink and redesign higher education for a "world that is still coming into existence."

During the evolution of all disruptive and transformational efforts, there have been those who fight it, and those who embrace it. However, the future goes to those who go boldly and courageously into it, looking to weave the best of the past into the bright prospects of a different kind of future.

The classroom of the future may not be a classroom at all. It may well be a collection of activities that engage the learner from the inside out instead of from the outside in. Whatever emerges that aligns with the needs of a different kind of society and economy will not be just reforming and improving what already exists to make it more efficient. It will be a complete rethinking and redesign of what learning means and how learning occur. It will be a transformation.



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