Educational institutions today have lost their primary value proposition: the dissemination of information. In the Digital Era, people have unlimited personal access to information. They are also in a continuous learning frame of mind, collaboratively consuming and producing content online and via social media. So, education authorities, schools, and tertiary institutions have to entirely reinvent themselves by becoming curators of the education experience rather than custodians of knowledge.

The good news is that while re-strategising is essential, pioneering is not.

Yes, indeed, organisations like Coursera, an aggregator of short courses provided by 500 different universities, have scrapped the conventional education rule book in creating an entirely new kind of tertiary education organisation. For example, Coursera has garnered 35 million students and raised USD 60 million in funding in only 4 years. Rick Levin, who was the 22nd President of Yale University (from 1993 to 2013), is Coursera’s Chief Executive Officer. So, Coursera is a powerful example of what’s possible in digital education.

AltSchool, which has just raised USD 100 million in venture capital, has applied similar, digital, principles to elementary education. AltSchool operates across schools in the San Francisco Bay area, New York, and Chicago. Teachers share lesson plans across the schools’ online network and students complete tasks that they cherry pick from this pool, based on learning strategies that work best for them.

AltSchool founder and CEO, Max Ventilla, says: 'We take more cues from Facebook and Zynga in creating an engaging educational experience than we do from the classroom. Education is broken. Come help us build the education the world deserves.'
You don’t have to start from scratch, though. Some traditional educational institutions are already successfully transitioning incrementally from a classroom, campus-based, rote-learning approach to a digital one.

**Think systemically**

Instead of cannibalising its existing MBA and executive education programmes, Harvard Business School (HBS) has created a third line of business – a pre-MBA course known as HBX. Using a skunkworks approach, HBX offers the Credential of Readiness (CORe) consisting of three online courses: accounting, analytics, and economics for managers. Students have nine weeks to complete all three courses at a tuition fee of USD 1,500 that will fulfill HBS’s requirement that HBX be self-sustaining.

As HBX demonstrates, a phased transformation to digital allows you to access and allocate funds as you go. It is vital, however, not to see the transition as simply the addition of some digital or ‘e-learning’ capabilities to your established operations. Much of the e-learning we’ve seen thus far is ‘paper under glass’. It lacks an instructional design that takes account of the specific challenges and opportunities within digital education and does not systematically leverage the ecosystem of possibilities available today. It perpetuates the old Industrial Era way of educating, which is incapable of meeting the needs of today’s students and tomorrow’s workplace.

**Customer-obsessed**

That’s not quite as onerous as it sounds. The starting place is understanding that people are no longer loyal to brands. They are loyal to experience. Harvard Business School is being extremely astute in parlaying its brand into an online experience that meets the needs of people wanting short courses that they can study in their own time, online, in order to prepare themselves for a world of work in which traditional job types are disappearing and new ones are constantly emerging.

‘The starting place is understanding that people are no longer loyal to brands. They are loyal to experience.’

Education’s evolution is systemic. So, you shouldn’t think incrementally, in terms of point solutions. Instead, adopt a systemic, holistic approach to solving for digital education. This could involve novel and effective user experience design, data and learning analytics, and automation and artificial intelligence as well as blended learning models that make use of the Internet of Things (IoT) sensors and connected learning environments.

There is also a fundamental consideration available to educational institutions through the rise of digital. Instead of focusing on your product – for instance a degree program – and trying to offer that product on a once-off basis to as many students as possible, you can now focus on the students and continuously innovate and develop your product offerings for them. People will change careers, not just jobs, many times in their working life. Since we are all now having to engage with lifelong learning, the more an institution knows about me and my needs, the longer and deeper its relationship with me can be. The digital institution can track my changing career and roles, presenting me with product and service offerings appropriate to my needs, just-in-time. That’s a much more sustainable position to be in.

In fact, being a successful digital education institution means going beyond student-centricity to creating a fully student-centric operating model. In other words, it’s not enough to just have a digital curriculum. You must use data, learning analytics, and other digitally orientated processes and approaches in such a way that they enable you to comprehensively organise and deploy resources and leverage technology - throughout both your front and back office institutional functions.
Digital maturity model
Ideally, you would assess your current capabilities and your desired end state in seven areas: customer experience, information value, portfolio development, smarter processes, business models or ecosystems, people and culture, and technology fabric.

Currently most education institutions have disparate, multiple interfaces with or channels to students. They don’t easily share information between channels, and information is siloed and of highly variable quality. There might be some systems integration but, generally, there is little overarching portfolio management. Processes remain largely paper-based, although they may be supplemented in part by automation. Business models are relatively internally focused, product-centric and geared towards fixed physical locations like campuses or classrooms.

One can move up the leader board to a fully digitised, responsive institution via a series of steps that include social engagement, big data and analytics, any technology-as-a-service (XaaS), machine learning that continuously refines processes, enterprise mobility, rich collaboration, and multi-cloud solutions.

At the end, what you want is:
- Customer experience driven by virtual service agents and predictive analytics
- Boundary-less information value enabled by contextualisation
- An integrated technology portfolio that delivers outcomes-based services
- Smarter processes powered by cognitive intelligence that automates knowledge work
- People and culture supported by digital services shared across an ecosystem of content and services providers, many of whom will be external to your organisation
- A responsive technology fabric that enables all of the above and more as innovations come about.

Don’t go it alone
The goal can be described as having high stakeholder connectivity and student-centricity, cross-product solutions and data flow, the ability to aggregate and curate best in class products, and the ability to engage students and partners in a social, collaborative eco-system that makes best use of offline and online capabilities.

Clearly, this is a massive transformational journey that entails an all-embracing culture change. It cannot be undertaken without an explicit strategic vision that is visibly supported by top management. The culture change has to be modelled at the highest level through the evolution of the organisation to support new business and operating models. Driving this change is an ongoing affair, which includes making explicit the link between the evolving interests of the institution and the evolving interests of those affected by the changes.

It goes without saying that you must also have the right technology foundation. For that, you need a partner that is already providing the education community with the guidance and tools that will accelerate them by the shortest and most effective route to their desired future state. Specifically, you want a partner that has the commercial longevity, fighting weight, and appetite to be by your side for your entire journey.

While your technology is not your strategy, it is a key enabler, creating the foundation for dynamic, responsive and innovative educational delivery. Get the best, most experienced advice out there.

By Alison Jacobson, Dimension Data Group Principal Digital Strategist

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