Designing digital learning strategies

Business education has been slow to respond to the disruption (and opportunities) caused by technological innovation. **Tony Sheehan** provides some guidance on how it should act.

The past decade has seen “digital disruption” everywhere. Firms such as Uber, Facebook, Google, Airbnb and Netflix have revolutionised their sectors. Business education has been far from immune.

- MOOCs and SPOCs have been heavily hyped and serviced millions of learners with new forms of programmes and courses
- New entrants such as Lynda.com have created fresh product interfaces to new styles of content and MOOC providers such as Coursera have started to target corporate education
- Business schools have launched digital hubs, embracing teaching techniques that blend face-to-face contact with online, video with animation, discussion boards with social networks.

Yet, when researching the impact of digital learning, digital disappointment seems to be far more common than digital delight. Why is this?

Many digital learning providers are fighting the curse of unrealistic expectations, largely as a result of the seduction of vendor-fuelled jargon and the promise of quick fixes that distract from good learning design. Many are also restricted in some ways with existing systems and cultures that anchor speed of adoption and inhibit change.

People have different preferences for digital learning and learning technologies need to address form and user engagement as well as technical functionality. Learning designers need to be sensitive to these issues in order to deliver deep, impactful learning and lasting change.

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To create truly effective digital learning there is a need to slow down, step back and review three questions:
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What is the goal?
Taking time to understand desired outcomes, how to measure them and what success looks like is essential. Such analysis can then help to review potential tools and techniques to ensure they help achieve these outcomes in practice.
• If someone is still learning the essentials of a subject then initial knowledge absorption may be paramount. This insight might suggest use of short assets to introduce the key facts prior to any formal learning, blended with extended links to further text, audio and video assets for detail.
• On the other hand, if a senior executive needs support on improvements in decision making, learning will need to extend beyond the boundaries of a conventional "course". In this case, post-programme interventions that empower and guide the executive at the point of need are essential – so a one-minute video, top tips and instant insights delivered just in time to reinforce learning would be appropriate.
In any given case, it is essential to understand the desired outcomes. Only then is it possible to decide what tool will best deliver them.

What are the anchors?
What are the organisational and technical constraints that could limit ambitions? Budgets, regulations (such as data protection), responsibilities, capacities and talents each need to be considered carefully before looking at the potential for implementation, adoption and impact of a new tool.
System preferences and cultures already exist and cannot be binned overnight; few environments are as nimble as a start-up. Such limitations are realities and it is important to both understand and work with them to deliver successfully.
Only when these three points are understood is it possible to start thinking about what a learning intervention (for example an online course) will look like. At this point, it is valuable to think in terms of three Cs:

Content
Content is still king. But in a world where there is so much content online, the question becomes: what to create and what to curate? New content can be created with ease – with smartphones there is a production studio in our pockets. But creating meaningful content takes time and there is little point in doing so unless it is connected to the vast collection of quality content that already exists.
Content is valuable in so far as it helps achieve learning goals and comes with a clear call to action. What action does the content trigger? Think about it? Talk about it? Join an online discussion? Content needs to be part of an overall learning experience rather than living in isolation.
Community
A key technique to enhance the impact of content is use of community. Multiple methods of engagement exist, from commenting on personal blogs, through peer groups to online discussions and large-scale jams. Discussion threads can be surprisingly effective albeit different preferences are likely to exist. These include:
- Lurkers – looking but not engaging
- Vocal – actively participating and dominating
- Passive – not engaging at all (frequently the majority)

Discussions work well within MOOCs, where the scale effect ensures multiple perspectives. It can, however, be hard for a smaller group to get the diversity of opinion to make them productive.

Live classes offer knowledge delivery and online chat that are powerful and are now much easier to achieve through a variety of technologies from the simple (Skype and Google Hangout) to high quality (HD videoconferencing and telepresence).

Again, thinking carefully about goals, existing systems and resources, and learner preference can help to clarify the best community approach.

Context
In an age of complexity, it is essential to contextualise learning. In the business school context, the age of the case method is not dead – but it is evolving.

Some older cases remain classics, some modern ones are exceptional. At the same time, frequent connections to context - a link to a relevant news story or a debate on a current issue – keep case perspectives current and make learning feel relevant and alive. Contextualising and ideally adapting learning to individual needs does not have to be complicated or expensive but it is essential.

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For all the buzz around digital learning, its true potential in business education remains largely untapped. Digital learning can help reach people in new locations and personalise their learning to create impact in their business and their life. It can deliver new forms of qualification and new forms of impact from executive education but only if it cuts through the rhetoric of technology promises to design its own more effective learning solutions.

Digital business education needs to be more about pedagogy rather than novelty and will take time to design in a manner aligned with rapidly evolving technology and a diverse multi-generational workforce. The commercial models of digital learning are still evolving but in a world where so much digital content appears free, there are significant opportunities to create new business models.

In terms of content, customers will value what is newly created over what is already available on the web.

In terms of community, customers will value being highly connected over being disengaged.

And in terms of context, they will value the highly specialised over the generic.

Looking to the future, digital learning will certainly continue to be disruptive. As educators, our challenge is how best to shape that disruption to create a better future both for our institutions and for the learners of the future.

About the Author
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