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Autonomy of Choice in a Global Classroom: Choose-your-own Adventure, Micro-credentials, and the Destruction of "Course in a Box"

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Abstract.

Autonomy and student choice are values held by the more recent generations, and they are taking ownership of their learning in a variety of ways. It is not a surprise that students prefer different ways of learning, but students, more than ever, have greater choices in the educational marketplace for where and how they want to learn. iGen is accustomed to choosing their journey for knowledge, which is evident in the rise of the popularity of Coursera and other quick-hit education providers. If learners they choice they are presented, they can click through options until they find something they do like. This puts traditional institutions of higher education at a severe disadvantage from a customer service perspective. How then can higher educational institutions provide more choice? By building in components that students can take small portions of information have choices in how they learn, and what they learn creates student autonomy in an innovative environment where students engage in the topic. By dismantling the "course in a box," off-the-shelf curriculum is redesigned with student-centered, student autonomy as a foundation. Micro-credentials are discussed as pathways and options for greater student autonomy.

Keywords: educational pathway; iGen; learning choice; self-design

1. Introduction

As the student body across the world changes and evolves, the iGeneration, (the mid-1990s to mid-2000s) emerges as the most recent cohort of college students. Named for the significance that this group is the first generation of true digital natives having availability to digital technology from birth, the influence of technology on the generation is unmistakable. This group of learners has never known a world without touch screens, swiping their opinions, mobile applications for nearly all aspects of their worlds. Access to technology can serve as economic equality with the proliferation of cellphone ownership in this generation. Even technology is suited for the individual learner. Students believe that using a mobile device in the classroom allows them to "learn in a way that's best for me" (Pearson Education, 2015). iGen uses social media differently than previous generations. They use YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram to discover content rather than connect with friends and family. iGen is more isolated, finding it easier to connect with technology than with people (Beck & Wright, 2019).

This generation conducts most of its connections between thinking, feeling humans through digital third-parties. As a result, they struggle with human connection and social learning. The educational experiences that iGen encounters must extend beyond what they can Google. Answers to complex questions may not be found in a millisecond of an algorithm's hit. Educational experiences must be simple, provide easy answers, and be rich in experiences and viewed as personally valuable.

The attitudes and perspectives of iGen are shaped by significant political and social events: mass shootings, climate disasters, political unrest, war, ethnic cleansing, and most defining, the global pandemic. In a global learning community, those significant events rarely have the same impact and effect on students. Therefore, providing student services and curriculum cannot be one-size-fits-all. iGen is socially conscious, more socially aware than previous generations. They champion social justice and have broad exposure to diversity. Yet, globally we see the resurgence of nationalism in the US, Brexit, and throughout Europe. In the classroom, learners struggle to understand the shaky line between free speech and hate speech. More than ever, dialogic discourse is need for free and independent thinking. The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated the shift towards individualized, customizable, adaptable learning environments. Globally, institutions are looking at modalities and course design that preserves the continuity of instruction during turbulent and unpredictable times.

iGen is accustomed to choosing their journey for knowledge, which is evident in the rise of the popularity of Coursera and other quick-hit education providers. Learners of all ages are signing up for boot camps and certificate programs to up their skills quickly and efficiently to advance or change careers. Global learners are attracted to the self-paced, flexibility of on-demand learning opportunities. YouTube avails tutorials on everything from eyebrow lining to differential statistics. The equality of instruction or the expertise of the instructor doesn't seem to be a factor. If learners do not like what they see, they can click through options until they find something they do like. This puts traditional education at a severe disadvantage from a customer service perspective. How then can educational institutions provide more choice?

1.1 Course in a Box

When online education gained popularity as it spread throughout traditional brick and mortar organizations and other for-profit institutions, faculty struggled to engage with students using the online platform. Creating and posting reading lists, monitoring discussion boards, and creating videos or voice recordings were some ways that faculty tried to engage with their students. What faculty did not realize at this time was that there was a struggle for students who had a hard time navigating the classroom (Mohr and Shelton, 2017). Students were not familiar with the technology, nor did they have the time to spend learning about the technology to stay current with the curriculum.

Institutions began to receive comments from students about the inconsistencies that they were receiving in the classroom. Each faculty would set up the course in different ways, use the technology or not use the technology that the online platform provided, or never show up to

the online classroom to clarify content. Some faculty stopped having office hours or providing timely feedback. There was an apparent disconnect between expectations of the faculty requirements and the expectations of the student experience. This began a culture of creating more of a "course in a box" curriculum.

The mega-online schools set the example of scalability through the "course in a box" model. Teams of instructional designers created courses that the faculty's individual knowledge and expertise were unnecessary and often unwelcome as courses were locked and could not be modified or changed by faculty teaching the courses. This model was scalable but lacked personal approaches. Discussion questions were predetermined. Even instructor feedback was canned, copy/pasted, or automated. It provided a solid structure for the Baby Boomers and Generation X students. The Millennials and Generation Y students were still not satisfied with their online class experience.

In the early 2010s, the focus for online education was on scalability. MOOCs arose out of a desire to include more students into premiere college experiences at little to no cost. The enthusiasm has since died down because MOOCs lacked the personal attention that learners need, and the value-add was murky at best. The industry could not measure or quantify learning that their students acquire in MOOCS to translate into the workforce's skills directly. MOOCs are early examples of the "course in a box" model. This model was scalable but lacked a personal connection. MOOCs were simply too big and impersonal, resulting in low student motivation, low completion rates, and low perceived value. "Course in a Box" neglects the individual, especially for the iGeneration who puts enormous value on identity and individualism.

The iGen and Generation Y students started to share that the "course in a box" model is not satisfying. Learners started to look at different ways of gaining the desired information without using the course materials. Quick, accessible materials that could be searched online or consumed within a short amount of time are requirements. Building in components that students can take small portions of information have choices in how they learn, and what they learn creates an innovative environment where students engage in the topic.

1.1.1 Autonomy of Choice

The autonomy of choice is a value held by the more recent generations, and the way they are taking ownership of their learning can vary. Students may all prefer different ways of learning. When using a "course in a box" approach, faculty are discouraged from changing how the curriculum is delivered. Portfolio tools can now be leveraged to demonstrate students' mastery of competencies and skills, which showcase individualized work that can be assessed and mapped to the programmatic outcomes.

Autonomy can be identified in the course so that open dialog or questioning helps students gain understanding. Office hours, in-person or held synchronously during multiple times during the day, open question posts, and direct contact with peers can provide opportunities for students to gain the insight they may need to take on a project. Students may need to have opportunities to self-reflect or monitor their progress on the goals that are set. This could be completed in a reflection or formal rubric that aligns with course outcomes.

When completing projects, faculty need to provide students with projects with no clear, searchable answer. Students will have to complete additional work to put together the project for submission. Students need to have a choice, some rationale for why they are doing specific work, and the opportunity to make the work their own (Lee, Pate, & Cozart, 2015).

The shift in the landscape includes the growing popularity of micro-credentials due to their lower cost and greater return on investment. Students can complete multiple certificate programs in the time required to complete a traditional degree. Learners are not obligated to commit to one focus area of a bachelor's or master's degree. Credentials provide a shared expectation for an individual's ability to meet standardized expectations and may involve additional licensure or certification requirements. In the past, certificate programs prepared individuals for skill-based jobs, including construction, dental and medical assisting, web development, and real estate. Now, more traditional academic programs are taking the approach of breaking degrees into smaller packages. Learners have a wide variety of credential choices to acquire by learning and applying new and existing knowledge in specific areas. Learners are looking for a program that is the right fit at the right time for their needs.

2. Student Expectations of Online Classrooms

Governments are responsible for protecting higher education as a public good, even as countries like the US are battered by cynicism and mistrust of academic institutions in an economic climate where individual student loan debt is crippling, and US schools continue to see enrollment declines. More now than ever, institutions that hope to attract global learners must demonstrate the value of programs in higher education. Further, learners are looking for cheaper and faster ways to increase skills to change careers and have sustainable education opportunities. For this reason, many institutions are looking to micro-credentialing to allow learners to personalize their education to learn the skills and earn certificates when they need to, at the pace they need for their own personal goals.

The learning environments that will be needed to support future generations of global innovators will include smart, effective, and efficient uses of technology in courses. Tools are designed to support personalized pedagogy, like adaptive learning software that uses artificial intelligence to personalize each student's learning experience and meet them where their needs are. Classroom technology should create a seamless interaction between students learning from home and students on-site, in a classroom through multiaccess modality design. The one-size-fits-all lecture and textbook model need to be redesigned to allow learners the freedom to learn beyond the confines of the syllabus. iGen has used the internet to find content but lacks information literacy to retrieve trusted sources and apply them. Global learning institutions will expect learners to be creators of knowledge by bringing materials they have found back to the classroom. The "Course-in-a-box" model will not work with this generation who want and desire a personalized and cutting-edge learning experience.

Online students may look for different ways to engage with their faculty and other students. Multiaccess modality, sometimes referred to as hyflex, should be designed so that learners from around the globe could engage in synchronous classroom experiences if they chose. They value synchronous meetings, projects that create a collaborative environment, and ways

to engage in the classroom without "just answering discussion questions. The students prefer open-ended questions that have multiple responses.

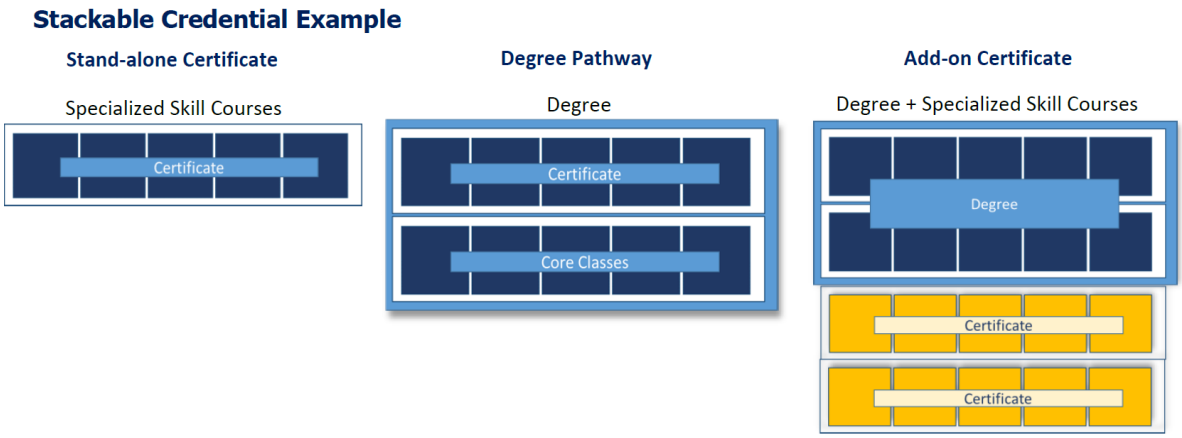
Students will look for opportunities to make decisions about the curriculum that will benefit or meet the goals that they have set. iGen and Generation Y students want to identify different ways to complete assignments instead of continually writing papers and engaging in discussion boards. This generation of students prefers to set goals and reflect on if they have met the goal, what they learned, and their next steps in learning about the content.

Students expect that faculty will be prepared to allow an autonomous environment and that the technology classroom platforms will allow them to be creative with their work product. (Deschaine & Whale, 2017). Students want to work with faculty to build guidelines for engagement; they do not want to post on specific days or respond with specific word counts. We create online courses, teach and participate, and be assessed, and new theories should be applied to curriculum builds.

2.2 Micro-Credentialing

Micro-credentialing is an emergent approach to professional learning where learning opportunities are more personalized, practical, applied, and nimble. Students are seeking faster, cheaper alternatives to college. Students and employers are looking for transparent, stackable, and evidence-rich credentials. The benefits of micro-credentialing for the global learner include: 1) Flexible time to complete: A micro-credential may take a few weeks to several months to earn. 2) Learners have a choice in the credentials they want to pursue; alternates to traditional degree programs are available. 3) Micro-credentials are earned by learning and applying new or existing expertise. 4) Institutions may choose to use a micro-credential as a programmatic milestone to motivate student persistence towards degree completion. Micro-credentials include certificates, stackable credits, badges, and pathways.

Figure 1: Stackable Credential Example



2.3 Theories

Two theories were identified as being relevant to updating the curriculum to engage the autonomous learner. These theories are Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance and Engagement theory. Moore's theory articulateeoris that distance education is not merely a geographic separation of learners and teachers, but it is, more importantly, a pedagogical concept, and the distance is significant enough that specific teaching strategies must be used. Understandably, the distance between global learners can pose enough complicated challenges. Transactional distance includes variables based on culture, physical distance, modality, and behaviors between learners and teachers and learners. According to the theory, when interaction decreases between teachers and learners, learner autonomy must increase (Moore, 1997). For the future of global learners, designing a curriculum must include the opportunity for personalized interaction between teacher and learners balanced with students' opportunity to demonstrate autonomy in the learning process.

Keersley and Schneiderman assert that their Engagement Theory is a learning model for technology-based environments where students should be involved in their learning through meaningful, interactive, and authentic tasks. Further, technology can promote engagement. The engagement theory promotes learning through collaboration to develop communication, planning, and social skills. Learners have the opportunity to individualize their learning by creating and defining their own projects to develop a sense of ownership in the learning process. Finally, according to the Engagement Theory, learning activities should have a meaningful and realistic relationship to the outside world to better prepare students for the workforce. The opportunity for diversity of learning with a global environment elevates the theory to force teachers and learners to stretch beyond themselves and seek relevant and engaging connections.

3 Conclusion

Soon the traditional undergraduate student will be a minority on college campuses. The traditional model is being disrupted, even as some educational institutions cling to the past models. Due to the pandemic, higher education institutions were forced to accelerate the shift to the new normal. Online and on-campus modality choices are no longer binary. Student-centered learning is at the forefront of educational change. Institutions that cannot or will not respond to the shift will be left behind. The term "life-long learner" in the past meant someone interested in learning new ideas and skills throughout their lives. However, implied in the term is the idea that this s a voluntary endeavor. However, in the Information Age, where learners find themselves in a Gig Economy, life-long learning is no longer a nicety; it is a necessity. The new model of education is renewable. Renewable learning and skill development opportunities must be student-centered, individualized, and built on a foundation of student choice and autonomy. One must stay current, active, engaged, and connected. Learners require broader opportunities for continuous learning and professional development with fewer entry and completion barriers, cheaper, faster, and more available. Institutions cannot be faster, better, cheaper, more mobile, or more accessible to meet this generation's needs. Institutions need to think more like a business than they ever have before. This

includes consideration of the end-to-end customer experience of the student. All the while, institutions know that learners can choose to get their education somewhere else. This is why institutions need to provide learning opportunities for students with choice and customization.

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