

Online Technologies Enhance the Liberal Arts Learning Experience

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The focus on small classroom sizes and face-to-face time with students at small liberal arts colleges can create interesting challenges when considering the latest technologies in content delivery. Distance learning, hybrid courses, and massively open online courses (MOOCs) may not be the best fit to achieve the learning outcomes and experiences desired at a liberal arts institution when used as a replacement for in-person teaching and learning. However, I believe these technologies still have value in a liberal arts setting. Instead of thinking of online and hybrid offerings as a replacement for face-to-face interaction, schools might want to consider using these resources to enhance the learning experience. This article looks at the technologies available and provides examples of ways to use these resources without compromising the core values of a liberal arts education at a small college.

Content Delivery Options

MOOCs have generated discussions at the highest levels of higher education.¹ At one extreme, they are viewed as the latest fad that can safely be ignored; at the other extreme, they prompt an urge to move forward immediately with an offering on edX, Coursera, or Udacity to keep up with the competition. A number of prominent universities have chosen to offer a MOOC as an experiment or a marketing opportunity. Detractors reference low completion rates and difficulty in assessing outcomes, while proponents point to the high number of enrollees, credentials of the faculty members, and prestige of the institutions offering the courses. The true value of a particular MOOC probably lies somewhere in the middle. Referencing low completion rates for a free offering is not fair, since a large percentage sign up out of curiosity. Additionally, an instructor experienced in face-to-face teaching may not be able to communicate the message adequately in an online setting.

The flipped classroom and hybrid offerings are not necessarily new developments in course delivery. However, smartphones and tablets have given new life to these pedagogical approaches. It is now possible to offer content online nearly anywhere to a large percentage of our students.² The portability of smartphones and tablets allows content consumption in places where laptops were inconvenient, and the increases in market penetration of mobile devices makes learning on the go a reality today. Students now bring three to four wireless devices to campus, challenging universities to embrace these devices and use them to support the academic mission.

Examples at Ohio Wesleyan University

How can we use these delivery methods and technologies in a liberal arts setting? How do we stay true to the value of small classroom sizes with direct student interaction with talented faculty members? Can we actually enhance face-to-face time using technology? Of course!

Whether or not MOOCs pose a threat for small liberal arts institutions is up for debate. At [Ohio Wesleyan University](#) (OWU), instructional technologist David Soliday is taking MOOCs in various disciplines with the goal of finding the "cream of the crop." The purpose is not to find an entire course for OWU, but rather individual lessons. Once he identifies a well-done lecture (or content), he shares the lecture with the appropriate faculty members. These high-quality lectures can be assigned to students struggling with certain topics. This approach drastically reduces the time faculty would need to research content on their own. Instead, they can review the lecture once and decide if it is appropriate for their needs. Given that the time required to evaluate pedagogical resources constitutes a prominent barrier to the adoption of any innovation, this pre-vetting can have a significant impact on the decision process.

Video, for example, is a powerful tool when used appropriately. Three graduate students in the University of Maryland Sociology Department (Valerie Chepp, Paul Dean, and Lester Andrist), realizing how important the pre-vetting of online materials is to their adoption, developed a website focused on sociology topics. [The Sociological Cinema](#) website they created indexes online video with tags so that others can quickly find content that speaks to a particular theme and also offers lesson plans and assignment recommendations. The resource is completely free, and they have seen usage increase exponentially since launching the site. (The dramatic graphical video of the [wealth of countries over time](#) is one of my favorites and worth a preview.) For more information, see the [interview with Dean](#) (now an assistant professor of sociology and anthropology at OWU).

The flipped classroom can optimize face-to-face time. This delivery model requires students to come to class prepared to discuss and apply information acquired outside of the classroom. When implemented well, it can free up classroom time for deeper discussion, experimentation, and group work. By asking students to become familiar with core concepts in cell biology at a basic level before attending class, OWU Professor of Botany and Microbiology Chris Wolverton could engage students in application-style scenarios rather than spending valuable classroom time lecturing. Students worked in groups to [answer questions, solve problems, or explain a key experiment](#) in their own words. When misconceptions arose, they could be addressed on a case-by-case basis and gaps in understanding filled in. While some students expressed a preference for more traditional lectures, others were happy to do more work in advance of class if it meant they would get to apply the information and receive feedback in class. Click on this [link to hear Wolverton talk](#) about his experiment with the flipped classroom.

Conclusion

Technology will undoubtedly continue to have an impact on the delivery of course content. Sorting out the trends from the game changers is difficult, and sometimes impossible. Faculty, staff, and administrators should monitor technology developments in collaboration with their IT departments to make the best decisions for the institution. Technology is not needed in every classroom or course, or by every faculty member. The correct approach is to evaluate and implement technology where it makes the most sense, and to avoid forcing it on faculty arbitrarily.

Our experience at OWU demonstrates that using technology strategically can benefit a small, liberal arts college without compromising our core values. However, we should not wait for the requests to arrive at the IT help desk. A better approach is to take the initiative, reduce the barriers to the extent possible, and present technology solutions to the faculty for consideration. We have found that our faculty are already doing amazing things with technology. It is our job to assist them, spread the success stories, and monitor the landscape to bring new ideas to campus. This approach changes the definition of the typical IT department by transforming it from a service organization to partners in teaching and learning.

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Notes

1. Devon Haynie, "[MOOCs Stir Up Controversy](#)," *U.S. News and World Report*, May 14, 2013.
2. Susan Grajek and the 2012–2013 EDUCAUSE IT Issues Panel, "[Welcome to the Connected Age: Top-Ten IT Issues, 2013](#)," *EDUCAUSE Review*, (May/June 2013), pp. 30–57.