Chapter 5
Faculty Response to the Opportunities of the Digital Age:
Towards a Service Culture in the Professoriate

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ABSTRACT

The digital revolution has had a profound impact on learning opportunities, but there is often ambivalence in the ways in which faculty and colleges embrace these opportunities. Attitudes and the cultural expectations of faculty lie at the heart of any successful strategic response to the digital revolution. This chapter examines cultural values that may limit responsiveness and suggests that a new cultural paradigm is needed among faculty members. This paradigm accentuates the notion of service and a relational commitment to learners. In education, a relational service culture recognizes the value and centrality of the learner and provides a pathway for the broader strategic alignment of the academy with the opportunities that are presented by the digital age. The chapter critically appraises the need for a relational service culture among faculty that might further and expand learner-centered pedagogies, and suggests how change might be initiated and supported.

INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution in higher education means different things to different people; however, nobody doubts that the revolution is in progress. Whether seen in terms of online distance learning, massive online open courses (MOOCs), freely available open educational resources (OERs), or in the growing employment of social media in instructional design, the digital revolution has impacted the ways in which higher education sees itself and how it responds to change and innovation (European Commission, 2014; Kelly & Hess, 2013).

Many college presidents and senior administrators believe that higher education is, and

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-9577-1.ch005

certainly should be, an adopter of digital change, not simply a follower (Parker, Lenhart, & Moore, 2011). Others remain less confident about adoption progress. They recognize that higher education has been stressed by the digital challenge, but that it has not as yet risen to the challenge. They also believe that the academy is resilient and possesses the capacity to eventually make changes (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Weller & Anderson, 2013). However, there are others – particularly among the front-line teaching faculty – who complain that academic culture is inherently resistant to change and that qualities such as flexibility, responsiveness, and adaptability are in short supply (Khalil, 2013; Lai, 2011).

Although there is a lack of consensus about its impact, there is unanimity that the digital challenge will remain a permanent feature of the higher learning environment. Linked to a globalized economy, and to an increasingly internationalized world, the digital revolution has radically changed what is done – and what can be done – and there is a growing sense that a sea-change is required in higher education. There is hope that the more effective and comprehensive adoption of technological will solves some of the seemingly intractable problems faced by higher education. In Australia, for instance, the dramatic rise in tuition and administrative costs led the consultant firm Ernst and Young (2012) to warn that the whole academic system is facing imminent disaster and that "the dominant university model in Australia – a broad-based teaching and research institution, supported by a large asset base and a large, predominantly in-house back office – will prove unviable in all but a few cases over the next 10-15 years" (p. 4). In such a harsh and stressful economic climate, many look to the digital revolution as a potential solution, not a problem. Indeed, considering the disruptive power of technologies – particularly the promise of MOOCs – another independent Australian report predicted that "education systems around the world are on the brink of major transformation" (Austrade, 2013, p. 1).

The juxtaposition of a developing crisis and a possible solution is also recognized in the UK. It has been a prediction that the disruptive potentials of the digital revolution might mean that the next 50 years will be "a golden age for higher education, but only if all the players in the system, from students to governments, seize the initiative and act ambitiously" (Barber, Donnelly, & Rizvi, 2013, p. 5). The same authors warned, however, that if there is a failure to act then "an avalanche of change will sweep the system away" (p. 5). Recognizing the necessity for deep change, there has been considerable evaluation of the advantages that the digital revolution has brought to learners, particularly the opportunities of MOOCs and open educational resources. This has resulted in a large number of initiatives to incorporate these technologies into the teaching and learning practices of British and European universities (Falconer, McGill, Littlejohn, & Boursinou, 2013; Yuan & Powell, 2013; Yuan, Powell, & Olivier, 2014).

In order to avoid the disaster of the inevitable avalanche, higher education must formulate strategic responses and implement them effectively. But strategic responses cannot be considered until the academy appreciates the threats and opportunities that it faces and evaluates its own internal strengths and weaknesses. External forces, including the digital revolution, can neither be ignored nor changed. Effective strategic responses need to deploy the internal strengths of the academy, but in order to convert external threats into opportunities the academy must reconfigure itself. A critical part of this reconfiguration is a reshaping of the understanding, practice, and culture of the college faculty. The digital revolution *cannot* issue in a "golden age" unless the faculty is empowered to change and to act ambitiously.

This chapter considers a shift in culture that might allow faculty to grasp the digital revolution and to utilize it in productive and innovative ways. Of course, a shift in culture is only *one* response. It would be naïve to see it as the *only* response, or to over-dramatize its importance. However, it would