Online Education, Standardization, and Roles

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INTRODUCTION

Education is associated with *standardization* – determining how learning should occur and for what students, is the essence of education from the perspective of those who administer educational programs. The administration of education also requires the consideration of roles, whether of content developer, tester, lecturer, manager, or something else (Rada, 2001). What has happened historically as regards standardization and roles in education, and how does this relate to the impact of *online education*?

BACKGROUND

Reviewing the history of education can illustrate the importance of standardization and roles in education. Two thousand years ago, the Chinese had a standardized educational system. Students were tested on a fixed curriculum at certain ages in every village and passed from one level of education to another only after they were able to reproduce from memory certain documents. "By requiring set standards and prescribing teaching methods and uniform syllabuses, and by establishing controlling bodies of literary superintendents, the examination system assumed a systematic comprehensiveness unknown in the West before the mass education systems of the early nineteenth century." (Cleverley, 1991, p. 15). The technology of the day was textbooks, tools for writing, classrooms, and exams. All these tools were standardized by the state. The roles involved in education included those who developed the standardized tools and those who monitored the delivery of those tools to students.

One thousand years ago in the Western World, the church controlled education. Each bishop exercised educational control under authority delegated to them by the pope. While the masses were illiterate and uneducated, for those who were deemed worthy of education, the preacher was the primary teacher, and religious education was the main goal. Education became more universal but remained equally religious in focus in the founding colonies of the United States. Massachusetts was founded as a religious state 400 years ago. To help make children Puritans, the Massachusetts government ordered every town of 50 families to employ a preacher to teach reading and writing. The educational tool was The Bible and the method of learning was memorization. Standardization was high, but the various functions of teaching were largely bundled into the one role of the preacher.

Nineteenth century education was driven by the industrial revolution to find efficient ways to teach larger numbers of students. Joseph Lancaster founded a school in a poor section of London and used older pupils as assistant teachers for the younger children. He first taught the lesson to these monitors, and each monitor then taught the lesson to the group of children that had been placed under the monitor's control (Duggan, 1936). With this monitorial system, a single teacher was able to direct the instruction of a large number of pupils. Lancaster, for instance, himself taught an entire school of 1,000 children through the use of child monitors. The monitorial method was also widely adopted for elementary schools and secondary schools throughout the first half of the 19th century in the United States. The system illustrated a specialization of roles in which one teacher was a master of other teachers who, in turn, did the teaching. However, as material wealth increased and the public became willing to contribute funds to education, the mechanical methods that had become part of the monitorial schools were abandoned and full-time, professional teachers replaced students in the monitorial role.

MAIN FOCUS: STANDARDIZATION AND ROLES

Throughout the history of education, *standardization of teaching* and learning has become more and more systematic; however, the role of the teacher has essentially remained the same. Information technology and online education have significantly increased automation and changed the traditional teacher.

Technology

In the mid-20th century, radio and television became technologies for delivery of distance education. The *Open University* in England in the first 30 years of its existence had already granted 200,000 degrees through combinations of television shows, paper mail, and other distance communication devices. A single course that was developed at the Open University headquarters would be delivered through the media with the support of various levels of technicians and teachers to tens of thousands of students. Content was thus standardized. Roles were also well-differentiated, as the person making the script might be different from the person starring in an educational show, who might also be different from the person who answered students' questions. In the United States, over 100,000 million Americans, through organizations such as the National Radio Institute, used distance education methods during the 20th century.

To the extent that learning can be formalized and modeled on the computer, the computer can play an active role in education. Information technology can support various tasks in the classroom. Educational organizations can operate in quantitatively and qualitatively different ways. The role of the instructor can be "unbundled" into three parts: the content specialist, who decides what material goes online; instruction designer, who designs the material's presentation, and the instructor, who interacts with the students of the course (Levy, 2003).

Computers and telecommunications networks have less changed the formal education of children from the ages of 5 to 18 than they have changed the education of university students. However, the types of changes that technology can bring have implications for education at all levels. This impact will be illustrated with cases studies of two university online education programs.

Pace University

Pace University is a multi-campus private university based in New York City with approximately 15,000 students that offers associate, bachelors, masters, and professional degrees. Pace has had negligible involvement in distance education prior to starting, in 1998, an online Associate of Arts Degree for employees of the telecommunications industry (Pace, 2007).

The program developed very quickly under the adroit leadership of the person responsible for continuing education programs, not academic programs. All courses follow a strict pattern. Numerous specialists support various operations of the program; for example, different roles:

- Administer quality control surveys on a regular basis, at times weekly, to students in a class.
- Phone students whose survey responses suggest a problem.
- Answer academic queries about the degree program for students.

The teacher of the course is not necessarily the person who developed the course content, schedule, examinations, or anything else about the structure or function of the course. Furthermore, the teacher no longer does the quality control or social support expected of a traditional teacher.

The development of course content is also specialized:

- The requirements for the courses have come from industry.
- The template for all courses is fixed in advance.
- Technical staff helps place content in courses.

Someone designs the course, but other people teach it. Those who deliver the course are obligated to follow the curriculum developed by the designer.

A faculty member gets a few thousand dollars to design an online course, and the university owns the copyright on the course. The director has managed the rapid development of a full complement of online courses for an associate of arts degree and staffed the program for successful delivery.

Further evidence of the non-traditional, manufacturing mode of the program is the schedule. Courses each last a traditional 15 weeks. However, rather than

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