

Camelot, Calamity, and Some Common Cents About Distance Education

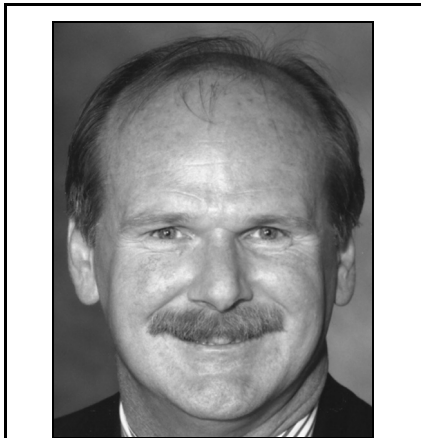
Don Olcott, Jr.

Once upon a time, in a far-off land, the King awoke one morning pondering the question "Do I really know what my Camelot subjects want from the Crown?" Later that day, at his Knights Roundtable, his First Knight echoed these sentiments and asked the

King, "Do we really know what the other Kings are doing with their subjects in the surrounding Kingdoms? Are we really harnessing our available resources and focusing on delivering what our subjects need, not just what they want?"

This dialogue seems to be as applicable today as it was for Camelot. Today, continuing and distance education deans engage their staff in open dialogue about what we do, do we do it well, and how do we know we are doing it well. Moreover, as we reflect on the evolution of distance education over the past 20 years, we are simultaneously amazed and perplexed at the changes that have defined the profession. This has never been more true than in the hallowed halls of the modern university. At times, we wonder who is steering the ship, where it is going, and whether the distance game has a major role in the university's future.

The last 20 years, perhaps, could be viewed in three general phases. The first phase, from 1985-1995, would be the Camelot period. The second phase, from 1995-2003, might be described as the Calamity phase. The current phase, beginning around 2004, would be the Common Cents



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phase. These may seem like humorous descriptions of the field until one examines these periods of the distance education continuum. You, the reader, can decide for yourself whether your experiences and views on the field coincide with these phases. Let's look at some of the key characteristics of each phase.

THE CAMELOT PHASE: 1985-1995

DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS

- *Technologies:* Primarily satellite broadcasting, PBS programming, correspondence programs, one-way instructional video; two-way compressed video arrives in early 1990s; some audioconferencing.
- *Organizational Structure:* Universities tended to house distance delivery in the current structures (e.g., TV studio, technology center, PBS affiliated station, etc). Continuing education organizations managed correspondence study and slowly began assuming new responsibilities for distance learning support services to students. Distance education was viewed with skepticism and as a auxiliary service of the university ... most faculty and senior administrators viewed it as second class higher education that was just another of those innovations that would eventually die a slow death.
- *Instructional Formats:* In general, differentiated instructional attributes for distance learning was an anomaly. Most programs were taught exactly like traditional face-to-face courses, designed like traditional courses, and evaluated like traditional courses. The formal instructional design paradigm faced considerable resistance by faculty and it would take a few years before faculty and administrators alike figured out that teaching at a distance requires new

design approaches that would achieve the same outcomes.

- *Financial Model:* Distance education would save or make the university money. This was the university's version of "Save the Planet" by advocating to legislatures, funding agencies, and accrediting bodies that academic quality and free enterprise could coexist in the academy ... or so the story goes. The formal funding mechanism for many universities during this period could be aptly described as the "Scavenger Model," building distance programs on existing budgets and targeting any new or available moneys primarily at the technologies that were viewed as the silver bullet success factor for all distance learning programs. Quality, design, faculty training, student outcomes, and institutional budget funding would have to wait.
- *Student Services:* Student services were face-to-face and done by staff. Online student services were in the future. Campus-based models, including student fees, were just applied to off-campus distance programs. In didn't matter that a student 200 miles away didn't use the health center, attend football games, etc.: charge them anyway.
- *Accreditation and Assessment:* Accrediting agencies evaluated distance education programs using the same criteria required for traditional campus academic programs. However, in the early 1990s, the North Central Accrediting Commission and the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications began examining different approaches for reviewing distance education programs.

In sum, the Camelot period had high aspirations for distance education in expanding access to higher education. In retrospect, these aspirations fell short of the lofty expectations set for distance education. Technology drove the engine with

little focus on design, assessment, and mission alignment with the core mission of an institution. And, the field learned a hard lesson that distance education done well costs money and that making money on the enterprise for many institutions was the exception, not the rule.

At the same time, the Camelot period began to raise “realistic” opportunities for distance education in expanding access, serving working adult learners, and mainstreaming various technologies into the regular classroom as well as for distance delivery. Accrediting agencies soon began to see the light that perhaps different approaches for assessing distance education would be needed. Institutions, at least those that really took distance education seriously, soon realized that dedicated funding to support the enterprise would be needed in the future. Research in distance education began to grow, and dedicated journals were soon to hit the academic newsstand. A brave new world it was not. However, the possibilities were gathering momentum.

THE CALAMITY PHASE: 1995-2003

Calamity, in and of itself, does not necessarily mean instability for the field. To the contrary, it means a period of significant transformations that pave the way for the future of the field. What are some of these transformations that characterized the calamity phase?

DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS

- *Technologies:* Emergence of the World Wide Web and the Internet. Online learning begins to evolve and the learning management systems (e.g., E-College, Blackboard, WebCT, and others) emerge in the private sector. Statewide telecommunications networks primarily dependent on video-based programming are being scrutinized in this

new era. Integrated Technology Systems Design, the combining of multiple technologies to deliver programs and courses, begin to take shape. New terms that confuse the field, such as blended learning and hybrid learning, appear in the literature and in professional conference presentations.

- *Organizational Structure:* Universities begin experimenting with new organizational models. Some are built on previous continuing education and outreach units, while others are separate distance learning units, instructional technology centers, and/or centers for teaching and learning. Some universities go as far as creating separate and global units such as Penn State’s World Campus, the University of Texas System TeleCampus, and variations of virtual universities. Community colleges during this period are more focused on using distance learning to expand access to all learners. Many universities still stumble over their elitism and cumbersome governance and policy structures.
- *Instructional Formats:* Instructional designers finally have their day in court. Increasingly, distance learning units and even faculty begin to understand the critical role that design plays in developing and assessing distance learning courses.
- *Financial Model:* More and more universities are dedicating reoccurring funding to campus distance education. Federal and private funding sources increase available resources for distance learning initiatives, particularly collaborative partnerships between K-12, community colleges, and universities. Universities, in general, still operate on a cost-recovery model for distance education, and many under the illusion that distance learning will create extensive new profit centers.
- *Student Services:* Transition period from old labor-staff intensive models of ser-

vices to the integration of online student services into many distance learning programs. Online admissions, registration, financial aid, marketing, general academic advising, and assessment begin to emerge. Eventually campus student service organizations begin to learn from the distance learning managers and automate campus services for students. Universities still grapple with technology fees and student fees for distance learners.

- *Accreditation and Assessment:* Increased focus on the instructional design also increases focus on outcomes assessment. Competency-based assessment gains some ground among some universities largely because of the work of Western Governors University.

THE COMMON CENTS PHASE: 2003-PRESENT

The common cents phase, while building on the calamity phase, has some distinct characteristics. This phase could aptly be described as *distance education at the crossroads* phase. Moreover, distance education's future is not secure, not well-defined, and devoid of visionary leadership that is defining the future for the profession. This profession truly is at the crossroads.

THE COMMON CENTS TRENDS

- Distance, as a functional term, is obsolete. Today, students are taking courses 300 yards from the faculty member's office or 10,000 miles away. Universities are beginning to finally understand that education is education is education, regardless of how, where, when, and through what facilitative technologies are employed. Terms such as distributed, virtual, hybrid, and blended are equally obsolete if, in fact, they ever were useful to the profession.
- Financial efficiency of distance learning is more focused by most institutions and programs that continually lose money will be phased out. Conversely, institutions are engaging in broad-based technology planning that encompasses the entire continuum of technologies to serve all students.
- Mainstreaming, or the integration of distance learning into the day-to-day operations and organization of the university, is increasing. Instructional development, student services, assessment, and fiscal efficiency are examined based upon their role in serving all students of the institution.
- Be careful what you wish for in higher education. Distance learning advocates in the previous Camelot and calamity phases complained that the university didn't value distance learning and viewed it as second-class education. Well, we've come full circle and institutions are fully integrating distance delivery into the mainstream academic culture. Advocating that distance education should be separate but equal is a weak argument today. The result will be more centralized organizational structures for distance learning and the new distance learning organizations that were created in the calamity phase may disappear along with continuing education units that have enjoyed managerial oversight for distance learning. Universities have finally recognized that throwing funds at multiple organizations on the campus to play a role in distance education is simply poor fiscal management. And it's the same people who have been throwing the money who are now advocating for the centralized focused approach. C'est la vie!
- Accreditation agencies are focusing on student learning outcomes for all instruction. Assessment will increasingly target showing that students are learning what faculty state they are supposed to learn and demonstrate.

THE FUTURE: OBSOLESCENCE OR A BRAVE NEW WORLD

Distance education has made considerable progress during the past 20 years in expanding access to higher education. At the same time, the winds of change have taken it from second-class academic citizen to the mainstream of the academy. Change is inevitable for most professions, and distance learning has truly arrived at a crossroads. Where are we going and how will we get there? Do you want to thrive or just survive in the next 5 years? How will you do this? The following are what I think will be the characteristics of successful distance learning organizations in the next 5 years. Agree or disagree, it's up to you, but you may want to give these and others some thought as you prepare for the next winds of change.

- Online education will be strategically designed to support the mission of the university. Alignment with the university mission will be mandatory, not optional.
- Faculty will play an increasing role in planning and vision for distance learning.
- Online student and faculty support services will be designed to serve all students and faculty of the university, regardless of location, time, and space.
- Online programs will be responsive to learner and employer needs, not what academicians think they need.
- Multiple-language instruction for selected programs will increase, particularly for national and international markets.
- Design team models will emerge that support scalable growth of programs without proportionate increases for instructional and administrative costs.

Scalability is ultimately about serving more students at less cost, not the same costs as enrollments increase.

- Assessment and research of distance education will be an integral value across the institution.
- Selected market response: institutions will focus on doing lots of what they do best.
- Distance learning programs will be marketed and priced for profitability.
- Economic development and workforce training will be an expected and measurable outcome of university distance education.
- Pay attention to advances in mobile technologies. Mobile technologies will be cheaper, faster, and more efficient for transmitting data sets in multiple formats.
- Sophistication of online language translation capacity will increase.
- Online systems will have enhanced security features for protecting personal and professional data and information.
- Know your students and their learning characteristics. Today's traditional age students are sometimes referred to as "millennials" and are using multiple technologies simultaneously and multi-tasking in their approach to learning. These students may look the same in the classroom, but they are learning very differently when they go home or to their dorm rooms.

As Will Rogers so eloquently stated, "Even if you're on the right track you are going to get run over if you just sit there." Are you on the right track for distance education at your university? Camelot, calamity, or common cents, it's your choice.

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