Paving Cow Paths With Today's Online Classroom

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Technology solutions abound in the education community. Yet for decades, while the global economy has seen unprecedented efficiency and product quality gains, there has been no discernable growth in achievement for secondary education students in America. In 1997 our national composite ACT (our most consistent objective test over the years) score was 21.0. In 2010 it was still 21.0. What happened to the transformational potential of the online classroom?

All industries can claim to have unique characteristics. But none are exempt from the central tenets of The Quality Process. As other industries use technology to enable the principles of *continuous process improvement*, *voice of the customer*, and *cost of quality* in order to compete with better products at lower cost, the education community seems to be relying heavily on tools to automate disparate classroom functions.

The education community is plagued by high variability in student achievement. Not adequately explained by student demographics, this variability (a fundamental quality metric) has its root causes in the *processes* that form the education experience of our students. The education experience, not the classroom, is the *product* our students consume and this nuanced distinction is a key to understanding why today's classroom technologies are falling short of expectations. Process improvement, not simply automation, leads to transformation. Breakthroughs occur by altering how *interdependent* activities of a business process work in relation to one another. When teaching activities are automated without considering the larger processes to which they belong, unintended consequences can result; innately flawed processes can be reinforced

In many industries, individual employees personally impact the customer experience. Teachers, inarguably, have the greatest impact on student achievement. Similarly, pilots impact the flying experience of United's customers, and so on. Yet, uniquely, popular education technologies accept the temporal teacher/student relationship as a structural requirement. That is, Ms. Smith's Algebra 2 class is treated as a logically distinct education experience relative to Mr. Brown's Algebra 2 class. This is the "my classroom" paradigm of today's online classroom, and illuminates a root structural flaw that perpetuates arbitrariness in what students experience. All other industries embrace the "our product" paradigm which would establish "the Algebra 2 education experience" as the singular product, for which Ms. Smith and Mr. Brown are jointly responsible. Here, the technology is structurally poised to facilitate continuous improvement and consistency, even though physically distinct classrooms are involved. Meaningful measurements and collaborative practices can more easily be "wired" into the teaching process. Teachers will come and go, but the Algebra 2 offering would remain and incrementally evolve at the hands of many teachers, year over year. School systems unwittingly incur costs to compensate for the teaching silos today's solutions reinforce. These costs show up in overhead initiatives, meetings, and coordinator positions to cross-fertilize knowledge that should have already been embodied in course offerings; IT efforts to maintain data "bridges" between disparate tools; reporting procedures to help administrators integrate information that should be integrated naturally. This cost-of-quality is significant. Profit-driven companies would become

uncompetitive if they were similarly bound to enabling technologies that fragmented their service offerings into personalized silos that come and go with their employees.

Much of industry's transformation in recent decades had less to do with the internet than it did with a quality management principle called "process-over-function." Consider, for example, the practice of student assessment. The functional view of assessment is that it measures the impact of what has already been taught, and thus produces data suitable for grading the performance of both teacher and student. The process perspective, however, frames assessment as a voice-of-the-customer *input* that influences teaching priorities going forward; it influences, through the teacher, the product itself. In this context, student assessments must do more than produce information for grading. So when assessment methods are designed with just their traditional purpose in mind, the effort to retro-fit them into useful operational tools for teachers often results in disappointment.

For instance, teaching is a continuous process and student proficiencies evolve continuously. Yet today, students are typically assessed against established education standards only twice or three times a year. This satisfies traditional reporting requirements, but this approach cannot adequately influence, what is fundamentally, a continuous teaching process. Educators cannot have a continuously adaptive offering if critical inputs are not continuously received. Further, to be operationally useful, standards-based assessments must produce data that is qualitatively helpful to the teacher who, like the pilot of a plane, bears ultimate "in-flight" responsibility for her students' experiences. This means the data must include more information than what is needed for grading. It also means that teachers must possess deep understandings of established standards so they can correctly interpret and apply the data they are seeing. Process improvement requires more than tools to help teachers create assessments: It requires tools to help teachers become proficient assessors so they can deliver a true standards-driven education experience to their students.

The point is that *transformation* relies on technologies that can shine light on process flaws and root issues, not technologies that give analgesic relief to the pain they cause. New assessment methodologies can indeed be transformational, but only if education leaders can clearly see and remove the trip-wires that stand in the way, such as information gaps and critical skill gaps. Tools that merely compensate for (hence preserve) gaps will impede real transformation, not enable it.

Educators are in the professional services business. Top tier services Firms, such as Accenture, Deloitte, PwC, and others, compete on distinctive "best practice" methodologies, their ability to continually improve upon them, and their ability to consistently deliver customer value with them. They lever internal resources and cross-fertilize knowledge with utmost efficiency. Their employees are trained to speak with one methodological voice and are rewarded not just for the impact they have on their customers, but for their thought leadership and the impact they have on their peers, their offerings, and their Firm's overall success. These Firms are lean up top because their processes are sound down below. Their functional tools come and go as process-improvements require, but their operating infrastructure is a stable product-focused, information-driven, platform designed to reinforce the principles of continuous improvement.

Industry leaders of the 90's challenged the familiarities of the way things have always worked; the cow paths. They demanded fundamental methodological changes, not simply automation, and embraced information technologies that could help guide their way. Transformation followed. Education leaders can do the same. Information-driven methodologies, not disparate functional tools, will strengthen the central pillar of the education experience, *the teacher*. They will ultimately remove arbitrariness from the system and equip professional educators with the means to deliberately manage improvement, growth, and their impact on our students.