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Tomorrow's Globally Engaged University

By Kevin Kinser

Technology has had an enormous impact on the development of universities around the world. From the printing press to PowerPoint, technology has enabled the accumulation and distribution of knowledge. It has permitted communication beyond the range of the human voice and facilitated interactions between people who would never meet face-to-face. Scientific experimentation, classroom presentation, and analysis of information have all been influenced by technology. In short, technology is, and always has been, fundamental to the mission of higher education.

Likewise, technology has been essential to the expanding international activities of universities. Transportation is easier and cheaper now than ever before, and tools at our disposal give us numerous ways to stay in touch with students and faculty around the world. Information about distant places is readily available for planning purposes, and online tours can give a sense of the sights and sounds (if not the smells) of potential destinations. Linkages with colleagues in other countries help make management of global programs easier, while faculty and students can work across time zones to build effective joint programs and curricula.

Still, technology makes some in the academy uneasy. It threatens the deeply personal experience of connecting with others over the exchange of ideas. It trades the community of scholars for the quick click of a mouse. It paints real-world experience as a luxury that the virtual world can duplicate. And claims of cheaper, faster, and more engaged learning through technological innovations often coincide with a declining view of education as a public good.

On the one hand, technology is vital to the modern university. On the other hand, it challenges the traditional idea of the university as grounded in a particular location, with physical interactions and connections at the heart of what is done.

But internationalization also challenges the geographically centered university by insisting on global engagement as a core responsibility. Because of this, there is a natural synergy between technology and internationalization that should be explored. Some forms of technology have had an immediate impact. Others will see a rise in influence in the coming years. And imaginations run wild in considering the long-term potential of technology on the international activities of higher education.

Technological Tailwind

The current impact of technology on internationalization is undeniable. The instant flow of information around the world makes it easy to bring international perspectives into the curriculum, and also easier to promote university activities to a global audience. That this is a matter-of-fact statement today shows just how far we have come in the 20 years since the web was introduced. Although the digital divide remains in many places around the world, it is certainly getting narrower. Just two countries, Norway and Canada, had half of their populations using the Internet in 2000. By

2012, more than 80 countries—ranging from Andorra to Uruguay—showed that level of connectivity.[1] This sort of access to the world is invaluable for everything from international recruitment to participating in international consortia. The current portfolio of global engagement in higher education would be unthinkable without this 20-year technological tailwind.

Trends and Impact

As unremarkable as information sharing and communication on a global scale currently is, there is far less comfort with the impact of technology as a substitute for personal interaction. The Facebook decade has demonstrated how pervasive social media can be, and the rise of distance education shows that faculty and students do not have to be in the same place for learning to occur. The combination of these two trends is on the horizon.

The recent emergence of massive open online courses, or MOOCs, for example, suggests that technology can be employed to open the university to the masses, irrespective of geography or income level. These are courses that are delivered via online learning platforms (following distance education models) and use a peer-driven approach (taking advantage of social media conventions) in order to provide virtually free courses to thousands of students at a time. The first versions of MOOCs grabbed media attention and attracted investors from both academia and the venture capital world. What began in only a few countries—namely, the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom— quickly spread around the world, with well over half of all MOOC enrollments coming from outside the United States.[2] It has become sport to dismiss the effectiveness of MOOCs because they have such low completion rates. But it is good to remember that in a class of 100,000 students, even if five percent graduate, that is more than most faculty will see in a career of teaching.

Moreover, the innovations represented by MOOCs are in their first generation. It is not what MOOCs are doing now, but what they might be doing 5–10 years from now. And for that we already have some hints. As an export industry, MOOCs open a new front in the competition for international students.

Not only are they attractive options for students who do not have the resources to travel abroad, but they also can provide content for on-the-ground efforts to expand access and quality in underserved regions around the world. For example, the U.S. State Department has partnered with Coursera to open global learning hubs in embassies and U.S. State Department "American Spaces" in more than 30 countries.[3] In Rwanda, a pilot program called Kepler is providing top-tier higher education to small groups of students using a selection of free online courses from U.S. institutions. Initially, students are tracked to earn an associate degree through a Southern New Hampshire University competency-based program.[4]

More generally, because MOOCs rely on peer-to-peer interaction to make manageable contributions among thousands of students, they show potential for cross-cultural exchange among students from different nations. Finding the correct balance is going to be challenging, though, as the difficulties with a course called "Constitutional Struggles in the Muslim World" recently demonstrated.[5] But the opportunity for global engagement by students is real and should be a focus of internationalization efforts by the sponsoring universities.

The Long View

Imagining the future of technology is always a risky proposition. But with Moore's law stating that computing power doubles every 18 months, and Amara's law noting that the effects of technology are overestimated in the short run and underestimated in the long run, it is worthwhile to consider what might be in store that could transform internationalization efforts in the twenty-first century.

There is already an iPhone app, for example, that allows you to speak short phrases and sentences that are then translated into dozens of languages. Imagine a real-time universal translator that could do the same thing with a classroom lecture. Immersive technology is also developing quickly, with applications that use 3D images and gesture recognition to simulate virtual environments, and massively multiplayer online games providing models for interactions among many people in an artificial

world. Imagine developing a world cultures curriculum that spans the globe with students and faculty participating from virtual reality labs on their home campuses. There are mind-machine interfaces, wearable technologies, and intelligence amplification devices all in current production. How can we not imagine a world where these combine to produce experiences for students that would outshine any current semester abroad?

As much as some will be enthused by the possibilities, others will be horrified by the implications of such technologies. Instead of accepting the virtual substitution—no matter how realistic—as the equivalent of being there, internationalization promotes the ineffable benefit of actual experience. In addition to developing a conceptual understanding of global issues, it is just as important to be outside of one's comfort zone, in a cultural or language minority, and see how real people live their lives in other parts of the world. Problems have a different way of presenting themselves on-the-ground, and solutions that seem good in theory can be invalidated by the first exposure to complexity of the natural world. Whether it is guanxi in China or wasta in Dubai, relationships are built not from a distance, but from personal interactions. Looking at it this way, it is hard to see how virtual reality can ever compete with visceral reality.

Still, the speed of change is dizzying. The next big thing will appear seemingly out of nowhere to transform how people live, work, and interact. What is impossible to imagine now will seem commonplace in a few years. Just as they always have, technological innovations will reveal new ways to be a globally engaged university. The tools will change, and new goals will move to the forefront, but the case for internationalization of the university is not diminished.

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Endnotes

[1] International Telecommunication Union. 2012. *World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database.* http://www.itu.int/.

[2] Coursera. 2012. "Coursera Hits 1 Million Students Across 196 Countries." http://blog.coursera.org/post/29062736760/coursera-hits-1-million-students-across-196-countries.

[3] U.S. Department of State. 2013. "U.S. Department of State and Coursera Partner to Offer Enhanced Learning Opportunities." http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/10/216098.htm.

[4] Bartholet, Jeffrey. 2013. "Free Online Courses Bring 'Magic' to Rwanda." *Scientific American* 309:2. http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/free-online-classes-bring-magic-rwanda/.

[5] Straumsheim, Carl. 2014. "Everything in Moderation." *Inside Higher Education.* http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/01/23/u-copenhagen-mooc-instructor-searches-right-amount-online-moderation.