

Using an ‘open approach’ to create a new, innovative higher education model

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Abstract

Navigating learning, formal or informal, can be overwhelming, confusing, and impersonal. With more options than ever, the process of deciding what, where, and when can be overwhelming to a learner. The concept of Open College at Kaplan University (OC@KU) was to bring organization, purpose, and personalization of learning caused by vast resources and numerous options.

Focused on organizing, supporting and providing a personalized education experience using open courses, an innovative higher education model was conceived and created. As the concept of developing a college that adapted its resources and services to the needs of the learner emerged so did the idea of integrating open courses into a formal higher education model to award college credit for open courses as well as inclusion in a degree program.

Keywords: Individual learning plan, open access, open courses, open education, open learning, open education, open learning, personalized, prior learning

Introduction

Navigating learning, formal or informal, can be overwhelming, confusing, and impersonal. With more options than ever, the process of deciding what, where, and when can be overwhelming to learners. Confusion occurs when products and services are plentiful and are disbursed without instructions or directions to help the learner navigate the maze. In addition, learning that is dictated rather than selected by the learner contributes to a lack of personalization.

Today’s learners present new challenges like we’ve not seen before both in behavior and in expectations. Technology has affected both the learner’s behavior and expectations; multitasking, always-on communication, and engagement with multimedia have become the norm (Hartman, Moskal & Dziuban, 2005). Access to technology and information 24/7 have created the desire to integrate technology into their education, the ability to control their own learning, and the desire to have personalized learning (Hartman *et al.*, 2005). Basically, the expectation for an educational experience doesn’t differ much from their Amazon experience!

Can students have it all? Our response is yes. Yes, it is possible to have it all. For the learner, having it all means consuming what you need when you need it. The University of Central Florida (UCF) is a perfect example as Morrison (2012) suggested in his article. UCF provides choices or options that puts students in charge of “when, where and how they want to learn”. Students do not present themselves to an institution as being similar but different.

OC@KU was an opportunity to make a distinctive footprint in higher education by using open resources and technology to address the new behavior and expectations while also effecting the significant barriers to education through a new approach of supporting and promoting personalized learning. The approach is ultimately flexible, aligning specific learning points to the unique needs of the learner. OC@KU represents the power of technology and open resources to increase the personalization and quality of both informal and formal higher education while reducing cost.

OC@KU, the concept

Focused on supporting and providing a personalized education experience, several years ago, a small group of people at Kaplan University began to meet around the concept of creating a college for the future. As the concept was developed, we found ourselves imagining a college that adapted its resources and services to the needs of the learner, whether the needs included a degree, informal learning, assessments or some combination of all three. A college was envisioned that met a learner's needs without requiring admission as the price of participation. Rather than just co-opting the language, the vision was a college that was truly learning- and learner-centric.

At the same time, a trifecta of circumstances and events were occurring in higher education that was effecting learning in higher education: *technology, supply and demand*, and the *rising cost of education* (Huggins & Smith, 2013).

Technology improvements made it possible to make learning opportunities available anytime, anywhere. And as the emergence of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) amply demonstrates, terrific content is readily available at low cost or for free. Place-based education, the campus, becomes an option, not a necessity. An important part of this change is its financial consequence. Technology creates a whole new level of access.

Supply and demand of skilled workers is a driver to find new ways to validate knowledge and skills. In a world of accelerating change in the workplace, there is a growing gap between the number of people with the skills needed for entry into the workforce and the number of jobs requiring those skills. Employers are unable to hire the people they need because colleges are not graduating them in sufficient numbers with the skills needed.

Rising cost of education adds to the pressure for colleges to think creatively and to act entrepreneurial to create more effective educational models.

The building process

OC@KU was launched in the fall of 2014 with the initial offering of thirteen open courses. The first group of courses that were launched were developed specifically to be delivered as free and self-paced, with no formal enrollment. The competencies and outcomes of the open courses aligned with their sister Kaplan University courses and were developed internally by credentialed faculty with subject-area teaching experience.

Using some existing best practices such as Walden University's (2006) Concierge Service, Capella University's (2015) Flex-Path, and Thomas Edison State College's For Adults with Higher Expectations (2015), OC@KU strategically selected and developed open courses, placed them in an openly accessible environment with live, personal support, and a formal degree program designed for open courses.

Within months, hundreds of learners were using the open courses. Keeping the original goal in mind of organization, purpose, and personalization, the next logical step was to develop the purpose and personalization: course assessments by which learners could earn and apply college credit for the open courses toward a degree.

Since of the launch of the first OpenCourseWare project in 2002 (MIT, 2015), tens of thousands of open courses have been developed and offered in multiple formats by many vendors and schools. Collectively the Open Education Consortium (www.oeconsortium.org) and MIT list almost 40,000 courses. At the end of 2014, MIT OpenCourseWare published over 2,250 courses with over 1 billion page views (MIT, 2015). While MOOCs are still referred to as a trend or phenomenon in education, open courses have met diverse learner needs in ways that were as unanticipated. *Just-in-time*, *affordable*, and *self-managed* are the core, primary characteristics of why open educational resources

have grown in popularity. Combined, the characteristics represent a new asset for lifelong learners, putting the learner in control of their learning, formal and informal. When they are coupled with a curation of services, technologies, and assessments, open educational resources are the springboard to organized high quality learning that meets the personal needs of the individual learner.

As such, OC@KU is an example of a wholly new method of access. Beyond the actual availability of thousands of courses and services, physical access if you will, OC@KU offers access to learner-owned, personalized learning. It is a learning concierge service that puts higher education in an entirely new dimension, removing the barriers between career advancement and education. OC@KU encourages learners to chart their own paths using assessments to recognize learning, however acquired, for academic and career value.

Multi-faceted offerings of OC@KU

In addition to offering free, open courses developed in-house, other resources are also available for free or at a low cost. Realizing that one size does not fit all and that learners have varying needs, OC@KU provides a suite of services that learners can use to customize their learning. “Equally important, as part of this technological and web-driven disruption, learners’ capacity to develop and store evidence of learning in electronic portfolios—carefully organized around career, academic, or personal interests—has also been transformed”, as stated by the founding president of OC@KU, Dr. Peter Smith in a recent Educause article (2014). Learners can use the open courses to learn for the sake of learning, or, if a more formal goal is desired, apply their learning toward a degree.

To date, the following suite of products are available as a part of the personalized learning concierge service:

- **Open Portfolio.** The Open Portfolio is a tool that allows learners to track and manage their open courses. Built with an integrated API for Open Education Consortium courses, the Open Portfolio is a free tool for users to develop informal learning plans around personal or professional interests which can be shared or kept private. Acting as a “learning journal,” the Open Portfolio becomes a powerful tool, not simply a passive repository. www.openlearningportfolio.com
- **LearningAdvisor.** LearningAdvisor is a free, comprehensive search tool that connects learners with thousands of open courses. This rigorous tool allows users to search for courses by subject, institution, or interest. Created for integration with the American Association of Retired People’s (AARP) *Life Reimagined* program, LearningAdvisor is focused on life transitions be they from job to job, career to retirement, and any other combination of events. www.learningadvisor.com/courses
- **StraighterLine.** StraighterLine provides first and second year general education courses that have been evaluated and recommended for college credit by the American Council on Education. As an OC@KU course partner, any of the courses from StraighterLine can be applied toward a degree at OC@KU. www.straighterline.com
- **CareerJourney.** Learners have free access to CareerJourney, a self-paced course that was developed in partnership with LinkedIn, using their rich database for career planning. In a game-like environment, CareerJourney provides practical strategies to identify strengths, explore career opportunities, network with like-professionals, and to create a professional development plan. CareerJourney also includes the ability to match skill gaps to courses. www.Careerjourney.com
- **CLA+.** CLA+ is a low cost skills assessment tool. For a minimal fee, learners can take an assessment that will evaluate real-life, cross-cutting intellectual skills. The skills that CLA+ test for include analysis and problem solving, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical

reading and evaluation, and critiquing an argument. These are the skills which employers have overwhelmingly stated matter more to them than a particular major or GPA. Our objective in partnering with CLA+ is to provide evidence for learners and employers that the individual is ready to work effectively. www.takeclaplus.com

- **Learning Recognition Course (LRC100).** As the first open course developed by OC@KU, the LRC100 guides individuals through the process of documenting their training and experience in a portfolio which is evaluated by university faculty for college-level credit. The LRC100 is free and self-paced with personal support provided by assessment specialist that have many years of experience with adult learners. As a sense-making offering, the portfolio is a curation of the individual's prior learning, experience, and informal learning. <https://opencollege.kaplan.com/events/LRC100>

The unique degree program model

The *Bachelor of Science in Professional Studies* (BSPR) is designed with self-motivated students in mind and provides the opportunity to create a customized degree plan to meet professional goals. The open degree format provides the flexibility of learning through open courses from anywhere. The degree program is focused on professional knowledge and skills, problem solving, and strategic planning and culminates in a capstone class with a portfolio project.

Built on a proprietary platform, technology brings together the use of open courses, assessments, and other learning resources to provide learners with an Individualized Learning Plan, a customized learning path allowing the learner, with the guidance of a faculty mentor, to develop a personalized degree path.

As the name indicates, the ILP is unique to the learner and includes:

- a career goal statement which enables the student and the faculty advisor to identify potential course assessments and learning options to fulfill the degree requirements that relates to a career,
- a review of previously earned college credit,
- an analysis of previous experience that can be evaluated for college credit so that the learner does not duplicate learning that has already been acquired,
- potential open courses to meet degree requirements, and
- course assessments (credit by exam) to meet the degree program learning outcomes.

Looking at traditional education through the new lens of an open approach, learners have the opportunity of an individualized, affordable education that integrates technology, open resources, and personalized services to help them meet their career, academic, and personal goals. While this may sound like business as usual, it is not. While most of the language is not new, OC@KU is actually a unique development within the realm of higher education. The result of creating and organizing a one-stop shop for all things 'open,' learners are in charge of their learning, formal or informal. In an era in which curricula is easily accessible, OC@KU provides a manner in which learners can create, organize, and make sense of their learning.

The uniqueness of the open degree includes multiple features; the most outstanding is the fact that learners can use open courses—taken anywhere—to complete their degree requirements. To start the task of identifying open courses, the faculty mentor works with the learner to help them identify open course outcomes to their college credit counterpart. Because searching for open courses can be overwhelming, OC@KU strategically developed partnerships with select open course providers to develop curated course pages to help learners navigate open courses by subjects. For example, our faculty worked with Udemy to develop a customized, co-branded curated

page that organized courses according to subject. Not only did it provide learners with a list of Udemy courses organized by subject, it also gave the faculty an opportunity to select courses that best aligned with credit-bearing courses.

Another unique feature is the integration of multiple types of assessments starting with the assessment of prior learning. The open, self-paced course, the Learning Recognition Course (LRC) guides learners through the development of a rigorous learning portfolio which is assessed by faculty subject-matter experts. In addition, the LRC was reviewed by the American Council on Education (ACE) enabling learners to earn college credit for the course.

In addition to prior learning, new learning acquired from the open courses is assessed for college credit in multiple ways, through a portfolio assessment, standardized assessments, and challenge exams. The learning acquired from the open courses is assessed against the outcomes of their college-level counterparts. OC@KU has developed course assessments, partnered with Kaplan University as well as external nationally recognized challenge exam providers to be able to offer a wide range of examinations. Successful completion of the challenge exams results in credit awarded by the University toward the BSPR.

Lastly, since the degree is based on services rather than courses provided, the degree is based on a monthly subscription model. The monthly subscription includes access to faculty mentors, assessment advisors, an assessment of prior learning, and open resources curated specifically for the BSPR students.

Individualized doesn't have to be lonely

For many years, the instructor was the center of the classroom, responsible for creating and maintaining the classroom community through projects that encouraged communication and collaboration and through open classroom discussions. They were basically responsible for the overall classroom community.

In recent years, the traditional instructor-centered classroom has been disrupted by the Internet and wireless capabilities and has become a mobile community. Two recent reports support the fact that various devices now play a significant role in the classroom, not replacing the instructor, but creating a new type of community. Over 82% of mobile device owners claim that they have used a table for academic purposes (Chen & Denoyelles, 2013). A Pew Research Center report states that two-thirds of Americans own a smartphone, 67% use their phone to share pictures, videos, or commentary about events happening in their community, with 35% doing so frequently (Smith, 2015). The community is no longer instructor-centered, but is now mobile.

Embracing the new community, OC@KU focused on supporting adult learners through multiple mobile-ready tools:

- Live Seminars using Google+ and YouTube. The Live Seminar is a unique tool that combines video, Google+, and YouTube to stream a live, real-time interaction with the instructor. Students can see and hear the live lecture and chat with the instructor at a set time. Students can access a recorded, archived Live Seminar if they miss the live version.
- Social Media. Some of the open courses contain social media activities. Classroom responses, communication, and feedback are delivered via social media.
- Live support and feedback in the courses. Even though the courses are open and self-paced, live course support is available by phone or email.
- Forums and discussion boards. Faculty are assigned to the open courses on a rotating schedule. They are visible, accessible, and to engage the learners in communication.

Today's learners are savvy consumers. They demand consumer elements such as self-management, real-time access, device availability, and socializing in their educational journey. Although the learning environment is open, proven instructional strategies that provide a positive experience are part of the design and delivery of OC@KU.

To date, the evidence is positive

Since the launch of OC@KU in the fall of 2014, the outcome has been beyond expectation. With little marketing outside word-of-mouth, there is a tremendous interest in our unique model.

- Approximately 4,000 unique learners have accessed the OC@KU open course web site and have registered for 4,800 courses.
- 104 have developed and submitted a prior learning portfolios for assessment.
- Learners have received college credit for 711 courses as a result of the prior learning portfolio assessment which translates to over \$1m in tuition savings at Kaplan University.
- The students currently enrolled in the BSPR are on target to complete their degree for under \$10,000.
- Faculty are using the open courses as supplemental material to their college credit classroom.

Conclusion: Looking Forward

OC@KU offers a myriad of ways that learning can be supported in the era of abundant information. It is ultimately flexible, aligning specific learning points to the unique needs of the learner. At the same time, its free and low cost *sense-making* services provide non-judgmental diagnostics and information which assist the learner in personalizing their learning to meet their needs.

Finally and importantly, however, OC@KU represents a new *method*, an approach to thinking about learning environments and learning support in the 21st century. As such, it can be used in multiple delivery environments, beyond the exclusive online, self-paced model we have started with. Whether you want to support a weekend or a different low-residency model, adapt it to groups of learners using the BSPR or other degree programs and individual assessments, use it in a business environment, or put it in a blended environment, the OC@KU method will work effectively. It represents the power of technology and open resources to increase the personalization and quality of both informal and formal higher education while reducing their educational cost.

As a sense-making venture, OC@KU combines self-paced, open-access, and relevant courses with the opportunity to earn college credit in a one-stop environment, a technologically supported and andrologically appropriate learning hub. As an extraordinary driver of change, the broadening of the Internet has been a driver in how content, information, and learning is accessed and delivered; today access to resources and information is like no other time in history. A college was developed that embraced and utilized the benefits of the new information environment.

When it comes to harnessing the infinite power of the Internet to meet educational and career needs, the process can be as offensive and confusing as it is difficult. We likened the unharnessed information on the Internet to a blizzard and the unsupported user trying to organize it to a skier without goggles in that blizzard. Hence, we developed the concept of developing and offering free sense-making services. These services addressed organizing and understanding prior learning, career investigation, and the curation of informal learning as the preliminary steps to identifying a learning path forward that could be followed informally, with individual assessments, or in a degree program. To that we have added low cost diagnostics as well.

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