

The Future of Accreditation: When Learners Do It Themselves

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Imagine yourself emerging from the Way Back Machine in London, England. It's 1526. Henry VIII is on the throne. You scurry furtively down a back alley in a nondescript part of the city. You duck into a shop, and quickly head to the back room. Drawing the curtain, you and the shopkeeper exchange glances. The shopkeeper reaches down, takes a package from behind the chest, and reveals just enough of its contents so that you can verify that, indeed, it is the item you came for: an English translation of the New Testament, printed by William Tyndale. Money exchanges hands, you take the package, and leave, being extraordinarily vigilant. You know that the mere possession of this book is punishable by death.

In the 1520s, having open access to books, meaning open access to knowledge, was a dangerous game. It threatened the religious and political establishments. It meant that ordinary people could see for themselves what the elite had guarded so closely—and make up their own minds about whether that elite had withheld certain key aspects of knowledge. One thing was certain. The elite fought mightily to maintain control. An example of that occurred in 1536, when, after about 500 days of imprisonment, William Tyndale was strangled and burned at the stake.

Enter Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury. He hired Myles Coverdale to publish the “Great Bible,” in English. It became widely used through its distribution to every church, where it was chained to the pulpit to ensure it was accessible (and didn't “disappear”). Readers were provided so that everyone, even the illiterate, could hear the Word of God proclaimed in their native English. The year? 1539, a mere three years after Tyndale's execution. Moving from officially sanctioned burning at the stake to officially sanctioned widespread dissemination, all under the same king, took only three years.

Fast forward 472 years. You're a college student. You've taken advantage of some amazing opportunities in the online world. You've listened to Nobel laureates discuss the Eurozone crisis and explain how current difficulties relate (or not) to classical theories of economics. You've worked through the underlying physics and chemistry for nearly every episode of *MythBusters*. You regularly watch the TED lectures. And you've even taken courses from the Open Learning Initiative (<http://oli.web.cmu.edu/openlearning/>) and from OpenCourseWare at MIT (<http://ocw.mit.edu/index.htm>). Now you want the credit.

Although it's unlikely you'll actually be burned at the stake, you have a very good chance of experiencing the modern version of this torture because it is equally threatening to the elite. It goes something like this. First, you'll be asked to produce

the sacred document, otherwise known as a transcript, indicating that you officially took the course. No transcript you say? Sorry—your learning is then considered “illegitimate,” and you’re then often cast out into the night where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth as you stumble back to the very beginning of college to start over. But even if you have the Holy Transcript, complete with the raised seal so you can actually feel the bumps, you’re still likely to encounter problems. You see, you still have to submit to the Inquisition By Syllabus process, in which the syllabus of each course you took is compared to the One True Syllabus (i.e., the syllabus of the course taught by the faculty evaluator). The fortunate earn credit for their work. The truly fortunate experience the heavenly moment in which you are given credit for your work that accrues toward your degree.

Alright, I exaggerate. Some. But really think about it.

The access to knowledge that we all have today is access to the very heart of knowledge that forms the core of academia in the same way that access to the New Testament gave otherwise uneducated English people access to the very heart of Christianity. That access is dangerous. It threatens the central notion of what a college or university exists to do, so, by extension, threatens the very *raison d’être* of faculty and staff. The English church’s initial response was to ban the book and execute violators. Colleges’ and universities’ response is to ban the use of widely accessible material as a substitute for “real” courses. The church punished by physical death and the promise of eternal damnation. Colleges and universities punish by relegating students to a minimum of longer periods of submission or even worse to a life without a legitimate postsecondary degree, often resulting in a life of more economic difficulty.

Threats to a well-entrenched status quo are not well-received. But the funny thing about many of them—whether books or ideas—is that they often quickly become the mainstream. It only took three years in the 1530s for Henry VIII’s England to move from executing Bible owners and printers to celebrating their achievement and making it the new status quo.

How our equivalent of all that should play out is the focus of the remainder of my talk today. The issues I’ll address are these:

- Who will play the role of Thomas Cranmer and make the reality of self-education at the postsecondary level a truly viable option?
- What will accreditation look like in a world that combines traditional campus-driven and self-provided education?

Whither Thomas Cranmer Redux?

First, let me be clear about my use of Thomas Cranmer as a model. I’m *not* endorsing his actions in relation to Henry VIII’s marital issues, or his complicated relationships with various royals, or his (or the Crown’s) political motivations behind promotion of the Anglican Church and his biblical translation, or his recantations and subsequent recantations of his recantations around the time of his execution (by being burned at the stake, naturally, in Oxford in 1556). My interest is *solely* in Cranmer’s role in revolutionizing access to knowledge. His ensuring that a translation of the Bible was widely available in the vernacular and his creation of

an equally ubiquitous English language prayer book fundamentally transformed the everyday religious experience of the common person. Whether people could read or not, they had easy access to the knowledge base once accessible only to those elite who could at least read Latin. Cranmer changed everything by changing access.

Today, we've all experienced the revolution of access in a different way through Friedman's flat world of the Web. Although it's difficult to pinpoint a single individual who can be said to be largely responsible for this revolution like Cranmer was in his day, there is no question that the context is similar. Let's take a closer look at the current situation.

In brief, the uncomfortable contextual situation that currently exists is the contradiction between access to high quality learning opportunities, online or otherwise, and the twin barriers of credit transfer and the focus of accreditation. The access side boasts at least thousands of learning opportunities created by very reputable organizations or individuals that on the surface pass the "sniff test" of legitimacy and quality. These include dozens of open learning opportunities, virtual experiences, inquiry-based opportunities, and the like. The very best of these opportunities incorporate the knowledge about how humans learn from cognitive neuroscience research, use a mastery learning approach, and include embedded authentic assessments of learning. Many are available for free or little cost, and can be completed in a self-paced format. They are tailor-made for motivated individuals who want to self-educate, just as people like George Washington or Frederick Douglass or Abraham Lincoln did in their day.

Think of it as home schooling goes to college. A little perspective. It wasn't all *that* long ago that the home school movement was viewed as a fringe movement reacting to certain religious and political issues in public P-12 education. It was severely criticized as being substandard, at best, and perhaps the end of Western civilization as we knew it at worst. Teachers claimed that parents (the people typically doing the home schooling) could not possibly be as effective as "real" teachers. The content of home school courses was criticized for being subpar. Colleges and universities initially rejected, or at least were quite skeptical about admitting home schooled students.

But a Cranmeresque thing happened. Within a very short time, home schooled students not only proved to be as well prepared as their regular schooled counterparts, but showed they were able to excel in the postsecondary realm. Now, home schooling is widely accepted, and home schooled students even participate in extracurricular activities along with their regular schooled colleagues.

We're on the verge of that in the postsecondary world. It's called *DIY U (Do It Yourself University)*, and is led by Anya Kamenetz (www.diyubook.com). Lest you think this is a fringe movement, take a look at the program for EDUCAUSE's recent meeting in Philadelphia. EDUCAUSE is the nation's largest higher education IT-related professional organization, and counts a wide variety of faculty and staff as well as institutions and organizations among its membership. Ms. Kamenetz was a featured speaker at the meeting.

If you think that people aren't going to start presenting themselves at your institutions demanding recognition for the learning they have completed on their own, you're fooling yourselves. What will you do? Will you require them to "test out" of the courses? Will you simply require them to take the "real" courses? Will you limit the number of credits they can earn this way?

There is another approach—simply accept the evidence from the online opportunities that include embedded assessment as sufficient. But wait. Wouldn't that undermine the very fabric of the academic credit system that in turn underlies the basis for a degree? Yes, it would. But that is true if and only if the basis for a degree is the credit system. And it would be true if and only if the accreditation process remains unchanged.

Alright, I've begged the question about a non-credit basis for a college degree. That alternative is already available; it's a system based on competency. It was the basis for our educational world for most of its history. One "read" in a particular field until the faculty preceptor determined you had gained a specific level of knowledge/competence. Then you moved to the next level, or, if the top level had been reached, were given an opportunity to demonstrate your cumulative knowledge and declared graduated. We still use that approach in many arenas, from martial arts to board certifications in numerous professions.

From a competency perspective, what matters is the ability of the student to demonstrate a certain level of knowledge/competence. *How* that knowledge/competence is *demonstrated* matters more than the number of clock hours one spent in supposedly acquiring it. Applied to the situation I presented a bit earlier, the key is providing the student with an opportunity to demonstrate knowledge. That demonstration must not be restricted to a score on an examination, or having a time clock ticket punched.

With the availability of information on the Web, there is ample opportunity for people to assemble it in very effective and meaningful ways. It's conceivable that these combinations could be superior to what they might encounter in our institutions as they are currently constituted. It's equally conceivable the combinations could be worse.

This is exactly the situation that confronted our colleagues in the P-12 world when home schooling entered their world. They figured out that if appropriate standards (i.e., learning outcomes) were agreed upon and stated clearly, it didn't really matter what path students took to get to the knowledge destination. Higher education needs to take a lesson from that experience and work much harder on specifying our analog of the Common Core State Standards. The tools are there, and have been there for a very, very long time. It's just not been in our self-interest to develop and agree on them. But we'd better, and we'd better do it *now*. Otherwise, it will be done to us, by the Edupunks and Edupreneurs out there.

What Thomas Cranmer figured out (but what Queen Mary and the Pope did not) is that it was impossible to execute people fast enough to stem the desire to access the new sources of knowledge. So he wholeheartedly adopted the reform, and made it his own. What we need to learn from that is to accept the reality that

anyone can access the same information we academics used to carefully meet out, so the best approach is to adapt and make that reality our own. We need to create a higher educational system that embraces competency based achievement, realign the milestones by which we gauge increasing levels of knowledge/competence, and redefine degrees on this basis.

This sounds like a really big deal, doesn't it? It's not. Here's why.

Accreditation Redux

How many of you know what Standard 14 is in the Middle States' *Characteristics of Excellence*? It is the standard that pertains to the assessment of student learning. The standard requires that students be told what "...knowledge, skills, and competencies [they] are expected to exhibit upon successful completion of a course, academic program, co-curricular program, general education requirement, or other specific set of experiences..." As stated in the Standard, the issue is "...to answer the question, 'Are our students learning what we want them to learn?'" Such assessment is "an essential component of the assessment of institutional effectiveness" (*Characteristics of Excellence*, p. 63). The description then goes on to discuss how learning outcome assessment should be designed and its results used. Nowhere is there a discussion of credits.

Two issues here are glaring. First, accreditation depends critically on assessing student learning, not their accumulation of credits. This implies that the credentials ultimately earned by students are based on demonstrated learning, not a collection of credits. Second, accreditation involves assessing whether students are "learning what we want them to learn." The first point connects critically to my earlier argument that we need to focus our institutions on the demonstration of knowledge/competency acquisition. The second raises some scary prospects I'll get to in a bit.

Given that we already have an accreditation system based on the assessment of student learning (i.e., knowledge/competence acquisition), then it is a rather straightforward matter of taking the existing approach to the next step to complete the conversion process from one grounded on credit accumulation irrespective of learning to one based on demonstrated learning outcomes. What is also means, and this is important, is that regional and specialized accreditors need to get on the same page in defining learning outcomes so that accreditations align. When that happens, the recognition of prior learning becomes very straightforward, and the source of that prior learning becomes irrelevant as long as the appropriate competencies are shown. In other words, we already have all the basic elements necessary to take the Cranmeresque step of moving from banning the immediate and unquestioned acceptance of demonstrated knowledge/competence to creating the postsecondary equivalent of the *Book of Common Prayer* and doing exactly that. The work-arounds we have created need to collapse from their own weight. When they do, the faculty will be liberated to serve a much more important (higher?) role than the credit dispenser one they play now—that of academic mentor and guide to assure the student's learning and knowledge/competence acquisition process, in short, to be a true guide of students' education. In a way, this will return us to the

past, whereby through the judicious use of technology faculty will be able to provide far more individualized instruction to many more students than the current system could ever possibly allow or support. In another way, it means that the kind of individualized attention we give to doctoral students can be extended to all. I argue this would be a major improvement for students and faculty alike.

Back to that scary second implication of assessing student learning. Recall that a goal of this standard is to determine whether students are “learning what we want them to learn.” All is well if they are. But what if they aren’t? What if the premise of *Academically Adrift* is correct regarding students’ mastery of basic skills? What if, for example, a majority of students in an elementary education program fail the praxis exam, or a majority in a nursing program fail the NCLEX? What do we do then?

Troubling as it may seem, the current answer is very little. Enforcement of the assessment of student learning outcomes standard in Middle States currently involves verifying that learning outcomes are assessed and that the results are used to make modifications in the academic program. An institution can dutifully live up to both parts of this obligation, have a majority of student fail, yet be judged to be in compliance with the standard.

That must end.

To continue to have legitimacy, accreditation must begin focusing on the core issue—student learning. Accreditation must begin certifying that students actually learn, and that what they learn matches the stated objectives of a course, an academic program, or a specific set of objectives (such as in general education). In short, accreditation must move from certifying that an institution claims that it is doing what it is supposed to do, to certifying that students are actually learning and progressing in their acquisition of knowledge/competence.

There is a variation on this theme that’s also important. Because people can simply wander around the Web and pick up content that is neither amalgamated by a content-provider nor verified for accuracy, it will become necessary for some entity to engage in quality assurance in terms of learning outcomes. This creates a second opportunity for entities: verifying bona fide knowledge/competencies and establishing where along the continuum of knowledge/competence acquisition that places an individual. For this issue, think about existing organizations such as LearningCounts.org, that use national panels of faculty and other experts in assessment, only broader.

In both cases (i.e., using content offered by a certified provider or doing it on your own with no official guidance), a credential or type of certification would be provided each time a new level of knowledge/competence is reached. The student then deposits those credentials or certifications into a credential bank for future reference. A key point—the student owns the credential. Currently, we do through our Registrar’s Offices.

How do we get to this alternate accreditation world? In two ways. First, we must come to quick agreement on what different types of degrees mean. For example, in the United States there is no clear explanation of what

knowledge/competence a student is supposed to demonstrate at the point at which the student is awarded a baccalaureate degree. What it generally means at most institutions is that the student at least spent a specified minimum amount of clock-defined time amassing an arbitrary number of credits and obtained a minimum set of grades. Mission statements list desired outcomes, but nothing in the current definition says anything about what knowledge or competencies the student actually *demonstrated*. Test it—look up the degree requirements for English Literature degrees, for instance, across a variety of institutions and compare them. In a real sense, we have no set of defined qualifications for the degree. We have them for *practicing* a particular profession in some cases, but not for most degrees in the first place. This loose approach is in contrast to efforts in other parts of the world, such as Europe, where degree qualifications discussions have been ongoing for years. Such conversations are only in their nascent state here. So the first step is to get with the rest of the world and clearly define what each degree means.

The second way we move accreditation forward is to step outside the box that equates accreditation with degree-granting entities. Currently, we accredit entire institutions. Once you put the focus on student learning outcomes for real, though, accreditation becomes tied with learning and is decoupled from granting degrees. So the second step is to align accreditation with entities that provide *content* and to focus on the level of discrete units of content, usually called “courses.” The seal of accreditation would then be placed on the separate pieces of content offered by content providers who demonstrate that the content offered comes with embedded authentic assessment of learning, such that a student must demonstrate the knowledge/competencies acquired as a result of learning that content. In a way, the ACE credit review process is a version of this.

So what’s the outcome of the change in focus? Regional accreditation would no longer give thumbs-up or thumbs-down on the traditional degree-granting institution per se. Rather, it would focus on what is provided by any entity, college/university or other, that wants to claim it’s in the business of offering content. If and only if that content meets certain standards would it be “accredited.” The determination of what entities are entitled to grant degrees could be another aspect of accreditation, but this would be different, separate from the accreditation I just described. Of course, there are compelling reasons to worry about and monitor quality control and institutional integrity for degree-granting entities, but because we are already pretty good at that I won’t dwell on it here.

There is another key piece to the picture. Some critics of the current model of accreditation argue that accreditation should be disconnected from institutional eligibility for federal financial aid for its students. Shifting the focus from the institutional level to the content level would, I argue, make it imperative for the link between accreditation and federal financial aid eligibility to not only remain, but be strengthened. It would work like this. If and only if a student used content from an accredited source would the student be able to apply for and receive federal financial aid. Likewise, if the student has amassed knowledge/competencies from self-instruction or from non-certified sources and wants to convert that into

“certified learning,” then federal financial aid could only be spent at accredited entities in that portfolio review business.

Charting a Future Course

The possible future I have described here is both scary and exciting. Anytime the core status quo is threatened, the natural response is to declare a “red alert” and put up the defensive shields. But history shows that when those shields go up to defend against increased access to knowledge, they inevitably are penetrated. Too often, the traditional structure behind those shields is pointlessly destroyed, with no thought given to what is being lost. Remember what happened and what knowledge was lost when the monasteries were destroyed.

We do not need to repeat that mistake. We have a choice. We can sit down in the captain’s chair and help chart our own course by fully embracing new opportunities while really being serious about quality as defined as authentic assessment of the acquisition of knowledge/competence. Or we can put up the shields, claim that the way we provide access to knowledge now is to remain immutable for all time and that change will condemn us to eternal damnation, only to have a modern equivalent of Thomas Cranmer bring it all crashing down.

It’s up to us. As Middle States looks toward the next revision of its *Characteristics of Excellence*, I know where I want to be. Shields will not work. We have only one real option if we want to build on the true legacy and meaning of education: To boldly go where no accreditation association has ever gone before.