Hungry Minds: A Commentary on Educational Portals

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The front end of Hungry Minds (http://www.hungryminds.com/) is an education portal modeled along the lines of another portal, About.Com (http://www.about.com; originally called The Mining Company). Hungry Minds' experts author a topical home page with commentary and links to resources and especially online courses.

In taking this approach, Hungry Minds is pursuing a path that intuitively seems correct - the idea that people searching for online learning opportunities will follow a topic-based pattern, and not an institutionally based pattern. For example, a person wishing to take a course in Roman History will search for 'Roman History'; they will not instead check out the University of Alberta or the University of California.

This is not entirely the case, of course. All universities have an established client base, represented by existing and former students with a stake in that particular university's credentials. And to some degree, the cachet of some universities, such as Harvard or Princeton, will draw additional students. But this is a client base on the wane; as continuing education especially rises to the fore, students will first search for the topic area, and only then consider the name and reputation of the institution offering the courses.

I belabor this point because it has been the practice of most traditional educational institutions to place most of their efforts into the creation of institutional, and not topic-based, portals. That is to say, most institutions list only their own course offerings, to the exclusion of other institutions. They rely on people using standard search engines to locate the course, though of course the portal is structured as though someone would first look up 'The University of Alberta' and then peruse the course offerings (indeed, the University of Alberta menu further requires that you proceed to individual faculty pages before you see any course listings).

I'll call this the 'restaurant' model of online course offerings. Like restaurants, traditional institutions are appealing to their name and reputation (and the occasional review). The only 'brand' present in a restaurant is the restaurants' own; the only choices offered are from the restaurant's own menu. Production and consumption is localized. Advertising promotes above all else the restaurant's name and distinctive quality.

It is hard to over-emphasize this point. For even where some various institutions have formed coalitions, the tendency has been to favor the individual institution over the breadth of content and expertise. California Virtual University (CVU) is a classic example of this (Downes, 1999). Even though a consortium was formed, each institution clung rigidly to its own identity and methodology, even to the point of individualized course numbering systems.

Now online learning portals have existed for some time - I can off the top of my head list TeleEducation and the WWWDEV course database at the University of New Brunswick Even in such portals, courses are listed by topic. The name of the institution appears only as an attachment to individual courses.

What is new about Hungry Minds - and about UNext, a similar service recently featured in Wired News

- is that these agencies are acting as online course brokers. Rather than merely listing online courses, they are acting in some capacity as a representative for both the course vendors and the potential students.

Thus, for example, Hungry Minds offers prospective learners a [guarantee that offers a refund](#) on any online course they take. And UNext, while it offers no financial guarantees, is focusing on the quality of its course offerings (it lists three Nobel laureates at the top of its academic advisory board).

These institutions are taking what I will call the 'grocery store' model of online education. They act as a distributor for brand-name products in such a way that the store - not the producers - manages purchases and refunds, and the store - more so than the producers - stands as the agent that ensures quality and price.

Now the easy approach at this point would be to argue that the grocery store model is on the ascendant, and the restaurant model is on the decline, because people prefer choice and selection, and because they prefer the guarantees and single interface that grocery store providers offer them. And to a significant degree, this will be what happens - while restaurant vendors may not see a decline in customers (they have a locked-in client base, after all), they will not participate in the enrollment boom online learning will engender.

More and more, restaurant vendors will focus on service and quality of offerings (some, such as [ZD University](#) (now renamed SmartPlanet as part of Ziff-Davis's new online learning initiative) will focus on price and availability). This is the main thrust behind, say, Michael Cenkner's remarks to ATLNet - "One idea that's been batted about in the Faculty of Extension is to provide a cluster of services for new students, in this case, foreign students (Cenker,1999)."

It has been remarked in the past that educational institutions will have to shift from being repositories of knowledge toward becoming service-oriented agencies (Downes, 2000) and this remains true. Such services, localized within an institution (even a large one, such as the University of Alberta), are costly, however. In order to keep costs down, even restaurant-type vendors will be drawn inevitably toward the grocery store model.

In the grocery store world, an inevitable battle is taking shape as different grocery stores try to establish themselves as the exclusive - or at least, the primary - broker for online courses. Hungry Minds and UNext represent two poles in this battle. Hungry Minds is focusing on expertise and service guarantees. UNext is focusing on expertise and exclusive offerings. Each is trying to segment the market, offering courses nobody else offers. It is as though Safeway - and only Safeway - sold Heinz products, while Save-On was the exclusive dealer of Kraft products.

But in the end, neither the restaurant nor the grocery store will be the primary agent of online learning.

The machinations emerging in the online learning community mirror the machinations that occurred when previous monopoly services, such as long distance telephony or cable television, were opened to competition. A raft of competing vendors emerged, spending a pile of money on name and brand recognition (the recent press campaigns supporting Hungry Minds and UNext are instances of this). They began by focusing on quality (as in Sprint's 1-800-PIN-DROP campaign) and choice (as in the satellite-TV's 800 channels campaign).

But consumers were unable to find the suggested difference in quality - a long distance call is essentially the same no matter who provides it; FOX is FOX whether delivered by satellite or by cable. They next began to focus on price - but since the price of these services is essentially the same, various Byzantine pricing schemes emerged to obscure the difference. Expect a similar price war in the field of

online learning, bolstered by commentaries complaining about the high cost of online learning.

But with quality and price being essentially non-factors, and with brand recognition able to carry only a small percentage of online learning institutions (who will charge a premium for this, thus maintaining their exclusivity), there will be nothing to choose from between Hungry Minds, UNext, and the many similar services which will operate across the world wide web.

So in planning for the future, education providers - both course-delivering institutions and aspiring portals - will have to look hard at what *actually* motivates the purchase of food, long distance telephony, cable television services, and any other commodity. And that factor (which also motivates love, marriage, crime and corruption) is *proximity*.

Think about it. Where do you buy your groceries? Do you drive across town in order to get the superior quality offered by the west-end Loblaws? Probably not; you probably buy your groceries within a kilometer of your home. Which restaurants and pubs do you patronize? I am a regular at the Inglewood, which happens to be two blocks from my front door. My long distance is provided by the local phone company, my cable from the local cable company, and if I were to commit a crime, it would probably be in my own neighborhood.

The same is true - has historically been true - of education. It is no coincidence that most students at the University of Alberta are from Alberta. While there is more mobility in education than in - say - restaurant selection, and while some name-brand institutions can attract scholars from around the world, in the main, people eat, sleep, learn and love where they live.

But what constitutes proximity on the world wide web? One truism is that the web breaks down physical distance. Once, people fell in love with and married people they met locally (and this is still how the vast majority of couples do it). But increasingly, couples are meeting and marrying online (http://www.webring.org/cgi-bin/webring?ring=netmate;list). In areas where physical proximity was paramount, the internet is breaking down that barrier and uniting people from around the globe.

Yet - even in the area of online romance - proximity is still vital. Browse through the hundreds of personal pages describing online romances and you will find (Alta Vista Search) in every one of them a reference to a particular MUD, chat line, IRC channel, discussion board, or other online forum.

Proximity on the internet falls under the loosely defined category of 'online community'. Though only recently discovered by mainstream academics and corporate pundits, the proliferation of online communities is what has *always* defined the internet. In the early days, netizens populated particular MUDs, IRC channels or newsgroups. Today, people congregate around portals, mailing lists, discussion boards and chat rooms.

There is some research that reveals this pattern in web usage. Tauscher and Greenberg (1997) report, for example, that "People tend to revisit pages just visited, access only a few pages frequently, browse in very small clusters of related pages, and generate only short sequences of repeated URL paths." In other words, people find the sites they like and tend to stay with them.

While a variety of factors influence a person's choice of websites (for example, people will leave sites which are too slow), the primary determinant is interest. The site discusses some topic that is important to that particular person. Indeed, a person's interests may be deduced from the sites they frequent - one person may visits news, gardening, astrology and self-help sites, for example, while I frequent news, technology and education sites.

It stands to reason - though I have no statistics to support this because the practice is not yet widespread

- that people who take online courses will take those courses listed on the sites they most frequently visit. If, for example, I wanted to take a course on XML, I would be far more likely to take such a course offered from one of my regular haunts than I would to search for XML courses in general. And the idea of searching a particular institution - say, the University of Alberta - for XML courses would not even show up on my horizon.

There are some strong caveats to this, of course. I would have to be sure that the course was offered by a reputable institution and taught by people knowledgeable in the field. I would have to be convinced that they would not merely take my cheque and disappear. It would have to be offered at a reasonable price, and at a place and time convenient to me. But these are all factors that emerge after the initial course selection has been made - factors which influence whether or not I select a particular course, and not how I begin my search (if I search at all) for a course to take.

So now - Terry Anderson observes (1997) that "There is huge 'land rush' now in progress between third party portals, seeking to combine and generate courses and student services from many institutions vs. schools who are working in-house trying to build delivery via systems such as WebCT and Blackboard and to integrate these services with registration, student support etc., providing students with a customized view of 'their institution'. In both instances the goal is an integrated 'one stop shopping' approach to life long learning."

Quite right - but if he asks, "What should the University of Alberta portal look like," he is traveling down the wrong road. If he is asking, even, whether the University of Alberta should team up with one of these grocery store portals, offering exclusive access in exchange for brokering services, he is still traveling down the wrong road. While both an institutional portal and a commercial portal will offer some short-term success, neither is likely to be the dominant model for online course delivery in the long run.

The conceptual leap that must be taken - which will be taken first by potential students, and only later by established institutions - is that the traditional gap that exists between learning and practice must be transcended.

Today, education exists in one sphere - in schools, colleges and universities - while work and play exist in another sphere - in the workplace, job site, or the home. When we decide to learn, we stop our other activities, remove ourselves to some distinct place (and often at a preset time), and for a certain period of time, dedicate ourselves solely to learning. Our knowledge of learning opportunities - courses, programs, and resources - is distinct from our knowledge of work-related or play activities.

But work and learning (especially) and play and learning (to some degree) will converge online. The same site we use to chat with people who share our interests will be the site where we find our research materials, our examples of best practices, and our online courses and programs. We are likely to drift toward a site devoted to - say - gardening, there to chat with our online friends about roses, to look up fertilizer mixes for tulips, to buy seeds, and to take that course in hydroponics.

Such online communities - today misleadingly called "vertical portals" - are on the rise. They will focus on particular topic-based niches. Some will cater almost exclusively to a corporate environment, while others will cater to a person's general interests. In many cases, the two will combine - some people study the history of the Roman Empire professionally, while others merely find it an engaging hobby (and yes, I am a Roman Empire buff).

Traditional educational institutions need to do two things. First, they need to devise mechanisms that will enable their courses to be embedded in the offerings of a vertical portal. And second, they need to

study the mechanics of vertical portals to best understand how learning could even fit into such a context. It is not clear that they should actually build such portals (there will be endless complaints that they are reaching beyond their mandate if they take up such activities as selling seeds), but they should place themselves in a position where they may partner with established government and non-government partners.

A more complete metric of exactly how the traditional institution should position itself is probably beyond the scope of this diatribe. But a few observations are in order.

With respect to the development of online learning materials and support systems, the institution must:

- learn how to deliver materials in a distributed environment, where the primary point of interaction is *not* the university site
- learn how to develop and deliver learning materials 'on-demand'
- learn how to produce customized or tailored learning programs for particular corporate or individual clients
- learn how to provide a completely online learning experience (this includes the such things as registry services, books and other resources, testing and grading)
- learn how to promote the authority and trustworthiness of its online course offerings

With respect to the development of sector specific online communities, the institution must:

- develop a framework for partnering with non-institutional partners
- learn how to develop sector-specific resource sites in general
- and how to pay for them without offending their partners
- learn how to structure resource and learning databases so that materials and courses are available on-demand
- learn how to partner with other educational institutions offering courses and programs in the same field (including credit transfers, common registration, etc)

These are just a sampling of the mechanisms required to support sector-specific online learning. No doubt a wide variety of technical, administrative and political issues will emerge in practice. In my own experience - trying to develop a sector-specific learning environment in municipal affairs http://www.munimall.net - all of these issues and more have arisen. And as we build this community in Alberta, many more issues - unanticipated issues - will arise.

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Back to Journal of Distance Learning Administration Contents