Learning in a World of Perishable Knowledge: An Interview with Diana Oblinger

Alan Mandell and Nan L. Travers, SUNY Empire State College, New York, USA

Diana G. Oblinger is president and CEO of EDUCAUSE, a nonprofit association whose mission is to advance higher education through the use of information technology. Before coming to EDUCAUSE, she served as vice president for information resources and the chief information officer for the University of North Carolina system, executive director of higher education for Microsoft and, at IBM, as director of the Institute for Academic Technology. Diana Oblinger was on the faculty at the University of Missouri-Columbia and at Michigan State University; she also was the associate dean of academic programs at the University of Missouri. She has written, edited and co-edited many books, including Game Changers: Education and Information Technologies *(2012, EDUCAUSE)*, Educating the Net Generation *(2005, EDUCAUSE) and* What Business Wants from Higher Education *(1998, Rowan & Littlefield). We spoke with Diana Oblinger on 23 January 2013. What follows is an edited version of that discussion.*

Alan Mandell: How do we think more fully and critically about the student, faculty and institutional roles in a world of open educational resources?

Diana Oblinger: With open educational resources, many people think first about content – of inputs to the educational process. One important shift is an increasing focus on providing a clear definition of the kinds of knowledge, skills and abilities students need, as well as the activities that demonstrate you've got the knowledge, skills and abilities. The shift is from inputs, or a focus on content, to more of a focus on outcomes and how you assess those outcomes. The shift from the inputs to outcomes is a positive shift and a very important one. However, it is a challenging one because it's hard to think about competencies and how you measure them.

A.M.: These are surely not easy things to measure.

D.O.: I completely agree. In addition to addressing competencies, it is important to call out a couple of other key elements of learning – transfer, non-cognitive factors and pathways.

How do you assess "transfer" – the ability to transfer knowledge from one situation to another situation? The starting point is having information – but information is both perishable and not useful unless it can be applied, so transfer becomes critical. Learning is about transferring knowledge to different situations.

There is another side of assessment – assessing non-cognitive factors, such as motivation or "grit." One important attribute in student success is persistence and perseverance. Students need to be able to set long-term goals and stick with them. There are ways to assess motivation, grit and so on. If you can measure it, you begin to know how you might intervene or support someone in improving those characteristics and making students more successful.

Also, we should remember that assessment is not just about gatekeeping. Assessment can be a critical diagnostic to help people find individualized pathways to success.

A few more notes about assessment. We assess at multiple levels – specific skills, courses, a full undergraduate experience. Add to these "levels of granularity" the fact that the resources could come from anywhere. Plus, life experiences contribute to learning even though they aren't part of a textbook or a course. So, assessment can mean many things.

Consider "embedded assessment" and "unobtrusive assessment." You see this type of assessment in gaming or augmented reality environments. As students are making choices or clicking on hints, you can evaluate responses, patterns, speed, and so on. With Web cameras, you can track facial expressions. So, a challenge for higher education is to build open education resources with these data collection and analytics engines underneath. Do we have the platform and tools to develop the next generation of open educational resources?

Nan Travers: We've noticed that one of the major topics around the assessing of open education resources has to do with the tensions between more standardized and more "open" models of assessment. For example, the things you're talking about regarding "transfer" or attention to the non-cognitive dimensions of learning that might really allow an individual to understand his or her learning and where it needs to go seem very different from an exam or rubric model where things are much more standardized. "This is what you have to know and you have to prove just these things!" Are we just repeating our standard curricula or are we taking this as a new opportunity, really, to ask hard questions about both learning and assessment?

D.O.: We are asking hard questions as we move toward a competency-based world. It's hard to define the competencies and it is hard to assess them. It may be an evolutionary cycle where we start with what we know how to do, then take advantage of research and analytical approaches, then gradually mature the approach.

A.M.: Maybe another way to say this is that the learning opportunities and the new resources have really broken free of certain institutional constraints. Then the question becomes: can, then, the evaluative tools break the same kinds of institutional constraints that the open resources themselves have broken?

D.O.: I hope so. Look at the larger context. We are unbundling, re-sorting and shifting pieces in the entire educational enterprise right now. For-profit providers are partnering with traditional institutions. Our system used to be predicated on everything being from the institution. Today, it is more of a mix-and-match world because we've outsourced things like student support and course development. We may see similar blending of providers in assessment and evaluation.

A.M.: Can I just go back to one point that you made earlier, Diana, about the "non-cognitive dimensions of learning" and our assessment of them? There seems to be more and more efforts to get at this domain; to understand, for example, the importance of attitude or perseverance. There are even tools like Angela Lee Duckworth's "grit scale."[1]

D.O.: Absolutely. There are fascinating possibilities. We've had data from college entrance exams on dozens of variables for a long time, but typically, we only use a few. And we can measure non-cognitive factors and fold that information in with other data to design customized pathways for students or predict who might benefit from specific interventions. These have become more important than ever for our "unconfident learners." These are learners who may have not had a positive high school experience, or they are first generation college students, or maybe English is not their first language. But they know they need a postsecondary credential to get a good job. These students can be put off by the campus and all the complexity of college. They may be smart, yet lack the confidence to succeed. Student services and student support can make a big difference in student success.

N.T.: Some of the research I did in the past – work done with Morris Keeton and Barry Sheckley – clearly pointed to the relationship between student success and the level of student support that was in place; and part

of that support was family support.[2] What's interesting to me is that we are moving more and more into a world where individuals are really self-authoring their learning. In effect, self-regulated learning is becoming essential to navigating out there. In this open resource context, maybe the role of the institution and of the faculty is much more about helping students learn about how to learn and how to relate the knowledge they have to other knowledge. And, of course, the assessment also has to shift because teaching and learning are no longer about delivering information and just spilling it back out.

D.O.: Agreed. Let me add two comments. The first is the notion of coherence. You mention students designing their own learning experiences. They do and they will. Yet, without guidance, it may be hard for students to create coherence in their educational experience. The point of the curriculum is to promote coherence and "planfulness." We are seeing a generation of tools that help people self-assemble their own curriculum – with courses coming from multiple institutions. How to do that well can be a challenge.

And a second point to note is that the commercial sector is developing tools to help students with things like transfer. For example, websites that ask: "What kind of a transfer student are you? What are your goals? Are you from the military trying to transition back into the civilian workforce? Are you changing institutions or majors? Are you trying to accumulate credit?" They define different styles of transfer. It illustrates another way we can help students – help them become more self-aware of their needs and appropriate pathways.

A.M.: It seems to me that we're also returning to Nan's point about changing roles – in this case, students' changing roles.

D.O.: I believe that students should be co-creators of their learning experiences, perhaps even of their assessments. Students should not be passive or closed out of shaping their education. We also have a responsibility to help students be wise consumers of education. I am not sure how much we, or students, think about this co-creation role today.

We also should remember the out-of-class roles. For a lot of assessments, we're measuring what students have learned outside the "course." Randy Bass [of Georgetown University] talks about being in the "post-course era." His point is that many of the things we want our learners to do don't come from the course – they are out-of-class experiences, they're the interactions with people. Success isn't just predicated on subject matter expertise – it also is about how you interact with people.

N.T.: What do you think is the significance of all of these changes on entire institutions and even beyond institutions?

D.O.: I believe we have to wrestle with what we are seeking, what we are delivering and how we measure it. There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to learning and assessment. Plus, we have the ability to personalize and customize education in ways never before possible. To do this well will require collaboration. We have to work on this individually and collectively. We have the opportunity to reach more learners with greater personalization and greater success. We can make education more affordable, accessible and effective. It is a big challenge – but the return will be well worth the effort.

Notes

[1] For more information about Duckworth's understanding of "grit," please see her 2009 TED ED Talk, as well as many other resources at http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~duckwort/.

[2] See Cubeta, J., Travers, N., & Sheckley, B. G. (1998). *Predicting the academic success of adults from diverse populations.* Technical report for research supported by Pew Charitable Trusts, Diverse Students Project, University of Maryland University College, Institute for Research on Adults in Higher Education (IRAHE).