

Ivory tower needs to adapt to online media landscape, scholar says

April 9 2009



University of Illinois education professor Michael A. Peters says universities need to embrace new online media, social networks and a culture of "openness" as part of their pedagogy, or they risk becoming seen as anachronisms in today's hyper-connected world. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Universities need to embrace new online media, social networks and a culture of "openness" as part of their pedagogy, or they risk becoming seen as anachronisms in today's hyper-connected world where information is available freely, says a University of Illinois expert who studies the knowledge economy's effect on higher education.

Michael A. Peters, a professor of educational policy studies in the U. of

I.'s College of Education and a co-author of "Creativity and the Global Knowledge Economy," says that while forms of social media and [social networking](#) are transforming all of major institutions, including business, media and government, higher education has fallen behind the curve in adapting to the realities of information flow in the 21st century.

"Schools are built on industrial models whose logic often lags behind what underwrites new media, social networks and the creative economy," Peters said. "Now, we're living in a radically networked age, and higher education hasn't quite come to terms yet with what these new forms of the learning economy are, or how to adapt to them."

In the classic model of education, students received information from teachers and textbooks in an almost one-way informational flow. Now, Peters said, the viral nature of communication on the Internet is rapidly displacing the "old school" model.

In an age of file sharing and open academic repositories, he said, it's not reasonable to assume that knowledge need be something that's handed-down from on high, especially when the course materials used in the teaching of virtually all of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's courses are available free of charge online.

"When the scholarly ideas and information contained in a PDF file can be downloaded, viewed and shared by hundreds of millions of people worldwide in a matter of minutes while an ink-and-paper version languishes on a dusty library shelf, what that does is radically de-center forms of educational authority," Peters said. "It also flattens the academic playing field, and puts a greater emphasis on the social aspect of learning."

With the ubiquity of the Internet in college classrooms, and with the wealth of free information available online, Peters said students still

need teachers who are savvy synthesizers of knowledge.

"One of the critical concepts we in higher education have to come to grips with in this era of transformation is openness, and the diffuse, decentralized availability of information that's available for free," he said.

"Openness sets up all new knowledge ecologies, especially in a networked environment, and these new ways of communication are based on social principles and cultural logic. As professional educators, we need to think about how our curriculums can be rebooted so they fit better into a networked environment."

In some sense, Peters said, a lot of the leading developments in adapting higher education to a Web 2.0 world are happening on the fringes, almost despite education.

"You already have people in the sciences doing this voluntarily, where experts and amateurs will collaborate on a time-intensive subject such as astronomy," Peters said. "But that's the exception to the rule, not the norm."

The major questions, Peters said, are: "How do we redesign our schools to make use of the new logics. How do we begin to refocus these institutions to promote the kinds of innovation that businesses and governments around the world are trying to encourage?"

Citing the Web 2.0 principles of participation and open collaboration, as exemplified by Web sites such as Wikipedia and Wikiversity, Peters said traditional "bricks-and-mortarboard" universities need to embrace "Education 3.0," which he defines as "a cross-institutional, cross-cultural education where the learners themselves play a key role as creators of knowledge."

Seen through a historical lens, the Encyclopédie, an Enlightenment-era publication written by many of the French intellectual giants of the time, including Voltaire, Rousseau and Montesquieu, was a precursor to the raft of free content available today, Peters said. The creative impulse behind the Encyclopédie was to compile and publish a compendium of human knowledge in order to cultivate a well-informed populace capable of self-government, Peters said.

"Back then, access to knowledge was seen as an absolutely profound political principle, not unlike today," Peters said. "So this idea of participatory knowledge for a well-informed polity to create better self-government has been affecting all of our major institutions for quite some time. Over 200 years later, this is something that everyone is still trying to wrap their heads around. But it's also a very exciting time to be involved in higher education."

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Ivory tower needs to adapt to online media landscape, scholar says (2009, April 9)
retrieved 23 April 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2009-04-ivory-tower-online-media-landscape.html>

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