Online Education in Community Colleges:
Conversations With the Field

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This paper examines the current state of online learning and course development in community colleges. Community colleges, because they serve large numbers of students and often have standardized course curricula, are already deeply involved with online technologies. The document reviews the current structure of distance learning organizations, online course development models, and a variety of opinions of those involved in online learning.

The information gathered for this paper comes directly from open-ended conversational interviews with 53 people. While the main focus is on the 30 interviews with distance learning managers, 15 thought leaders and 8 instructional designers were interviewed for additional perspectives. An attempt was made to talk with people and institutions that represent a broad array of locations, institutional sizes, and sophistication with online education. Appendix A lists the persons interviewed and their organizations. Few names will be used in the paper, in order to maintain anonymity. Also, the terms *online learning*, *distance learning*, and *e-learning* are used interchangeably.

Conversations From the Field is sponsored by The Monterey Institute for Technology and Education (MITE) and funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. MITE is an educational nonprofit organization committed to the development and distribution of high-quality online content for higher education and secondary students. Its two main projects are (1) building a shared network of content providers to offer quality content globally at a minimal cost, and (2) the development and use of a criterion-based online course evaluation model.

In addition to these two projects, MITE also funds the development of papers, with particular emphasis on topics concerning how online learning is now being practiced throughout the country. The following is the first of a series of occasional papers titled "Conversations With the Field." Two additional papers are planned for the coming year, one dealing with interviews with faculty who produce e-learning courses, and a second on how state and other nonprofit cooperatives are affecting online education.

One final note: This is not a formal research study. The interviews themselves were open ended and constrained only by an outline of topics and the time available. The resulting paper is really an opinion piece on online learning issues distilled from some 50 hours of interviews, the content of which has been filtered through my own 25 years of experience in the distance learning field. Because people like to talk about the work they do, and I was there to listen, most people were very frank and open with me. This paper reflects what I believe to be honest opinions of the people on the e-learning firing line. However, the thoughts in this report are my own distillation of 53 voices, and do not represent any single point of view.

Thought Leaders

Prior to diving into interviews with the distance learning program managers, it seemed important, early in the process, to get a broad and general view of the current state of online learning in this country. The term *thought leader* is jargonistic and overblown, but seems to be in use now. But for the purpose of this paper, people with some or all of the following characteristics were interviewed:

- Consultants or managers of projects related to online learning
- Frequent speakers at conferences
- Writers of general articles related to online learning
- Those with a broad view of the field

Although many were from the community college sector, most were generalists with experience in various levels of higher education. Each was asked questions about the trends in online learning in higher education, obstacles to expanded use, and sources of content in online courses.

Trends

Hybrid or Blended Courses. The dominant trend mentioned by thought leaders was the rapid, almost spontaneous growth of courses that combine live classroom instruction with online elements. It was assumed that hybrid courses used web technologies to replace a portion of live classroom activities. This trend was viewed very positively by most thought leaders. Phrases such as "the best of all possible worlds" and "a great combination" are representative. One would assume the growth in hybrid courses is largely due to the growth in campuswide course management systems, in which each faculty member, online or not, has access to a course shell. Overcrowding and insufficient classroom space brought on by increasing enrollments constitute another reason for the implementation of hybrid courses. One thought leader, however, believed that hybrid courses disappointed both those students seeking live instruction as well as those who wanted totally online education.

Mainstreaming. Again, this was a near-universal trend mentioned by the 15 thought leaders. They believed that online learning was more widely accepted than five years ago, and that it had become just part of the education structure of the campus. Online learning is no longer exclusively a distance learning tool. One person said, "What was just a fringe program five years ago is now considered integral to campus teaching and learning." The growth of hybrid or blended courses would also suggest increasing acceptance of technology-mediated instruction in higher education.

Productivity. Most people at least mentioned productivity during the course of the interview. Although it was rarely defined, it was taken to mean increased student retention, reduced failure rates, and shortened time to degree for students. In the context of other things said during the interviews, it might also imply increasing faculty productivity in terms of number of students taught.

Learning Objects. Learning objects were also noted as a trend, but the interviewees were split in their opinions regarding the impact on education. About half thought that learning objects were the next major development in online education, but the other half asked, "What are they, really?" and, "Who is using them?" Because of this uncertainty, Susan Metros was added to the interview list. Metros is the deputy chief information officer and executive director for e-learning at The Ohio State University. She confirmed a certain ambiguity about learning objects, and verbally restated a quotation from her recent article:

A repository chock full of learning objects cannot, by its simple existence, create dynamic learning. Although learning objects have been discussed anecdotally, there are very few published case studies describing the successful use of learning objects in higher education, and there is almost no scholarly research formally assessing their educational value.[1]

Obstacles

There was significant consistency among thought leaders related to obstacles, as well. Several were regularly mentioned. There were no surprises. These will be briefly mentioned here and discussed in greater detail in the last section of the paper.

Resources. Online learning, particularly if properly done, requires a financial commitment. Funding course development conflicts with the typical structure of higher education budgeting. As will be discussed, developing, revising, and maintaining high-quality courses is expensive on a per-course basis. Beyond course development is the ongoing cost of technology infrastructure. Most believed additional resources would be required for growth in online education.

Institutional Leadership. Many of the thought leaders interviewed believed that development of online education was often a function of top-down direction and growth in student numbers, and sophistication of online programs was either hampered or enhanced by leadership. This view was supported by interviews with distance education managers. Institutions with the most robust online learning programs have strong administrative support.

Policies. Many of the persons interviewed headed organizations that are involved in the development of or reaction to national, state, and institutional policies that influence online education. These policies include funding for students, transferability of credits, faculty pay, institutional accreditation, course ownership issues, and tenure, as well as others. While some movement has been made over the past decade, such as the joint accreditation process, more needs to be done.

Faculty Culture. Historically, faculty members have been responsible for the totality of the teaching process: creation of the syllabus, location of materials, design and delivery of instruction, assessment, and quality control. In the main, it is a solitary process. Many thought leaders saw the gradual ending of this model and its replacement by one that deconstructs education into component parts and includes a variety of other specialized people. One person interviewed stated, "We are seeing the gradual demise of the craft-guild model of education." Thought leaders believed changes in faculty culture and perceptions may represent the major challenge to higher education.

Course Creation and Content

The thought leaders were asked their opinions about how online courses are currently created and about sources of content used in online instruction. One must remember that most of these people are at least one step removed from the course development process, and their opinions are conjecture, at least in part.

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[1] Metros, Susan E. (2005 July/August). Learning Objects: A Rose by any Other Name. *Educause Review,* pp. 12-13.

Current Course Development. There was near unanimity in opinion that online courses are generally created by individual faculty members adapting classroom instruction for the campus course management system (CMS). It can be summed up in a quote from one person: "Have Blackboard, will develop course." Thought leaders believed that most online courses today are designed by faculty members taking their existing classroom content and fitting it into a course management system. Some believed that the faculty received training in the CMS through a faculty development center and built the course with assistance from distance education staff. They did not think that many courses were designed specifically for online delivery, or designed to take advantage of the technology. The tone of these responses was one of frustration and disappointment, and reflected in the following comment: "Frankly, I thought we would have moved farther along by this point."

Future Course Development. The thought leaders were asked to hypothesize about how courses might be developed in the future. Surprisingly, many people thought that the current faculty member/CMS model would continue into the near future. One person noted, "I had high hopes that things would change; now I'm not so sure." Others saw change as more likely. Some saw games and simulations as the growing addition to online learning. Several others saw a basic change in the way courses would be developed in the future, one in which teams of faculty content experts would work in conjunction with design and technical professionals. One person's dream was "to get the best instructors, build super media-rich courses based on sound pedagogy which each teacher could personalize when they taught the course." Although centralized course development is taking place at some schools, it is still an isolated practice slowed by a lack of resources and expertise in developing technology-based content.

Sources of Content. Many of the thought leaders paused when asked about the source of online course content. It appeared that the content issue was of secondary importance. Most assumed that content would continue to come from textbook publishers. Few believed that content would come from individual faculty members, although it might come from institutions themselves. Two of the interviewees were from organizations actively producing content for sale.

Distance Education Managers

Thirty distance learning managers from nine states were interviewed for this paper. The information from these interviews forms the core of this paper. Interviewees ranged from the smallest to the largest community colleges in the country, in both rural and urban settings. They worked in a range of programs, from large, resource-rich organizations to the most basic single-person units. The interviews took 30 to 90 minutes and followed an outline consisting of six main topics:
1. The local distance education program
2. General trends and obstacles in online learning
3. The course development process
4. Course content
5. Faculty attitudes
6. General opinions

The Local Distance Learning Program. In general, most distance education programs reported either directly to the chief academic officer or one layer below. In the

smaller colleges, with full-time enrollment below 1,500, the head of distance learning often was the chief academic officer. In one instance, the program was part of the computer science department, and in another, it was part of the department of mathematics.

In many instances, distance learning included telecourse instruction and live televised classes as well as online learning. The continued use of both of these live video-based courses was surprising. Several smaller schools were moving toward the use of live IP video technology, primarily to link off-campus centers.
At this point in e-learning history, it is interesting to see the continued strength in live instruction. Because distance education has entered the campus mainstream, it was difficult to get an accurate figure on the number of employees directly involved in distance learning. Often, online learning is spread among a technology unit, a faculty development center, and a media/courseware development organization. The decentralization of distance learning is a growing trend, with no single person in charge of all aspects. This, of course, is another indication of mainstreaming, the movement of distance learning programs from self-contained organizations on the college periphery to a diffusion of functions into traditional campus structure.

The number of online courses offered and the number of students served varied dramatically among institutions, from a low of 30 courses and 115 students to a high of 400 courses and 20,000 students per semester. It appears that only a limited number of new courses is developed each year, both because there was a flurry of development over the past decade and because the most needed courses are already online.

However, the most universal finding was that enrollment growth was very rapid – almost explosive. Several managers cited high double-digit percentage increases over the past five years. Indeed, in a few instances, online learning was masking declining enrollment on the traditional campus and helping the college meet enrollment targets.

General Trends in Online Learning. As with thought leaders, distance learning managers saw the general blurring of lines between online courses and traditional classroom teaching. The development of hybrid courses seems to be expanding at a significant rate. Of note is that the creation of blended or hybrid courses seems to be as much a spontaneous phenomenon as a strategic one. Because many institutions provide CMS accounts for all faculty, the interviewees believed there was a significant amount of what one person called "stealth hybrid courses," in which faculty would assign online activities to students in lieu of classroom attendance, in the same way faculty have assigned work in the library or team project work in lieu of classroom attendance.

Another trend was the use of adjunct faculty. While some colleges were not increasing their use of adjuncts, most were expanding adjunct teaching in online courses to complement the full-time faculty at the institutions. Several institutions employed adjuncts to develop as well as teach online courses. It would seem that the only difference between full-time faculty and adjunct faculty is that the former has permanent employment.

Finally, many colleges were part of state cooperative organizations. These consortia acted as brokers among and between the member institutions, facilitating the course-sharing process. Typically, a college with a large distance learning program

would offer seats in its online classes to other colleges. In what is described by some as the "host-provider model," colleges would share any revenues and work out credit-transfer processes.

General Obstacles to Online Learning. Distance learning managers also saw common obstacles. Because community colleges often work with rural students who may have limited resources, a commonly mentioned problem was the lack of computing and internet access. As one person put it, "There is still a digital divide." Another topic mentioned was the lack of technical resources on the campus to assist faculty in designing and implementing online instruction. This was reinforced later in the interviews when managers were asked about faculty complaints.

The faculty and traditional academic culture were also mentioned as obstacles. While faculty resistance to online learning continues to be an issue, it seems to have lessened over the past five years as implementation of CMS and mainstreaming of online components spread.

The Course Development Process. Over the course of interviewing managers from 30 colleges, it became apparent that colleges could be arrayed along a continuum based on resources available for online learning. Colleges with funding and staff provided more services to faculty; those with less did not. The reasons for the amount of resources at a particular college were varied and often related to the general economic condition of the state and the college, the interests of higher administration, the college's history, and faculty attitudes. In addition, most colleges with ample resources have been very successful in attracting large grants to supplement state and college funds. About 25 colleges seemed to be located toward the "limited resources" end of the scale, with the remaining 5 or so at the other end, with "ample resources."

While the course development process had similarities at both limited- and ample-resource colleges, there were also marked differences. Both models will be described below:

Limited resource colleges
- A faculty member approaches the distance or online learning organization with an interest in putting a course online. The impetus for this usually comes from the faculty member's own interest, or a whole department may be moving in a general direction toward online learning. It is less common that the motivation for a course came from a strategic decision by the college itself (*i.e.*, selecting online courses for development based on enrollment or physical space needs).
- The faculty member completes a form or application to develop the online course. That form may simply be sent to the distance learning manager for approval. More often, however, it would be sent to a campus committee for approval (many colleges had never rejected an application), and then up the chain of command to the departmental chair, and occasionally to the chief academic officer. Decisions become more complicated if special funding or staff time is required to develop the course.
- Once approved, the faculty member signs an agreement and usually receives some payment for the development process. This payment varies widely among colleges. In two instances, there was no remuneration, but in most, it was a combination of release time and extra money, in the range of $1,500 to

$2,500. Payments are usually given at the end of a specified time when the course has been completed.

- Faculty are then given access to training, most likely to be instruction about how to use the campus CMS. Less than half the colleges provided additional training in online instructional design. In about half the colleges, training was mandatory; in the others, it was optional. One manager said, "We just hope they take the training, but they don't have to." The training itself was often online, thus providing faculty with the chance to experience being an online student. Some colleges used a model in which faculty members actually developed their online course as part of the training.
- At this point, the faculty member proceeds to create the online course. Depending on the college, faculty mentors or online learning staff may advise and assist, but in general, the faculty member does the work alone, with limited support.
- Once the course is completed, the developing faculty member teaches it, usually in the following term. Most colleges have either no process or only an informal process for reviewing the completed course. Quality control is left to the developing faculty member and perhaps the department. While the online learning manager may have concerns about the completed course, there may be reluctance to voice them. One distance learning manager quoted an instructor as saying, "You never hassled me in the classroom; why are you hassling me about my online course?" Which, of course, is true.
- Content for most online courses mirrors the faculty member's classroom course. A textbook is central. Most of the material from the classroom course is inserted into the campus CMS, with addition of added media and links to outside web resources. In some cases, faculty use publisher course cartridges that accompany the adopted textbook.

Ample resource colleges
- Often, the college has made some strategic decision to focus online learning in specific areas. Usually these included high enrollment entry-level courses, specialty curriculum such as nursing or electronics, or areas in which on-campus enrollment was dwindling. Often, too, entire programs were being put online, rather than individual courses. The course selection process is based on a well-articulated plan.
- A few institutions have developed course prototypes, full or partial courses which faculty can then adapt to their needs. This was most evident in Kentucky, which has produced a number of prototypes for the community and technical college system. Faculty are either encouraged or required to use these prototypes, depending on the college's policies.
- Various training courses are available for faculty, and at least some training is mandatory. Faculty often get some form of credit and, occasionally, payment for attending the training. More emphasis was given to the pedagogy of online education. At some colleges, faculty receive a certificate after taking a series of courses. Often, this training is provided by a faculty development center.
- Online learning organizations or other cooperating campus units have people to help in course design. This frequently includes instructional designers or technologists who help in creating instructional objectives, storyboarding content, or Flash programming. A few colleges had video production facilities and used these resources to create talking-head or interview segments. While the faculty member does most of the work in creating the course, much more intensive assistance is available during the process.

- Quality control is emphasized at these ample-resource colleges. This usually means that courses were reviewed by the distance learning director or staff midway through the development process, or reviewed by some form of committee when the course was completed, or both. In one instance, the chief academic officer reviewed each new course. However, it is noteworthy that only two online learning managers said they had ever rejected a course for quality reasons after it had been completed. Usually, problems are identified before any final review.
- While courses from these colleges still reflect their classroom counterparts, they show more innovative uses of media and tighter pedagogical models, and they are more expensive to produce.

There seems to be a difference between the roles of distance or online learning managers who managed the limited-resource development process described previously and the latter group of colleges who had a more rigorous and structured system. The former were at small colleges with limited staff and financial resources for online learning. The distance learning manager's role was often one of support. Several of these people said, "My job is to support the faculty." Any leadership provided by these managers was very subtle. It often consisted of cajoling faculty members into putting courses online and making subtle suggestions about ways to improve course quality. At colleges in which there was a more formal course-development process, managers seemed more proactive, often because of the support provided by senior administration at the institution. These managers really seemed to manage the process, with agreement of both faculty and administrators.

Course Content. As the thought leaders did, the online learning managers hesitated when asked about content. It seemed as though content wasn't often considered. The most common answer to the question about where course content came from was "the faculty." When pressed, the manager often said, "the brains of the faculty," or textbooks, e-paks, and course cartridges. As with traditional instruction, locating and assembling content in courses was the sole responsibility of teaching faculty. Only a few colleges produced any original media content.

Managers expressed mixed feelings about publishers and textbook companies. One said, "Some of my worst experiences in online learning relate to using publisher materials." Most expressed strong reservations about working with publishers but were resigned to using them, because that is where they perceived the bulk of the content would reside. Some managers, however, had a more optimistic view. One said, "Publishers have moved light years in the past five years," and another said, "The publishers, especially the custom publishers, get it now."

There was no clear sense where content would come from in the future. Most believed it would continue to come from publishers. Few thought that individual faculty would produce and market content. Many hoped that consortia or other nonprofit organizations would emerge and keep content development from becoming a solely commercial enterprise.

One final note on content: Aside from telecourses, course prototypes, and the host-provider model mentioned earlier, colleges were using courses produced locally. There was near-universal agreement that college faculty wanted to develop and teach their own courses. According to the managers, there would be increasing resistance to teaching courses produced by fellow faculty members at the college,

courses developed at sister colleges in the system, courses shared by a regional organization, and courses produced commercially.

Managers had little to say concerning two content areas: learning objects and open content. Most had somewhat positive feelings – "They are a good idea" – about learning objects, but few had used them. There were questions about their actual definition, how one would find them, and whether faculty would expend the time and effort to search for them. Most managers were familiar with Merlot and had perused that resource. On the other hand, three colleges were actively producing learning objects and had set up their own content repositories.

Most managers had at least heard of the open-content or courseware movement, although often they confused it with open-source software, such as Linux. Few had used open content, although two managers said faculty had looked at the MIT materials to study teaching techniques. This reaction may be because most open content has been produced for higher-level courses and wouldn't be of immediate value to community colleges. Regardless, open content is not centrally on the minds of these managers.

The online learning managers were as optimistic as the thought leaders about hybrid or blended courses. They saw this as a real growth area. In addition, hybrid or blended courses seemed to provide a way for technology-shy faculty to try out forms of e-learning without having to produce an entire course. As noted earlier, these mixed-mode courses seem to be happening spontaneously, as faculty have access to CMS resources and colleagues who can help them.

Faculty Attitudes. Interviewees were asked about general attitudes of faculty toward online learning. As noted earlier, most now see the struggle for acceptance of online learning as being about over. Common responses were "mixed…some like it, some hate it," and, "We work with those who want to work with us." There was much less emphasis on faculty reluctance than would have been expressed 5 or 10 years ago.

General Opinions. At the end of each interview, the distance learning managers were asked to respond to the following paragraph:

> In some states, there is a movement away from courses produced by individual faculty toward more highly produced, media-rich courses created by development teams, either within or outside of the institution. What is your reaction to that trend?

Managers were split on this trend. Some called this "the wave of the future," and, "This is the way things should be done." While most people liked the concept of team-created courses, many said that the cost would prohibit their use at institutions. However, the major misgiving was that faculty prefer teaching courses that they themselves created and would rebel against teaching a course created by someone else. One manager said, "This goes to the heart of what faculty do; they develop courses and teach." Many thought that while faculty would reject adopting entire courses, they would be more favorable to accepting content developed by others. Faculty have a long history with this from using and adapting pieces of content, finding articles, web resources, and textbook chapters to weave into a course. Few faculty, though, have instructional-design backgrounds or multimedia-development and art-direction skills.

Finally, online managers were asked what elements of online education are most satisfying to faculty and to students. Faculty and student satisfaction are critical precursors to course quality. If neither faculty nor students are satisfied with the online learning experience, course quality is irrelevant; if unsatisfied, faculty won't teach, and students won't enroll in online courses.

Answers to the question of what was satisfying about an online course were highly consistent between faculty and students. Faculty like the convenience of teaching online; they like that they can engage in teaching whenever and wherever they are. One manager said, "They can do it from a hot tub," while others with less colorful imagery said, "They can fit teaching into their lives." The second most commonly mentioned satisfying element was somewhat surprising. Managers believed that faculty valued the quality of interaction they experienced with students. A common response would be something like, "They develop better relationships with students than in a traditional class." Managers noted the surprise and delight that many faculty expressed when they discovered the quality of interaction over what heretofore had been perceived as an impersonal medium. This was applied to both student-student as well as faculty-student interaction.

A similar consistency was evidenced when interviewees were asked about student satisfaction with online learning. From student evaluation data, managers have learned that students also appreciate the convenience of online learning, the well-known ability to study when and where one wants. Students also liked those online courses where there was a high degree of clarity about requirements for the course, a grading rubric, specifics about assessment, and easy navigation through the course. However, the most important element of all was communication or, more specifically, the absence of communication. The managers were almost universal in the opinion that the single most important reason for student dissatisfaction with an online course was the failure of faculty to respond promptly to student email. As one person put it, "You can have the fanciest multimedia course with all the bell and whistles, but if the teacher doesn't check his email, he's dead."

Regarding student satisfaction, of particular note is one element that was not mentioned: content. None of the managers reported that students, of their own volition, were influenced in their attitudes by whether content was engaging, media rich, or comprehensive in scope.

Instructional Designers

The final process in this study was a series of eight interviews with people integrally involved in the online instructional design and development process. These were conducted to gain additional perspective on the previous interviews and to get a view from persons whose work relates directly to course development. As with the thought leaders, some were involved with community colleges, but most were not. However, all have strong academic and experiential credentials, and long experience designing online learning courses. Most interviews took about 20 minutes.

Course Development Process. Each instructional designer was read a summary of the course development process at institutions with limited resources. They were then

asked the degree to which this was an accurate picture for most institutions. Almost unanimously, they agreed that the steps outlined earlier in this paper were correct. Quotes from the instructional designers included, "matches my beliefs exactly," "rings true," and "yes, this is what is going on." One designer said, "The only difference between your beliefs and mine may be the degree to which we lament that it is true." As instructional designers, they felt that very little designing was taking place in most online course development around the country.

When queried about how courses should be designed, the instructional designers were somewhat predictable in their responses, the primary one being that more time should be spent in course development. Generally, the designers believed that courses should be developed by teams and have a strong emphasis on sound pedagogy, quality control, and integration of assessment.

The instructional designers split on the role of faculty in the design process. Some believed what was really needed was a ramping up of support for small teams of faculty to create courses: providing more instructional designers, more web specialists, and more media developers. Another group of interviewees believed that course development should become more regimented, with faculty members acting as part of a team of educational professionals, each playing a separate but equal role. When asked if a faculty member or a nonfaculty project director should lead the team, the group was split. Some felt that leadership should continue to reside with an academic professional; others believed that someone with project management skills should handle the mechanics of overseeing the development process.

V. Analysis and Implications

After 50-plus interviews, it is possible to see a number of general conditions and trends in online learning, particularly in community colleges. I will close with several final thoughts.

Faculty/Academic culture is the dominant force in online learning. Throughout all of the interviews, the managers were clear that the academic process is in the hands of the academics themselves. Even if a state has adopted a set of objectives and outcomes for courses, the content, course development, teaching process, oversight, and evaluation rest firmly in the hands of faculty and departments. The assumption continues to be that course content and teaching are solely the responsibility of the faculty, and it does not appear that this viewpoint is under any significant threat.

While some people I interviewed hoped and believed that instruction was a collegewide responsibility, and therefore participation in course design should be more diffused, the reality seems to be summed up in George Vaughn's retelling of an often-cited story:

> I once heard a story about President Eisenhower when he was president of Columbia University, prior to becoming president of the United States. The president was discussing an academic matter with an important faculty leader. Ike's comment was something to the effect that "Let's see what the university thinks about it." The faculty leader replied, "Sir, the faculty *is* the university."[2]

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[2] *Inquiry*, *1*(1). (Spring 1997). Pp. 8-13. Virginia Community College System.

While many interviewees for this paper talked about bringing the faculty along in online learning, others seemed more realistic in supporting the faculty if and when they themselves decided to move forward.

What wasn't addressed is the issue of online content development. For the most part, faculty use and adapt professionally developed publisher materials for most courses. In the case of online instruction, the possibility of content created specifically for use in a technology-based environment has yet to be addressed.

At most colleges, online learning represents a new tool for convenience and access, not a new model of education. As a corollary to the above finding, most faculty see online learning as a new tool to provide convenience and access to students, not a new way to teach and learn. Since most of what is being developed in online learning is simply a refashioning of existing face-to-face instruction, any improvements in pedagogy are incidental to the use of the new technology, more of a natural evolution than a purposeful, visible sea change in education.

This is a disappointing reality to many of the people with whom I spoke. Many saw distance and online learning as the perfect opportunity to put pedagogical improvements into practice, to take advantage of technology-based instruction. Others saw it as a chance to improve productivity and quality in higher education. But, as one very experienced instructional designer told me, "What are you going to do when you ask a faculty member if they have objectives for a course, and he responds with complaints that you are telling them how to teach just by asking the question?"

Content is a complex but undiscussed issue. As noted earlier, most interviewees were fuzzy when asked about sources of course content. In large part, this is because the content is the purview of the faculty member. However, beyond this initial response, there were divergent opinions about the need for using centrally developed content. Two persons, deeply involved in the course development process, wanted to see online courses created centrally, wherein the selection and use of specific content was fixed in the course development process, and not modifiable by instructors. They described the content as "locked down" and "bulletproof." On the other hand, others believed that specific course content was unimportant. Following a constructivist model, a part of the learning process was discovering and filtering content during the instructional process.

Aside from some large and sophisticated programs with ample resources, many online learning programs remain small and rudimentary. Many distance learning programs are run by a manager and a couple of staffers, usually an administrative assistant and perhaps a trainer, sometimes with reassigned faculty. Often people called *instructional designers* are given the title, not the training. I was struck that many distance learning programs aren't very different organizationally than they were five years ago. What *is* remarkable is that even modest programs have produced large numbers of courses and serve significant numbers of students each semester – so many, in fact, that they are occasionally threatening the on-campus programs. However, there is recognition that the quality of these online courses may be of lower quality than they would like.

Collaboration and centralization are good. Over the past decade, states and colleges have recognized the need for some level of centralization and cooperation. States with the best programs (Florida, Texas, and Kentucky) have their institutions

working together. Several persons interviewed in Florida believe that the high level of sophistication in the state was due in part to the Florida Distance Learning Consortium, which one person described as "the best organization I have ever belonged to." The dilemmas with consortia arrangements are two: sharing and funding. Most consortia are established to share information and course enrollments. As described earlier, course sharing consists of allowing students from one institution to use spare capacity in another institution's online classes. However, no joint course development was taking place. Although creating common courses or common content may not be a priority, it represents an underused resource inherent in a collaborative relationship.

Funding, the other issue, was quite simple. In two states, centralized funding had been removed from the consortia, and in both states the organizations were struggling.

Ironically, there will likely be growth in centrally developed large enrollment courses as well as smaller scale, more personal courses. While it was nowhere near universal, there was feeling among many people that college courses, particularly those whose enrollments were large, should be developed centrally. It was intriguing to hear the hushed tones in which this belief was expressed. People also prefaced their statements by words such as, "I shouldn't be saying this," or, "Don't quote me, but…." It was as if the idea of advocating centralized development was some form of heresy.

The model these people described either explicitly or implicitly is one used by many of the world's open universities.[3] [4] In short, teams of faculty and media experts develop courses within a highly structured process. Quality control mechanisms abound. The same producing faculty maintain the course and perform regular revisions. Courses are taught by tutors or adjuncts, whose interest and personal sense of accomplishment come from interacting with students.

This, of course, is the general model practiced by the University of Phoenix and Rio Salado College. The latter has about 30 full-time faculty and 900 adjuncts.

This model is easier to implement at an institution whose mission is primarily outreach with little or no home-campus instruction. However, I am familiar with several projects at regular campus-based colleges. One of the most interesting is the Sirius Academics Project at Florida Community College in Jacksonville. The college is pulling together teams of faculty and support personnel, including a librarian, to create courses in which enrollment is high but student retention is low. Four courses have been completed, with two dozen more scheduled. Most interesting is that the design teams are actually creating the course textbook. As might be expected, the production cost, including faculty and support personnel, is high. When completed, both regular and adjunct faculty will teach the course.

It is likely that the development of so-called megacourses will occur only where the potential for high enrollment will justify production and maintenance costs. In other courses, particularly with faculty who take a more constructivist approach to learning, fixed content may become less important. Robin Mason[5] describes two

[3] Kirp, David. (2003). *Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line*. Harvard University Press.
[4] Daniel, John. (1997). *Mega-Universities and the Knowledge Media*. Routledge Press.
[5] Mason, Robin. (2001 July). Models of Online Courses. *Ed at a Distance*, *15*(7).

concepts related to this learning model: breaking down of the distinction between teacher and what is taught, and the collective construction of a course. Because of the plethora of free and accessible content on the internet, it is likely that we may slowly see courses that begin as content free (other than a textbook), and whose content emerges throughout the teaching-learning experience.

There is an understanding that things should be done better. Most of the people I interviewed felt that the overall quality of online courses need to improve. After a period described by some as "the Wild West," a period when anyone could throw anything up on the web, programs now appear to be installing quality standards and review processes. One reason is to defend against faculty and external criticism, but the feeling also comes from seeing some model programs against which colleges can judge themselves.

Several organizations have developed program-quality standards; the most widely recognized are WCET's *Principles of Good Practice for Electronically Offered Higher Education Degree and Certificate Programs* (www.wcet.info) and SREB's *Principles of Good Practice* (http://www.sreb.org/). In addition, several organizations have developed quality rubrics for individual online courses. MITE and WCET have teamed up to create the Online Course Evaluation Project (www.edutools.info). The Online Course Evaluation Project provides an impartial evaluation of online course content as defined by an independent team of evaluators with expertise in specific course development areas.

Maryland Online received substantial FIPSE funding to establish a project, Quality Matters (http://www.qualitymatters.org). Quality Matters is interesting in that it is designed to certify courses and provide continuous quality improvement. The project's evaluation model may be acceptable to the academic community because it is largely a peer-review system, in which faculty are trained to evaluate courses produced by faculty at other institutions.

As is often the case with cultural changes, we appear to be in midstream with the use of computing technology in instruction. On one bank is our traditional way of providing higher education. Each faculty member, usually within some general structure, creates learning experiences based on his or her particular skills and knowledge. Students get the best that the faculty member can offer, but nothing more. While this model frustrates many who hope for greater breadth and efficiency, the craft model continues to make sense to some and has strong advocates. Indeed, in one group interview with faculty, when asked whether the Cal State System, with 23 campuses, should have 23 English 101 courses, the response from one faculty member was, "No, it should have 2,300 courses, because everyone has something to offer."

On the other bank of the online learning stream is the demonstrated promise that technology seems to provide: high-quality learning at a reasonable cost that offers mass education. However, it requires a degree of unbundling roles, rejiggering budget models, and surrendering autonomy, which faculty and institutions don't yet seem ready to adopt.

Change is happening, but it is happening at a slower rate than one might have thought. The developments we hear about at conferences don't yet seem to be commonplace in the field. As one manager of a large and sophisticated program put

it, "When I make presentations about our program, afterward, lots of people always tell me how rare and unique we are."