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The Real Disrupters: The Innovators Who are Truly Transforming Education

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During the last two years, the public and some academic insiders crowned Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) as the amazing disruption that was going to transform [education](#). One of the founders of Coursera has, on multiple occasions, proclaimed that its “innovation” was no less radical than the printing press.

Really? If you have ever taken a MOOC course, you will know that a statement like that might qualify as among the most significant hyperbole of the decade.

I have written in a number of venues from my [Forbes](#) column to the [Financial Times](#) to the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) why MOOCs are so much less than their self-congratulating founders think they are. I won't recount those arguments here. I would, however, like to turn the spotlight on the companies that *are* quietly transforming education: 2U and CorpU. You may not have heard of these companies because they are more interested in doing than talking. No bravado, no fanfare, no headline chasing. They are just quietly changing education.

These companies have smartly flown under the radar as they perfect their craft, but this is about to change. With the recent announcement by 2U (formerly 2Tor) that it has filed for an initial public offering (IPO), and with the current trajectory of CorpU, these companies are going to get attention from now on. Indeed, it will be impossible to ignore them.

During my three years as Dean of the George [Washington School of Business](#), we were very focused on building a best-in-class online MBA program and customized executive education that included an online component. Having studied and worked with many of the vendors in the online space, I can say unequivocally that, for degree-granting programs, 2U is hands down the best in the [business](#); and for customized executive education, there is no one doing better and more innovative work than CorpU.

These companies understand three key issues that are critical to making online education not just good, but, in some cases, *better* than the face-to-face experience.

First, you cannot do this by simply filming a classroom and posting the video. Lecture capture is online learning 1.0 and, to be frank, it is lame. To do online learning right, you have to completely break the learning process down and rebuild it from scratch. You have to share the learning concepts in “bite-size” nuggets that move constantly back and forth from concept to exercise. It is not that video lecture is not important, but it requires a completely new and different production from simply filming a lecture or conversation. Further, high-level production values that use narrative nonfiction, animation and documentary filmmaking techniques are essential.

Second, online learning must be interactive. Learning is fundamentally a social experience. When you take people out of the classroom, they lose the primary touch point of that social experience. You have to replace this with touch points through online modalities. These range from synchronous sessions facilitated by faculty to team-based exercises and problem solving. There are many ways to build in social experiences in the online environment, but online learning architects must be thoughtful about it.

Third, data collection allows for better outcomes. As I have noted elsewhere, “Big data in the online learning space [gives] institutions the predictive tools they need to improve learning outcomes for individual students. By designing a curriculum that collects data at every step of the student learning process, universities can address student needs with customized modules, assignments, feedback and learning trees in the curriculum that will promote better and richer learning.” We are still at the early stages of capturing and utilizing data in this way, but the opportunities for dynamic learning are tremendous.

CorpU and 2U understand all of this.

Rather than focusing on large student numbers the way MOOCs are, 2U is focused on producing a high-quality educational experience. They produce a high-touch experience that is very different from the lecture-capture model that has dominated the online experience. They also invest significant resources in the back-office services that are crucial for education and are often somewhat anemic for online programs. Here we are talking about student advisors, career services, etc. Rather than reaching big numbers, they are interested in providing the best educational experience from classroom experience (where the student-professor ratio averages about 9:1) to career services and job placement. In the online education space, this is a company to be watched.

The more radical innovator, however, is CorpU. This company is the true disruptor that has the potential to change not only online learning but also education more generally. CorpU shares many things in common with 2U: emphasis on top-notch production (this looks nothing like the lecture-capture model that so many faculty and MOOC advocates are used to seeing); socially embedded, network-based learning; and a

plethora of data gathered on learning analytics that allow faculty and corporations to track data on learning in ways that were heretofore unimaginable. This last point is the brilliance of online learning. If you break the learning process down and rebuild it in ways that you can capture information on the learning process, you can start to tailor learning in ways that could never be achieved in the face-to-face classroom environment.

But here is where the two companies diverge. The problem for 2U is that it is operating within the rules of a faculty-driven, degree-granting system. As wonderful as 2U's production values are for the online learning experience, they must still operate by the rules of the university system. And, unfortunately, there are many things about that system that are broken. Faculty have become largely tone deaf to what the market needs; and business schools, specifically, have become worse and worse at delivering the types of education and training that corporations are asking for.

CorpU's approach is quite different. Like 2U, this company is focused on the social aspects of learning. Beyond this, CorpU is singularly focused on being relevant for the corporations it serves. Following the model of custom, non-degree executive education in business schools, CorpU works with a handful of top executive-education faculty to build programs that are customized for exactly what the corporations' need. CorpU's curriculum is not driven by faculty approval processes or accreditation bodies. Rather, it is driven by learning outcomes for corporate bottom lines. As corporations turn away from the emphasis placed on accredited degree-granting institutions (this is already happening), they are going to care more and more about whether learning delivers knowledge that is valuable to the organization. The learning companies that are doing this – with CorpU leading the way – are going to have the greatest influence over education in the years to come.

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