ABSTRACT

The challenge of Information and Communication Technology Management within the Caribbean university system remains daunting. On the surface there exists constant need to revisit infrastructure, system architecture, software and relevant hardware in keeping with the myriad number of changes across the global technology landscape. However, a greater challenge is emerging rapidly forcing universities across the globe to re-evaluate their strategic direction as it relates to course delivery. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) represent the next frontier for open and distance education; allowing for dispersion of courses (free of charge) to participants with a diverse array of digital content spanning the sciences, arts, humanities and business. MOOCs represent a new thinking for content design/delivery rooted in the transformation of production and knowledge sharing Tapscott & Williams, (2007). University systems regionally as traditional gatekeepers of knowledge must now become au courant to ensure currency and competitiveness. This paper examines MOOCs as a new digital content frontier, their relevance to Caribbean higher education institutions and the challenges that universities face as they become more prevalent. It will also provide insights into the potential strategies for adoption of MOOCs within the Caribbean university system.

Keywords: Content Strategies, Disruptive Innovation, Disruptive Technologies, E-Learning, MOOC, Technology Adoption

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of such education models as MIT’s MITOCW, Udacity, Coursera and Udemy signal alternative approaches to content delivery modalities. Moreover, as the digital age progresses into its maturity stage the relevancy of knowledge acquisition needs to shift accordingly. Brick and mortar institutions are already challenged by tools such as YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2009) which provide a high degree of subject content knowledge. MOOCs may be next. MOOCs represent an exciting time for the global higher education market, not only are they relevant for learning but also represents a source of disruptive innovation, (Christensen, 1997) that is wreaking havoc on higher education business models both within
traditional as well as for profit university settings. The emergence of new education business models and their utilization of MOOCs as a source of competitive advantage make access to students outside of the traditional radar of US/European based higher education institutions more palatable as affordance becomes less of an issue through increased access to Information & Communication Technology (ICT).

The potential impact of MOOCs on the Caribbean university system remains inevitable due to already existing changes in ICT. The landscape of education in the Caribbean region is changing, not only as a result of the growing need for a more educated cadre of professionals who can contribute to the new knowledge driven economies but also because of the emerging impact of globalized education opportunities without the need for travel. Online learning has gained much momentum in the region, including the University of The West Indies’ (UWI) Open Campus’ foray into the realm of open and distance education. The reach of the dominant Caribbean University (UWI), within the region is now as pervasive a click environment as it has been in the brick landscape for over 60 years. Currently, UWI’s Open Campus system offers more than 30 blended learning courses on an annual basis with a total of 6,499 enrolled during the 2011-2012 period (Open Campus, 2012). This is an impressive feat that attests to the robustness of the University system and its foresight in embracing a geographically diverse student population spanning the region.

The origins of the University’s approach to online education commenced with UWIDE (The University of the West Indies Distance Education Centre), (Thurab-Nkhosi, 2006). It has traditionally offered its programmes using a mix of print, audio-conferencing and face-to-face tutorials with limited use of asynchronous, computer-based technologies. While there has been much debate about the effectiveness of technology-based learning versus face-to-face (Rampage 2005; IDECC 2005) cited by Thurab-Nkhosi (2006), the final impetus for UWIDE to move away from synchronous delivery however, was influenced by practical considerations. According to Thurab-Nkhosi (2006) the increasing student numbers over a wider geographical spread, and greater demands being placed on the audio-conferencing network, prompted the move toward more asynchronous delivery. This incorporation of more asynchronous delivery using computer-based technologies into the mix was considered a move toward “blended learning”. The University initiated a blended learning initiative establishing the UWIDE as a blended learning project, headed by the curriculum specialist/campus coordinator at the St. Augustine campus. The project was designed to prepare a set of pilot courses incorporating more asynchronous, computer-based technologies in time for delivery in the 2005/2006 academic year.

A total of thirteen courses were selected as pilot courses based on the willingness and skills of lecturers/course developers at the Mona, Cave Hill and St. Augustine campuses. The course developers were content specialists for the respective courses and each worked with a course development team comprising a curriculum specialist, editor, web designer/multi-media specialist and technician. This gives a brief history as to the formulation of an approach to online/distance education within the dominant Caribbean University’s (UWI) system.

While the blended learning format at UWI is now standard in its delivery to diverse learners, the university is still very insular in its approach. The insularity occurs as a result of the barriers to entry (i.e. admission/matriculation requirements) as most of the participants are matriculated into a full course at the certificate, diploma or degree level. As such assessment for entry remains based on meeting the pre-requisites for acceptance which allows participation only to those who matriculate successfully. While there is nothing wrong per se with this approach as it represents standard procedures for most universities, it does preclude participation of persons with an interest in a specific aspect(s) of the respective university’s offerings. Another common concern surrounds the technological infrastructure within the institution in that it may not be able to support as many learners as
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