Solving The Wrong Problems: Why Online Education Is and Must Be Different from In-Person Education

In-person educational institutions teach, at least as much as the individual teachers they employ. Students are taken out of their own environments and into that of the institution, signalling intent to learn. The physical environment is built for pervasive learning, from common rooms, to corridors, to campus cafes; students see one another learning, share learning conversations, learn from one another. Even the act of walking from classroom to classroom makes events within them more salient. Structures such as courses, timetables, semesters, and classes solve problems of teaching efficiently within the constraints of time and space but impose great constraints on how teaching occurs, and create multiple new pedagogical and management problems of their own. The institution's regulations, expectations, and norms play a strong pedagogical role in determining how, and when learning occurs. Combined with other entrenched systems and tools like credentials, textbooks, libraries, and curricula, a great deal of the teaching process occurs regardless of teachers. What we most readily recognize as 'good' teaching overcomes the problems caused by these in-person environments, and exploits their affordances.

Online institutions have radically different problems to solve, and radically different affordances to exploit, so it makes no sense to teach or manage the learning process in the same ways. Online, students do not inhabit the environment of the institution: the institution inhabits the environment of the student. It is just one small part of the student’s physical and virtual space, shared with billions of other potential teachers (formal or not) who are a click, a touch, or a glance away. The institution is just a service, not the environment in which learning occurs. The student picks the time, the space, the pace, and virtually all the surrounding supports of the learning process. Teachers cannot actively control any of this, except through the use of rewards, punishments, and the promise of credentials, that force compliance but that are antagonistic to effective or meaningful learning. In this talk, I will discuss the implications of this inverted dynamic for pedagogy, motivation, digital system design, and organizational structures & systems for online learning.