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Discovery learning is the new higher learning

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Encyclopedias, record labels and publishers were once in the business of producing unique content that generated big revenues. All are being bludgeoned by the digital age that brought abundance, mass participation, democratized production and the rise of a new delivery channel – the Internet.

A similar fate could soon await Canada's universities. On the surface, they may seem in good health. Competition is fierce and lecture halls are packed with young, tech-savvy learners. But as The Globe and Mail's series on higher education has clearly revealed, deep anxieties exist.

The university is in danger of losing its monopoly, and for good reason. The most visible threat are the new online courses, many of them free, with some of the best professors in their respective fields. Students are beginning to wonder whether to pay today's hefty tuition fees, especially if third-party testers will provide certificates, diplomas, even degrees.

But cheap online courses aren't the biggest challenge. There is a much deeper threat. **There is a rapidly widening gap between the model offered by big universities and the natural way that**

young people who have grown up immersed in digital technologies best learn. If universities want to prosper, they need to embrace a new model of pedagogy.

Since the invention of chalk and blackboard, professors have given lectures standing in front of many students. The student's job was to absorb this content and regurgitate it on exams. It's a teacher-focused, one-way, one-size-fits-all model and the student is isolated in the learning process.

But in today's world, and for today's students, this broadcast model is flawed. Unlike their baby-boomer parents, who grew up as passive recipients of television, today's youth are shaped by interacting with digital tools and online experiences.

Research shows that because of this, young people think differently. They need to inquire, not rely on the professor. They need an animated conversation, not a lecture. They need an interactive education, not a broadcast dating back two or three centuries.

We can now use technology to free up professors from transmitting information to curating customized learning experiences. Learning can occur through software programs, small group discussion and projects. The role of professors actually becomes more important. But those who wish to remain relevant will have to start listening and conversing with students – shifting from a broadcast style and adopting an interactive one. They need to tailor the education to their students' individual learning styles. They should encourage students to discover and collaborate outside the classroom.

Of course, a student still needs a knowledge base. One can't Google one's way through life. But what counts more is a person's capacity for lifelong learning, to think, research, find information, analyze, synthesize, contextualize and critically evaluate; to apply research to solving problems; to collaborate and communicate. This is particularly important for students and employers competing in a global economy. Workers and managers must learn, adapt and perform like never before.

To help in this transformation, we need an entirely new modus operandi for how the content of higher education – the subject matter, course materials, texts, written and spoken word and other media – is created. A \$150 textbook is obsolete compared to the rich information available online, both inside and outside the classroom.

The 21st-century university should be part of a network and an ecosystem, not a tower. Indeed, there is an enormous opportunity to assemble the world's best learning materials and software online. This could give students a customized learning path with support from a network of instructors and educational facilitators.

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