

[This piece repeats some of what an earlier one said, but is revised and with a different follow up and ending]

## COMMODITY COLLEGES

A commodity is a relatively inexpensive, widely available product or service. After an initial period in which goods and services are expensive and owned by only a few, modern technologies usually drive them to become commodities. Computers, HD televisions, and cell phones are current examples. Because commodities are the source of stiff price competition and low profit margins, companies often attempt to market their products and services as “special” in some way and not just as commodities. Only thereby can they charge more and earn more profit,

Today most college degrees are commodities. College courses and credits have long been standardized. Most colleges have largely equivalent faculty, class rooms, courses, degrees, majors, departments, and policies. Of course, some departments are better than others at any college and research universities vary significantly at the level of training graduate students. But from the point of view of the undergraduate “consumer” it is hard to distinguish many colleges one from the other at an academic level.

It is true, of course, that colleges and universities can and do distinguish themselves by size and status. Since courses, credits, and the basic format of a college education are standardized, high status colleges can only charge premium prices by claiming their faculty are better, their students are smarter (or richer), their students will make better contacts for their futures, or that they have august histories. Small colleges must claim that faculty interactions with students are more personal and intense. Both of these—status and small size—cost more and are not always what they are claimed to be. Small colleges often have nothing like the resources of larger ones and many high status ones often have faculty no better than good state universities. Further, in many cases, elites colleges are really selling their students to each other, students who are rich and elite, and not their faculty, who are not better than faculty elsewhere.

Until recently, there were basically two types of colleges: inexpensive low status colleges and expensive high-status ones. The former were commodities and the latter were special products (you paid more for status as a “special sauce”). There is one wrinkle, though. Thanks to state subsidies, in the past some colleges were inexpensive but high status (e.g., the University of California at Berkeley). Offering special products at commodity prices violates today’s current free market principles (“neo-liberalism”) and, in any case, state after state has raised the cost of all public colleges.

Today, a great many less than high status colleges are commodities in the sense that they pretty much offer just what every other one does. Let’s call these colleges (and universities) “old style commodity colleges”. Many of these colleges, however, are

becoming over-priced thanks to a loss of state subsidies and the cost of research-based, tenured, and tenure-track faculty. When commodities become expensive, problems arise. Since they are relatively easy to produce, others will seek to supply them at lower prices and undercut the competition. And that is, indeed, happening to today's old-style commodity colleges. Intense competition is occurring and will increase. This competition comes from for-profit colleges, distance degrees, and cut-rate extension programs operated by many colleges far from their home campuses. These programs and degrees are often staffed by adjuncts and part time faculty without tenure and not on a tenure track. Let us call these latter programs and degrees "new style commodity colleges", even if many of them are, in fact, run by old style commodity colleges, who are, thus, competing with themselves.

To the extent that an old-style commodity college carries no great distinction and is more expensive or less convenient than a new style one, it will eventually lose in competition with new style commodity colleges. These latter can be cheaper and can be run more efficiently by evading many of the constraints old style commodity colleges face because of old style commodity colleges' lower course loads, higher salaries, and tenure.

Old style commodity colleges will be caught in a bind. They already lose top (and top paying) students to elite colleges that can offer prestige at a high price (and have little need for innovation, since prestige will do). One new threat from such elite colleges is that they will, more and more, offer relatively cut-rate distance or extension versions of their degrees and name. This will allow more students to evade old style commodity colleges and gain some (though reduced) prestige.

Old style commodity colleges will lose other students to new style commodity colleges which offer low cost, flexibility, and customization, though no prestige. Why pay premium for X-State College when you can get the same standardized content and credits—often in a more flexible and customized format—from a cut-rate competitor (which might actually be X-State itself offering cut-rate discounted degrees via e-learning or off campus programs)?

What is an old-style commodity college to do, with its physical campus, tenured faculty, and research obligations? Does it have any advantages over the competition? Yes. It has beer nearby in the local college town and it has warm social bodies in the dorms. These are two things e-learning cannot supply. Undergraduates—the people who pay the bills—want socialization with other students. But this is not much of a leg up when it is only coupled with today's standardized courses, credits, lectures, and majors. There are other ways to get beer and bodies.

So, beer and bodies are not enough. One thing an old style commodity college could offer is socialization that goes much deeper than beer and bodies. Such a college could

offer learning-centered, collaborative, problem-focused, passion-driven social groups with a shared mission. More on this later.

In my view, many style old commodity colleges will survive only if they become specialty products. But they have to become specialty products of a special sort. Since, for the most part, they cannot offer the high prestige of elite colleges, they must either stay close to commodity pricing (while offering more than a commodity) or offer some other type of distinction than the prestige of elite colleges.

As old commodity colleges become new specialty colleges, whose specialty is not the status or a Harvard or Yale, they must remain place based. Indeed they must greatly enhance their place-baseness by creating a distinctive and alluring physical and social space devoted to learning. Yet they must also bring the virtual, the imaginary, and the distant world into full interaction with this real place-space. This mixed model, mixing the real with the virtual, is a big advantage over new style commodity colleges that offer only e-learning or unattractive physical spaces and shallow face-to-face social spaces.

Collaboration and collaborative problem—forms of cognitive socializing, the mixing of minds and not just bodies—have to be at the center of the college. Collaboration can no longer be seen as a form of cheating. Today's young people want to learn and play socially. Today's workplaces want people who can collaborate on teams that are smarter than the smartest person on them.

Finally, and most importantly, standardization must go. Standard courses, credits, disciplines, and majors need to disappear. So do grades. Grades are, in any case, meaningless in an age of grade inflation. One thing that most certainly must change is time. The goal has to be mastery not the time it takes to achieve it. It matters not whether a student with a good head start or lots of time masters something in six weeks and another student, without such a head start or time, takes six months. What matters is commitment to mastery.

Now claiming that the goal is mastery is controversial. We are all aware that many students today view college more as a social and networking experience than a cognitive one. So, it will be tempting for old style commodity colleges to offer “camps” for young people, with college work a not too serious side attraction. Indeed, many colleges for many students today are just this. But this is neither a moral thing to do, nor one that will lead to much profit for most colleges, since setting up good camps is actually another business altogether. Creating good camp colleges can be—and will be—done better by entertainment organizations.

## **LEARNING AS A DRUG**

Many an old-style commodity today is a place where many an undergraduate is more interested in beer, bodies, drugs, and socialization than in courses, term papers, and

majors. But here is a well-kept secret: deep learning is a drug for humans. It is as attractive and addicting as real drugs and sex. It fills a primal need in humans. Schools have obscured this by making learning noxious, as they would with sex if they taught that. However, out of school, popular culture has learned that hard learning is sexy and sells. Popular culture activities like the card game Yu-Gi-Oh and the video game Civilization are as complicated and hard as anything most kids see in school these days. They require effort, commitment, persistence past failure, lots of practice, and eventual mastery. They also make tons of money.

Now this is the new product old commodity colleges could offer: Allow students to recover from what schools have done to them. Allow them to engage in learning and mastery as addictive as good video games. Allow students to rediscover their learning muscles and rediscover (something they knew as babies) that learning is, along with sex and food, a primary need. Allow them to find new identities as producers, knowers, and movers and shakers in the world. This is a different sort of camp: a boot camp for designing a better world.

Old style commodity colleges cannot offer the prestige of elite colleges. They cannot compete with cut-rate discounted e-learning and “off brand” degrees offered in strip malls, even by themselves. They cannot compete with for-profit colleges that are unabashedly vocational and falsely guarantee jobs and a good income. But they can offer a “specialty” customized education that elite colleges need not. And then they can beat the e-learning colleges through building a face-to-face community worth being in, but one that still draws fully on the virtual, the digital, and the distant. Let’s call such colleges of the future “new specialty colleges” to separate them from the old specialty colleges like Harvard, Smith, and Vassar.

This niche is virtually unfilled. So, the first colleges into it will thrive. However, given the inertia of colleges and the lure of standardization, the niche may never be filled. In that case, the day may come where Kaplan and off campus e-degrees (new style commodity colleges) and Williams and Amherst (old specialty colleges), and their respective ilk, will be the last colleges standing.

Let me be clear. I am talking about colleges that keep their physical plant and their dorms. I am talking about colleges that keep their faculty and students in personal face-to-face contact. No one wants to go to a virtual summer camp. They want a real forest and lake. Many people do not want to go to a virtual college. They want to see real faculty and other students. The Army doesn’t run boot camp virtually, since people who have to fight together must learn to live together and trust each other. The same is true of a student body committed to fighting to redesign the real world (the world where people die because they have no food), the public sphere, and the future, as we argued in the last chapter they should be.

## HOW TO PROCEED

There are lots of ways colleges could innovate and we should encourage lots of experimentation. I do not want to propose one standard way to engage in innovation. I will, however, make some suggestions about one shape innovation could take. But first let me say that like most innovation, there is an initial high cost to development and implementation. After that, costs go down and will, indeed, be significantly less than today's old commodity colleges, especially those with lots of research-based faculty.

Let's call the college I propose "New College". It could be any old commodity college with vision and guts. First New College tells its students that there are billions of things worth knowing and studying in the modern world. Furthermore, information and knowledge transform rapidly in the modern world. The old model of education is based around everyone knowing the same things: "What every educated person should know". This model is profoundly out of date and never worked that well anyway (All Americans do know the same thing about science, for example, namely nothing).

At New College, every student must find his or her passion or passions. This passion must be connected to some big generative question, though addressing this question will require pooling people with different passions. So a person with a passion for public health may work with a person with a passion for urban design and one with a passion for education, as well as others around a generative big question like: How can we enhance life-long health and happiness in cost effective ways? In the domain of their passion, students will work collaboratively to achieve mastery. This will require "grit": passion plus persistence. Students must also demonstrate that can teach others in their domain of passion and that they can create new learning tools for people in that domain. And they must pool their skills to contribute to work on a big generative question with people with other passions and skills.

Students must demonstrate, as well, that they are prepared to learn new things from others who have mastered other domains of passion when they need to. That is, they must show they are expert learners and well prepared not just for future learning but a lifetime of new learning and mastery. Finally, as we have said, the end goal is that they must demonstrate, in their work on one or more big generative questions, that they can pool their expertise and mastery with other people to engage in collaborative problem solving that requires a team with different specialties but the ability to integrate skills and domains of passion (areas of expertise).

The old model was about everyone knowing the same things so that people could share some common ground as citizens. The new model is about people sharing abilities to learn, teach, listen, and collaborate. Arguably these are the foundations for national and global citizenship in the 21st Century.

New College will ban standardized classes or courses. It was never the case that everything worth learning could or should be taught in the same time-frame and format. Courses that are just based on professors giving students information face the dilemma that students today can now look up information in minutes on the Internet (and often find out, in the process, that there is more controversy than the professor told them). Standardized courses are based on the idea that because a group of students is sitting together in the classroom they all need the same thing and can proceed to learn in the same way. This is next to never true for undergraduates.

As I argued, however, in Chapter X, face-to-face encounters and dialogic interactions with professors who know their craft will remain crucial. The purpose of such encounters is not to gain information. Rather, the purpose is to learn how to think about, assess, and use information, principles, tools, technologies, and theories to solve problems. It is to see a master at a certain craft or “game” engage in that craft or game. It is to see academic work at its best as a “form of life” committed to challenges, knowledge production, problem solving, life-long learning, and a continual openness to falsification of one’s claims, to transformation of ways of thinking and doing, and to new ideas. It is, in the end, to learn “taste”: What makes a question a good question? What makes an argument a good argument? What is a good way to proceed? How can one get around blocks? When should one work to extend a well-worn path versus blaze a new one? These are matters not of algorithms or recipes; they are, in science as well as the humanities, matters of art, craft, experience, and taste. You would not want to learn to appreciate wine from a taped lecture or an Internet site. You need actually to taste the wine. But you also need to drink and savor wine with masters who can model how to talk about it, appreciate it, select it, and not abuse it. The same is true of learning any domain of knowledge production.

New College will ban majors. Majors are usually named by discipline labels like anthropology and biology. These labels now name only budgetary departments, not coherent fields of study. Real disciplines are lower-level units (e.g., medical anthropology or genetics) than academic departments. Furthermore, as we all know, there are today a great many new disciplines and sub-disciplines arising all the time (in part caused by changes in technology). And a great many of the most productive faculty do not work “in their discipline” alone but as part of teams that do not just pool different disciplines but integrate them into new forms of shared language and methods of inquiry. Majors will be replaced by work on one or more big generative questions coupled with the deep development of a specific passion that can contribute to that question when pooled with other people’s passions.

New College will ban grades or make transcripts with grades on them only for the convenience of students seeking to go on to traditional graduate programs. People do

not develop “grit” (passion + persistence) because of grades and grades can kill passion. Mendel was in the monastery garden growing peas and discovering the foundations for modern genetics because he had failed the qualifying examination for becoming a science teacher. Grades will be replaced by assessments that are much more integrated with learning and much better indicators of growth across time and the development of specific and manifest skills and dispositions. More on this later.

New College will know that failure is necessary to learning; it is often something to seek; and never failing is a sign of a domain not worth learning. A low cost of failure encourages risk taking, exploration, and hypotheses testing. All are necessary for innovation, as well as for deep learning and mastery. New College will never punish failure. It will only punish a lack of persistence past failure, a lack of effort, a lack of being proactive about more learning (including at times seeking more failure), and a lack of collaboration. In turn, facile successes will not be rewarded at New College.

## PASSIONATE AFFINITY SPACES

There is today a new learning system competing, in many respects, with our school systems. It is a learning system that is embedded in popular culture. Popular culture is more complex today than it has ever been, as we will soon see (Johnson 2006). Many different things happen in popular culture, good and bad, deep and superficial. Here I want to talk about one type of learning associated with popular culture, a type that is, I argue, complex, deep, and knowledge-producing.

There is no “official” name for this type of learning, so we will have to make one up. We will call it “passionate affinity-based learning.” Passionate affinity-based learning occurs when people organize themselves in the real world and/or via the Internet (or a virtual world) to learn something connected to a shared endeavor, interest, or passion. The people have an affinity (attraction) to the shared endeavor, interest, or passion first and foremost and then to other people because of their shared affinity.

Just as school is, in one sense, a place or space where people (students and teachers) are “in school” or “at school,” passionate affinity-based learning is done in a place or space, what we call a “passionate affinity space,” which may be real or virtual or both. A passionate affinity space, and the learning that goes on in it, requires some people associated with the space to have a deep passion for the common shared endeavor. It does not require everyone to have such a deep passion, but it does require them to recognize the value of that passion and respect it, in some sense. The passion is the “attractor” in the space.

Young people learning and playing the video game Civilization or playing chess in a club or via the Internet (or some mixture of both) are in a passionate affinity space, if the conditions are right. So, too, are people building and testing robots or model cars in

competitions; people writing fan fiction; people designing land, houses, clothes, and furniture for The Sims (a video game); or people sharing learning and expertise about gardening or cooking. The list of such endeavors today is nearly endless; in a recent book I have written about people organized to share a passion for and develop knowledge about cats and cat health.

What are the right conditions for a passionate affinity space in which people engage in passionate affinity-based learning? Passionate affinity spaces are a type of interest-driven group (Ito 2010). [However, we are trying to avoid words like “group” and “community,” since in a passionate affinity space and many so-called interest-driven groups, who is “in” the group is not always easy to define. A person who goes once or rarely to a passionate affinity space for resources or “lurks” in it is in the space, but are they in the “group” or “community”? The point is that different people are in the space in different ways]. These spaces must have additional features as well.

First, people are associated with them because of their shared endeavor or interest, not because of their “credentials” (e.g., degrees). They can achieve expert status regardless of their official credentials. Such spaces cannot be defined around or restricted to “professionals” in any credentialing or institutional sense.

Second, some people (usually, but not always, around 20%) must have a deep passion for the common endeavor, not just a passing interest (Gee & Hayes 2010; Shirky 2008). This passion may be reflected in different ways, such as an extended commitment of time to the interest and space, high levels of production, and so forth. Others in the space will have many different degrees of interest and may come and go in various ways. But they must affiliate with others in terms of the common interest and show that they respect and value the passion that fuels the most active people in the space.

Third, in passionate affinity spaces, everyone can, if they choose, produce (produce knowledge, create things, do things) and not just consume what others have produced. Of course, there can be and usually are standards—high ones—about what counts as good production and people who produce must accept (or seek to negotiate) and meet those standards.

Fourth, in passionate affinity spaces, people sometimes lead and sometimes follow. Some people lead in some situations and others lead in others. Leadership is flexible, and takes different forms, such as managing the site, introducing new ideas and practices, and helping others. People sometimes mentor (“teach”) others and sometimes get mentored. Mentoring is flexible.

Fifth, knowledge in the affinity space is “distributed” in the sense that different people know different things and can share that knowledge when necessary. Often the space



has good tools and technologies that store and facilitate knowledge. No one person has to or is expected to know everything all by themselves.

Sixth, the affinity space is not closed, though there may be requirements for entry, and takes in newcomers (“newbies”). It refreshes itself. Unlike school, people do not “progress” all at the same pace, age, or “grade.” Movement in the space is quite varied; people may focus on one narrow aspect or explore the entire breadth of the interest area, spend as much time as they want on a particular set of skills or practices, and otherwise pursue quite different learning trajectories.

Seventh, affinity spaces are about sharing a common endeavor where people learn things, produce things or knowledge, and can, if they wish, become experts (“professional amateurs” or “pro-ams”, see: Anderson 2006; Leadbeater & Miller 2004). Even these experts believe there is always something new to learn, more to discover, and higher standards to achieve.

Passionate affinity spaces are one distinctive type of interest-driven group. People can be nice or mean within them. Some operate quite cordially and collegially and some do not. In some, people flame each other and “haze” newbies (to ensure that they are “tough” enough). Both caring and cruel passionate affinity spaces can produce knowledge and learning. Both are, in that sense, alternatives to our traditional school system. We prefer caring passionate affinity spaces, as we prefer caring schools.

## LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

New College will help design and implement such passionate affinity spaces around specific passions, but ones that will also be linked to collaborative work on an important big generative question. So, for example, a person in an urban planning passionate affinity space might also be working on a big generative question with a person in an educational reform passionate affinity space as well as someone in a public health passionate affinity space.

In their passionate affinity spaces and in their work on big generative questions, students would engage in challenges (what might also be called “quests”). Challenges would involve a group producing knowledge, a tool, or a product related to their shared passion. Students over time would engage in a number of different and increasingly more complex or demanding such challenges.

It is important that an assessment model—a model of evidence for learning—be incorporated into each challenge. There should be no final tests. Challenges should be built in such a way that finishing them guarantees learning and mastery. Good video games are already built this way. Good video games are designed in terms of levels. Each level requires players to practice a good deal, deal with failure, and persist until certain skills are mastered. Mastery is displayed by finishing the level. Often a

level ends with a “boss fight” that tests whether the player has mastered the skills of the level in a high degree and whether the player is prepared for new learning on the next level. Each level ratchets up skills and integrates them in such a way that by the end of the game one is sure that finishing is a good signing of having mastered the game.

Well-designed learning—and thus our challenges—does not require a final test. Finishing means at least a degree of mastery. People will raise the issue of transfer. But transfer is simply tested by the next game one plays or challenge one faces. If you want to know whether using geometry to design buildings in Second Life transfers into doing geometry elsewhere, simply design a game or challenge that asks players or students to move from Second Life to the new game or challenge and see how well Second Life prepared them to learn in the new game or challenge, which, of course, may very well be in the “real world”.

Success at each challenge will earn the student a badge or qualification. Different students within one and the same passionate affinity space can earn different badges. A set of such badges would constitute a “major”, but reflect the specific way the student has customized their movement through the passionate affinity space as a learner and contributor. Students, of course, could “double” or “triple” major by working in more than one passionate affinity space.

Each student will work on continuously with other students, with other passions, on one or big generative questions. These groups will be higher order passionate affinity spaces. In them each student must work collaboratively to teach and learn, mentor and get mentored, so that they can work in so-called “cross functional teams”. Such teams are composed of people with different types of high-level specific expertise, but people who can integrate their specific skills with other people’s specific skills to create a whole that operates better than any individual in it. Work on one or more big generative questions will gain students higher-order badges or qualifications, further customizing their education. In the end, a student “transcript” in New College is a “passport” filled with badges (that cohere in a certain way) that represent where a student has been and what a student has accomplished in “knowledge space”.

When students from New College graduate, they can continue, if they choose, to work in and contribute to the passionate affinity spaces in which they worked and lived as students. They will become mentors and a sort of (free) faculty working with newcomers and official New College faculty. Alumni will remain in the college, perhaps for a life time. There is no real reason to ever leave college.