



CAME Voice/Voix

“The University in the Digital Age” revisited

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There are certain papers that have a long-lasting impact on your thinking as a developing scholar but when you reread them years later they are still luminous in their ideas and insights. One such paper for me was the 1998 essay “The University in the Digital Age” by John Seely-Brown and Paul Duguid (see link to full text below) that explored the role and function of the university in an increasingly computerized and networked world. They presented their arguments as an ‘intuition pump’ to challenge and unsettle beliefs and expectations around what higher education institutions were, what they might become, and what they should become.

They fundamentally rejected the then (and to an extent, still) dominant model of education being a matter of delivery, stressing instead the importance of providing legitimate access to, and participation in, scholarly communities. At a time when courses were being moved online and the future of the physical campus was being called in to doubt, they stressed the critical importance of situated face-to-face relationships and experiences and flexibility for all participants in these processes.

They broke the academy down to four core functions: credentialing, faculty, facilities, and students, each of which could be organized differently and brought together dynamically and flexibly to create the academic communities required for meaningful higher education. Although the fragmentation of the academy has not come to pass (at least not yet), many of the fundamental challenges in medical education (and higher education as a whole) come from the intersections between these four functions; tensions between teaching and research, balancing what students want and what they actually need, negotiating between administrative and academic cultures, and so on.

They also predicted that digital media would weaken the authority of the higher education institution. Although the medical school’s role as gatekeeper to knowledge is questionable, its role as the provider of structure, credentialing, and legitimate access to learning communities still stands. In our haste to innovate we should remember that there is much that has already been said that is wise and insightful and that still has value to inform and guide our actions.

Seely-Brown J, Duguid P. The University in the Digital Age. Times Higher Education Supplement (THES), 1996 May 10: 1-4. Online at http://people.ischool.berkeley.edu/~duguid/SLOFI/U_in_Digital_Age.htm