The Point of Convergence

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Everyone recognizes that a functional convergence is taking place in the field of learning. The new model is emerging, characterized by the fusion of media, platforms, knowledge sources, delivery modalities, and learning philosophies. The boundaries between "information" and "knowledge" are dissolving as the principal driver of the learning experience inexorably shifts from content to context, from preceptor to learner.

But the question lingers: why is this convergence happening now, where is it going, and how can we

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recognize the winning strategies that will take advantage of that current of change? Is there an action plan that will enable us, in the words of Wayne Gretzky, "to skate to where the puck will be?"

I believe there is. The title of this column, "The Point of Convergence," is a double entendre that defines both the *intersection*—the point—of confluent learning technologies and strategies, as well as the *reason*—the point—for that convergence. There is a model for this evolutionary movement that is both predictable and inevitable, a relentless natural phenomenon that is paving the way for not only a revolution in the way we learn, but also for a very practical and sustainable model of collaboration between universities and businesses.

Perhaps it is ill-advised to paint this phenomenon as a revolution. After all, the most important "revolutions" of history are in reality just different stages of human evolution, each based on increasing leverage: the application of creative intelligence to do less and accomplish more.

For example, in the first revolution—the Agricultural Revolution—we used the principle of leverage to develop tools to expand our strength. In the second revolution—the Industrial Revolution—we discovered subtler laws

of nature that transformed tools into more powerful machines to expand our reach. The third revolution, the so-called knowledge-based society, flows from the use of still subtler and more powerful laws of nature that transform electrical machines into "digital machines" (computers, databases) that expand the amount of knowledge available to the human mind.

The next "revolution" after that is simply a continuation of the same natural evolutionary trend. Thus, while the third revolution increased the amount of knowledge available for the mind, the fourth revolution is increasing the ability of the mind to filter, sort, and use that knowledge in a targeted and context-sensitive way.

The driving force behind this development—one that some are already labeling a new paradigm in learning—is the latest iteration in the development of the network. The earliest networks were built for both commerce and communication. They were the network of primitive roads that connected ancient settlements and villages, the only pathways for knowledge and information exchange. We have come some distance since those early times. Today we can achieve instant communication with anyone anywhere, at any time. Increasingly, we are developing the ability to have any bit of

knowledge available instantly, to share and refine our understanding with others, also instantly, and to capture the inherent knowledge of colleagues effortlessly. For the first time in human history we are transcending the boundaries of time and space. A more cosmic view of our increased capacity to communicate with one another may be understood in terms of linking individual awareness with a more global consciousness, a process whose defining characteristic is the enlivening of the qualities of "unity" within the field of diversity. At each stage, stronger and more robust networks of communication generate greater unity of awareness, and greater awareness of unity.

Interestingly, while the emergence of unity within diversity is the very essence of the concept of "uni-versity" and might seem to be academic in nature, at the same time it provides one of the most important elements in creating competitive advantage in our businesses and industries. While much of this may sound metaphysical, it serves the very practical purpose of connecting outside knowledge from a university and individuals who possess inherent knowledge within a business organization with those who require either or both at the moment of need. In a time when knowledge drives competitiveness, there is significant economic advantage to be gained from convergence. While education has in general lagged far behind business in the application of these new principles, the new realities have now begun to gain the attention of leaders in the field of education, a field largely unchanged for hundreds of years.

The boundaries of time and space, and the boundaries between "the town" and "gown" are now giving way to a new hybrid educational phenomenon, enabled by new and robust communications technologies and networks. Edward O. Wilson in *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge,* argues that science is beginning to piece together one "consilient" or interconnected picture of nature "that includes everything from dead atoms to warm, living flesh." In the field of learning, that time has come. Those who recognize this phenomenon have the ability to create strategies that take advantage of this tectonic movement.

Everywhere in our environment historical boundaries are dissolving. Home, work, school—a few years ago each was separate and distinct, with its own set of realities. Elements of each are now found in the others: we take our children to daycare at work and we engage in formal learning at work. We take our work with us on laptops when we travel, and we log in at home to continue the process. Similarly, we can find a blurring of the boundaries between these previously distinct areas of life.

- **Knowledge and information:** Traditional publishing, the enterprise, the Internet, and traditional and for-profit universities—the boundaries between the different areas of knowledge and information are dissolving into the business of "give me the content I need based on what I already know and what I need to know."

- **Technology convergence:** Video, telecommunications, computing, learning management systems, and resource management software—the boundaries between the different areas of technology are dissolving into the business of "push it to me now, seamlessly."

- **Pedagogical convergence:** Mediated/ simulated, synchronous/ asynchronous, traditional students/fully-employed "students, and on-campus/off-campus: the boundaries between the different elements of a preceptor-driven learning model are dissolving into the business of "give me the content I need, the way I want it, in the context of the moment (and then go away)."

In each of these models, the emphasis is shifting from the supplier-driven to the consumer-driven model: increasingly it is about the learner rather than the teacher. The roles of both are shifting, and when properly understood both will be ennobled. This is about a win-win scenario, and there are plenty of emerging examples of both teacher and student being empowered within the new educational milieu.

The Point of Convergence may be seen ultimately as not just the empowerment of the consumer of knowledge, but in a very practical sense as a strategic blueprint for a new and symbiotic relationship between the academy and the world of business. With recognition of the changing tides of knowledge acquisition, educators may learn to provide business with intellectual capital in the form that business needs for flexibility while in return business will provide education with the degree of financial capital that the academy requires for stability. In the process, the academy will be forced to come to grips with its own technological indolence, and will conquer it.

It is a sustainable model worthy of consideration.