Higher Education Migrates to YouTube and Social Networks

By Marilyn Gilroy
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True global enlightenment. That’s how YouTubeEDU is being promoted by company officials who have announced the launch of a YouTube section devoted to academic content. Calling the new site “a free, self-organizing, democratic website containing all the world’s knowledge,” YouTubeEDU promises an environment in which “any qualified teacher can contribute and absolutely anyone can learn.” It features lectures and other materials from hundreds of colleges and universities, including Stanford, Harvard, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

YouTubeEDU is the result of a volunteer project sparked by a group of employees who wanted to find a better way to collect and highlight all the educational content already being uploaded to YouTube. Many colleges and universities have previously posted videos on the site through their own channels; however, the new EDU page organizes the courses and programs in one place.

Spencer Crooks, a spokesman for YouTube, says there are more than 200 lectures on topics including computer science, literature, biology, philosophy, history, political science, and law. But there are thousands of other videos uploaded by participating universities that include discussions, interviews, and seminars. That number is sure to grow as YouTubeEDU has agreed to accept content from any “qualifying two- and four-year institutions.” Guidelines say institutions must apply online, and there can be only one application per institution.

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Colleges are boasting of their presence on YouTubeEDU and making the most of its marketing potential. Some are uploading presentations linked to cultural and entertainment phenomena. For example, Carnegie Mellon University's (CMU) “Star Trek Tech” video features professors talking about technology developments in robotics and virtual reality as well as medical and communication advances, comparing them to those used in scenes from last spring’s Star Trek movie. CMU faculty members also discuss the link between science fiction writing and scientific research. The video received approximately 25,000 views.

When Borough of Manhattan Community College posted a lecture by one of its nursing faculty members, it drew more than 3,872 views.

YouTube is not the only Internet site offering higher education lectures and courses. One competitor is Big Think, which bills itself as “a global forum connecting people and ideas.” Its experts include Paul Krugman, the Nobel-Prize-winning professor from Princeton University, as well as Billy Collins, former U.S. poet laureate, and dozens of other professors, politicians, and business leaders speaking on various topics. For example, viewers can see a presentation on how the Supreme Court works or an explanation of the future of the U.S. government’s bank rescue plan.

Another website, Education for All, offers more than video with its courses. The site provides syllabus materials that accompany courses, plus reading lists. The link for a course on financial markets, taught by Robert Schiller, a professor of economics at Yale University, even added copies of the exams and solutions as well as a discussion forum for viewers. The site also includes a complete set of four Chinese-language courses available with a package of downloadable textbooks and audio recordings of dialogues.

Elite University Content

And then there is Academic Earth, a site which also offers video courses and lectures from some of the nation’s top scholars. Founded by Richard Ludlow, a Yale graduate, Academic Earth’s mission is to “give everyone on earth access to a world-class education.” It draws material from Harvard, MIT, Princeton, Stanford, Yale, and Berkeley and says that 50% of users come from outside the United States. Like many other educational sites, it has a Facebook page and a presence on Twitter.

Ludlow says there are distinct differences between Academic Earth and sites such as Big Think and YouTubeEDU.

"Big Think also hosts academic videos, but only those that they produce themselves in a specific short-form monologue format,
whereas Academic Earth brings together videos from several sources with more of a focus on courses," he said. "The biggest differences between YouTubeEDU and Academic Earth are the user interface and the editorial oversight on Academic Earth. Instead of hosting any video that a university produces, we hand-pick videos whose production quality and educational focus are such that they will offer a great learning experience for the viewer. So while we have a smaller content index, visitors can be confident that everything they find on our site will be of very high quality."

A slightly different but related approach is found on FORA.tv, with its tagline, "The Smart Network." FORA offers unedited video drawn from events at universities, think tanks, and conferences.

"We present this provocative, big-idea content for anyone to watch, interact with, and share—when, where, and how they want," according to the site's management team. The team includes Blaise Zerega, former deputy editor at Condé Nast Publications and managing editor of Wired.

The forerunner and "big daddy" of all mobile and portable educational content is iTunesU, with more than 150,000 lectures, presentations, videos, readings, and podcasts available for downloads on iPods. It is used by many universities as a way for professors to podcast lectures simultaneously or right after class. Stanford divides its iTunesU material, touted as "Stanford to go," into a public site featuring courses, lectures, and even sports events, and a restricted site, for course-based material or campus communications.

Who's Watching?
The audience is unclear, although founders of Education for All envision their site as a place where students can supplement their studies by viewing a course similar to the one they are taking and interacting with students at other universities who might be watching, too. For those who have already graduated, these sites provide an opportunity to take interesting courses for personal growth free of charge and in a viewer's spare time. Some sites have attracted faculty members who have tuned in to watch how instructors at other colleges teach the same subject matter.

Ludlow says Academic Earth attracts some of these same demographics, which fall into four basic groups.

"First, the 'lifelong learner' segment, which consists of older adults who are intellectually curious and view our content just to enrich their lives," he said. "Second, high school and college students, who use our materials to enhance their own classroom instruction or to do research for
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papers and projects. Third, working professionals and job seekers, who view our business, economics, engineering, and computer science videos to gain knowledge related to job skills. And fourth, teachers and professors who get ideas for their own classrooms."

In the next few months, Academic Earth will be adding new videos, starting with a collection of medical videos for doctors, scientists, and public health professionals.

Social Media Find an Academic Niche

The idea of adding social networks as educational tools in the academic landscape is catching on fast as colleges recognize the potential to use the networks as both marketing tools and learning tools.

Heather Mansfield, who owns a consulting business, helps colleges and universities use MySpace, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to advance their online communications and development strategies.

“The thing with higher ed and social media is that colleges really don’t understand that they have no choice whether they want to use social media,” she said.

Mansfield believes that it is important for colleges to build an online community where the students are—and that means having accounts on Twitter and Facebook. She suggests multiple accounts for alumni, athletics, admissions, and academic departments in order to reach former, current, and future students.

“If colleges don’t start profiles for their school on Facebook, My Space, Twitter, etc., then an alum or current student will do it for them,” she said. “And by waiting or mis-thinking it is a fad, they run the risk of losing complete control of their brand online. It is very common.”

Many administrators and faculty are getting the message about the use of social networks. They are trying out new possibilities that engage students and create feelings of belonging.

At Northeastern University, Dan Schneider uses the social networking site to build relationships with students in his lecture biology class. He sets up Facebook groups for his classes and invites students to join via their profiles. Schneider then creates a digital photo roster of the class so he can connect names with faces. Students use the class group sites to get to know each other better or to ask classmates about homework assignments and lab reports. In turn, Schneider says he enjoys meeting the students in this way and participating in their lives. For example, he will send them a birthday note because their profiles list the date. He also finds it useful when writing student recommendations because he looks to the student profiles for
unique information about their lives and interests.

"I think this is a great opportunity for instructors—to make use of this and explore this new way of communicating with students," he said in a webcast explaining Facebook classroom to his colleagues.

At Marquette University in Milwaukee, one professor is using Twitter to connect her class with experts in various fields, such as advertising and public relations, who answer student questions online.

This is all part of the movement that acknowledges learning can occur anywhere at any time and in unlikely forums. Of course, there are critics who dismiss the use of social networks in higher education and other sites featuring academic content as fads that will diminish in popularity. Some see it as similar to the hype that revolved around telecourses, self-paced learning, and other technological advances that promised to "revolutionize" education in the 1960s and 70s. This can make institutions reluctant to leap into the social media environment.

"Higher ed in general has been entirely too cautious," said Mansfield. "And they probably don't realize the damage they are doing to themselves."

If Mansfield is correct, these social networking sites represent a new way of communicating that also is changing the way the public interacts with and perceives higher education.

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