



# Open EdTech 2010: Campus Life!

## *Rethinking the Online Campus Life of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

### Introduction

*Envision the next iteration of online campus life.* This was the goal of the diverse group of leaders in education, technology, the arts, design, and communications who met in Barcelona on October 3-5, 2010. Over the course of two days, some 30 specialists engaged in deep discussions about how to create an engaging, campus-like experience and environment for online learners. The event built on the work of last year's Open EdTech Summit, which focused on how to design educational institutions that can be truly responsive to the needs of contemporary society and of today's students.

### Rethinking Online Campus Life

The design of today's online learning environments is far from ideal. Although the content and experiences available on the web have evolved and are now highly interactive, rich, engaging, and even seductive, online learning environments have stagnated. They are generally flat and unattractive, with straightforward, text-heavy design and a structure that simply carries existing academic assumptions into the online arena. Students entering these spaces are often disappointed, frustrated, and let down; their experience often does not meet the expectations generated by the institution's recruitment process. What they experience does not inspire, motivate, empower, or excite them during their learning process. It is this disconnect between expectation and experience, between what is possible and what is actual, that the participants at the Open EdTech 2010 Summit wish to change, change radically, and change now.

The group approached the question of how to reinvent the online campus life experience from both an intellectual and a kinesthetic viewpoint. Discussions and hands-on experiences broadened the group's awareness of what it means to be engaged and what it feels like to be present in an inspirational space and immersed in an appealing activity. Early in the summit, the group examined the nature of the emotions evoked by truly great experiences and spaces, and the consequences of expectations met and unmet. Their insights on emotion and feelings framed all of the discussions that followed.

During an iterative series of discussions in small-group and whole-group settings, the group generated a list of more than 50 strategies for creating an online learning environment that promotes engagement and motivation. Those strategies were then narrowed to a list of 16 and developed into ten recommendations for immediate change. The summative conversation wove together the threads of the recommendations, revealing strong connections between them and underscoring the importance of three areas for development: personalization, connections among people, and platform considerations.

### A Call to Action: Ten Strategies for Change

The group's vision was to define concrete steps we can take now — not in ten years, not in five years, but *today* — to transform the online experience into one that is fresher, richer, and full of the intangible affordances that on-campus students experience and take for granted, but that are often completely missing in an online environment. The design of tomorrow's learning spaces must foster satisfaction over frustration; must nurture achievement over failure; and must evoke and engender those emotions that are reflective of deep engagement. With this in mind, the following ten strategies, grouped here into three thematic areas, are perceived as critical to transforming the online learning experience:

**Personalization.** We recognize that comfort, familiarity, and transparency are crucial elements of environments that support the kinds of emotional connections we want online learners to enjoy. We call for a level of personalization that goes beyond simple interface considerations — we call for radical personalization of the entire learning environment. It is our belief that engaging, personalized environments directly support deeper learning goals, and we propose the following three strategies for personalization:

1. Enable personalization, customization, and changing of the environment, of content, and of learning spaces based on student preference, level of study, learning style, and other factors.
2. Allow students to bring in personal tools for social and learning purposes, including tools for communication, research, and productivity.

3. Decentralize the learning experience such that students may immerse themselves in the environment using the devices of their choosing, including mobiles.

**Connections Among People.** We underscore the importance of deep relationships in online learning, as these help create and sustain a sense of engagement. Current spaces for connection and communication in online learning environments are often dull, flat and unattractive. Nurturing the joy of learning and promoting strong emotional connections in the right environments are key to building a sense of belonging. To that end, we promote the following three strategies for fostering connections among people in online learning situations:

4. Enable real-life connections, where desired, between and among online learners.
5. Integrate and disentangle personal, professional, and academic spheres online so that students can easily maintain and grow their networks and relationships.
6. Enable the integration of family and friends into online learning environments, much in the way that families can visit physical campuses.

**Platform Considerations.** While the conversations at the *Campus Life!* summit deliberately focused on areas of online learning other than teaching, delivery, and learning platform, we acknowledge that certain considerations underlie the recommendations we make here. Therefore, several strategies touch on general aspects related to platform, data, and other technical aspects of online learning. We believe that access to attractive, easy to use, customizable, and open platforms for learning is a critical component of an effective online learning experience, and we put forth the following four strategies for developing and selecting appropriate learning environments:

7. Enable each student to create and maintain an optional automatic aggregated portfolio of progress that feeds into visualization tools; allows for recommendations, referrals, and diagnostics; and follows the student throughout his or her life.
8. Enable the creation, discovery, and recommendation of appropriate pathways to resources and experiences that are appropriate for each learner.
9. Encourage the use of portable data formats and standard APIs for learning platforms.
10. Encourage the use of open source solutions to enable customization and provide access to the kinds of tools described here.

The task put to the participants of the summit — to draft recommendations for designing, creating and sustaining an online campus-like environment — is complex, and many factors influence the speed at which change can take place. It is time we begin leveraging new technologies and taking advantage of the opportunities globalization affords to make online learning one of the richest and most empowering educational experiences possible for learners. This work must begin today.

### Next Steps

With this call to action, we issue a challenge to educators and educational institutions everywhere: to recognize that profound change is needed in online learning, and is needed now. We invite them to shoulder the responsibility of empowering, motivating, and engaging their students — our future leaders. We challenge them to integrate the emotional dimension of learning into everything they do, create, or design, as we believe this is a hidden force driving the interest, motivation, and desire to learn.

This communiqué summarizes the major findings of the 2010 Open EdTech Summit, *Campus Life!* The full breadth of the work will be captured in a monograph and broadly distributed so that others may share in the discussions — with the hope that these reasoned reflections will prove useful catalysts for dialog and action. The ultimate goals are to open the door to a wider conversation and to create a groundswell of immediate and incremental change designed to transform learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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