

# Interviews with **Badrul Khan**



## Interview with **Darcy W. Hardy**

**1. There has been much talk recently about the emerging field of learning analytics. What is your view of the potential for Big Data and learning analytics near-term and in the future, say, ten years from now?**

For me, the big issue is not which product you have, or how many different types of software you are using. The issue should be about knowing what questions you are asking the data to answer and, probably even more importantly, what are you going to do with the information once you have it? While some institutions are prepared to move forward once they have the data in hand, others are still unsure—or unwilling—to completely overhaul a process or program to make a difference. Financial and personnel resources have to be made available, and in many cases a change agent must be identified who can champion the necessary adjustments with confidence and clarity. Unfortunately, that individual may not be readily accessible



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Campus. She has also served as an Intergovernmental Personnel Act (IPA) appointee at the US Department of Labor and the US Department of Education in Washington, DC. Dr. Hardy received her PhD in Instructional Technology from the University of Texas at Austin in 1992. She has served and continues to serve on various editorial and advisory boards and has delivered hundreds of presentations, keynotes, and workshops on distance education, online learning, and leadership (e-mail: [darcywhardy@gmail.com](mailto:darcywhardy@gmail.com); Website: [www.darcywhardy.com](http://www.darcywhardy.com)).

on the campus. That's when a consulting team like mine can help make a difference.

**2. Your background was in higher education prior to your current position at Blackboard. Are the challenges you face today very different from what you encountered at the University of Texas System?**

Fortunately, my position at Blackboard focuses on technology-enabled and online learning. Most people still think of Blackboard as a software company, an LMS company, but over the past few years it has become an education *solutions* company. We offer a full suite of consulting and student services that help institutions tackle what I consider to be the hard part of online programming. Each member of my consulting team comes from higher education, so we truly understand what a school is going through when they go down the online path. What's different (and surprising) to me are the number of schools who are still not planning strategically around their online initiatives. They are sometimes wasting valuable resources because they don't have a plan, or they re-invent the process every time they offer a new program. Faculty aren't prepared the way they should be in many cases. In my opinion, the MOOC invasion was detrimental to the advancement of faculty development for online. People now think as long as you have the camera rolling there's no need for additional knowledge acquisition. Those of us who have been in this field awhile know that's not true. This is where my team provides support. It all starts with a plan, and we help schools design one.

**3. What do you see as the future of MOOCs in the next five to ten years? What changes, if any, do you recommend in their design and use?**

This is a tough question for me. From the start, I have not been a MOOC fan. However, now that we've seen the concept slide into the Gartner "trough of disillusionment," I'm more hopeful about their future. Other people (like Sir John Daniel or Dr. Jack Wilson) have said it more eloquently, but the MOOC is nothing new to the field. We've been offering online courses that could have been declared "open" for years. The difference is that we worked our tails off back in the early 2000s making the

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courses engaging and interactive—and definitely not passive. Watching videos, no matter how well they were produced, did not keep students' attention, and they still don't. However, now that the MOOC providers have finally realized people need some level of interaction (not to mention an incentive like credit) to complete a course, changes are happening. My vision for the future of MOOCs is purely around assessments—open and accepted by institutions across the country. For the MOOC to have an impact that will meet the Lumina Foundation's "big goal," or the President's goal to be number one in the world (again) in educational attainment by 2020, we have to see credible open assessments that allow students to receive academic credit. Until that happens, I don't see the MOOCs doing much more than providing life-long learning opportunities.

#### **4. What do you see as the most important transformation drivers for technology-enhanced learning today?**

- Support structures are critical, for both students and faculty. To be competitive in today's overcrowded online space, institutions must be willing to provide a level of support for faculty so that they can focus on curriculum and pedagogical decisions. This is regardless of whether the course development is outsourced or in-house. The infrastructure of support for faculty has to be central to the online learning environment, from the institutional level all the way to the departmental level. Support for students who are online must be equivalent to the support provided for campus-based students. Even though "distance" is no longer the primary focus of many online programs, institutions should still be developing their programs as though the students will not be coming to campus. Services include everything from advising to help desk support to registration/financial aid/bursar issues, etc.
- Another critical driver for developing effective programs/environments is the need for faculty buy-in (public institutions mostly). When programs are developed as a mandate from the executive level that has not been vetted by the faculty senate or even the faculty of a department that is planning to go online, it's guaranteed that the programs will not be as successful as they could have been. There's a need to nurture the faculty, keep them involved in the process, etc. This goes for admissions and registrar offices as well (even financial aid officers). Better to get everyone to the table and work through planning as a team. Those are the most successful programs I've seen.
- Improving retention is another driver and involves several factors. As stated above, students must have access to the support services online that are offered on campus. And they must be convenient and flexible. Not having the right services can cause a student to completely spiral out of a course. In addition, the courses have to be designed well—strong instructional design theory with significant opportunities for interaction and engagements.

Retention in individual courses (when it's a trend) can often be traced back to poor course design. Faculty have to be appropriately supported so that when courses are developed they are not centered around PowerPoint slides and PDF files. And even if the institution provides instructional and multimedia support for development, the faculty need to have access to professional development that will help them use discussion boards and other interactive elements in the courses more effectively.

#### **5. What are your clients calling for? What kinds of technological help are they seeking today?**

That's really an interesting question. They need help with almost every technology they license in one way or another. While we have a team of individuals who help clients with their technological needs, we try to get them past just understanding how the technology works and more toward understanding what it can do. They always want to know which technology "is best." We all know there isn't any best tool and that the focus has to be on the content/curriculum and the design. Good instructional design calls for selecting the most appropriate technology tool for the content being presented. There's not one that's most helpful (in my opinion)—it depends on what you're teaching at what level, the size of the class, the level of interaction, etc. Course discussion tools are only as useful as the person who is trained to use them. When we develop courses, we never allow the technology to dictate the design. The content and the design determine the technology choice.

#### **6. What are the most common mistakes that college and university course instructors and administrators make in designing online courses?**

**Administrators:** Not understanding how much goes into developing a "good" course. Many (most) administrators have never been inside a course, so they don't even know what to expect. It's like the courses just magically come together and they have no idea how bad they really are. They don't realize that they need to have instructional designers (academically trained, not Web designers) and multimedia specialists if they really want to play in this space. I tell presidents and provosts all the time—"If you want to be competitive, you have to invest in the process."

**Instructors:** Thinking they can simply transfer the way they teach in the classroom to online. This is why you see so many courses that consist of slides and files. It's not their fault if the institution doesn't provide support, since they are just doing what they think is right. I had one faculty member who told me how great his course was because he added audio to his slides. Faculty have to understand that teaching online is not the same as teaching f2f, and they need to be given the opportunity to learn how to take full advantage of the LMS as well as the Internet. □