# Moving from Polarization to Possibility: Navigating the Challenges and Opportunities of Educational Innovation

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In today's fast-paced educational environment, faculty face the dual challenge of maintaining relevance while fostering meaningful, transformative learning experiences. As educators, we are often tasked with navigating the complexities of curriculum ownership, digital integration, and the evolving needs of our students. What I offer in this essay is the PAIR framework—Purpose and Pacing, Assessment and Alignment, Integration and Infrastructure, Relevance, and Engagement—as a pathway to shift from the polarization of traditional methods to the possibility of designing learning experiences that prepare students for the future. This essay will explore how applying this framework has the potential to enhance learning while addressing faculty concerns about curriculum ownership and academic freedom through the context of my own journey into digital innovation.

In August 2006, I started my journey as a faculty member at Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, Louisiana, in the Department of Communication. As part of a midsize regional university with strong connections to the community, I quickly became aware of the changing demographics of our learners. We had a growing population of adult learners, more transfer students, and an increasing number of dual enrollment courses. As the learner landscape shifted, we began offering more course modalities, and by 2008, I found myself teaching online. It didn't take long for me to notice that many of my students lacked the technological skills needed to succeed in digital environments. This was particularly concerning as the field of communication itself was evolving rapidly, with social media transforming how we interacted and shared information. Add to this, textbook materials couldn't keep up with the pace of change, often becoming outdated before the ink was dry. To overcome these issues, I began integrating up-to-date digital resources and content from industry-recognized courses, ensuring students had access to current information and real-world applications that aligned with course objectives.

In 2010, I taught my first social media class. I realized I had to go straight to the source—platform providers like Google, Facebook, and Twitter—to ensure my course content was relevant and up to date. This approach wasn't just about keeping up with the latest trends; it was about providing my students with the skills and knowledge they needed to navigate the professional world. Over time, I began integrating digital content around specific tools to support my students, but it was challenging to curate and update this content continuously.

Fast forward to Fall 2019, and my department shifted its focus to strategic communication, blending communication, media, technology, and culture. This change required a retooling of our curriculum. Many of my colleagues voiced uncertainty and resistance, worrying that by incorporating more digital tools and content, we might be working ourselves out of a job. They also raised concerns about academic freedom, governance, and who ultimately controls the curriculum. These concerns were only exacerbated in 2020 when the pandemic forced us to switch to remote learning. The labor-intensive process of creating high-quality digital content brought up deeper faculty concerns about academic freedom, faculty governance, and who ultimately has curricular authority.

For two years, I did my best to help my colleagues navigate these changes, but I often found myself overwhelmed by the sheer amount of work required to aggregate relevant digital content from different platforms. Then, in 2022, I learned about a partnership within our university system that gave me access to a range of industry-relevant digital content. I decided to explore how this content could be intentionally integrated or paired with our core courses in the graduate program. What I found was exciting—the goals, outcomes, and measures of our courses aligned well with offerings in digital marketing, e-commerce, data analytics, user experience design, and project management. The structure of our courses stayed the same, but this new content enriched and enhanced the learning experience.

When I shared my findings with my colleagues, they were intrigued but again, concerned. They worried about relying too much on external content and questioned our role as faculty with this type of course design. I understood, so I decided to run a pilot course. I was teaching a quantitative measurement course for strategic communication and had struggled to design a final project that effectively showcased student skills, given the varied learning levels. I required students to engage with industry certification content, use digital resources as supplements, and create a project that applied their skills to a real-world scenario and articulated their learning in use case/case study reports.

The final project became a user experience (UX) quantitative research proposal on online learning in Louisiana's public higher education institutions. The results were encouraging. Pre-assessment questionnaires revealed that students felt uncertain about navigating the course, but post-assessment results showed a significant increase in confidence, with many students expressing interest in pursuing further courses. Several students added their projects to their professional portfolios and used them in job interviews.

The most exciting outcome was that this project became the framework for a statewide report on online learning commissioned by our Board of Regents, a project I had the privilege of managing. This experience sparked student interest in technological innovation, leading me to create a class on strategic communication for technological innovation. In collaboration with NASA's T2U program, students applied their quantitative skills to STEM communication. NASA even featured our course in an article, where I was quoted saying, "This class was the actualization of my teaching ethic and beliefs about education."[1] Integrating digital content into my courses didn't diminish my role in the classroom; it enhanced it, allowing me to meaningfully articulate course and degree outcomes.

The journey I share here has evolved into a framework that I used to shift from polarization over curriculum ownership to focusing on the possibilities of designing impactful learning experiences. In today's rapidly evolving educational landscape, creating open, democratic, and liberatory learning spaces is more urgent than ever. As Suzan Koseoglu emphasizes, the challenge is fostering environments where openness, curiosity, and critical engagement can flourish.[2] Integrating the PAIR framework—Purpose and Pacing, Assessment and Alignment, Integration and Infrastructure, Relevance, and Engagement—into innovation strategies like generative AI, micro-credentials, and varied course modalities can address these challenges and create transformative learning experiences. These principles are not limited to Communication, but also can be applied in any academic field to address the evolving needs of today's learners.

## Purpose and Pacing

What is the purpose of my course? This is often a more complex question than first regarded. The purpose of a course can be tied to accreditation, institutional, departmental, or discipline-related goals. This can be a lot to process and structure; however, I think about the purpose in terms of fostering an epistemological shift from "banking" education models to co-con-

structed knowledge.[3] This purpose drives open pedagogy, which emphasizes collaboration, learner agency, reflective practice, and participatory technologies.[4] These democratic aims are further supported by innovation strategies such as generative AI and micro-credentials, which offer personalized learning experiences tailored to individual needs.[5]

Pacing plays a crucial role in realizing this purpose and is a multifaceted issue. Pace can be influenced by course level, modality, and length of course. As educators work to create inclusive learning environments, we have to be mindful of the rate at which learning is expected to occur.[6] Flexible pacing allows students to engage deeply with content rather than rushing through it. For example, a standard goal in all my courses is to prioritize the needs and voices of all learners. For me, the pacing is how this goal is achieved, ensuring that learners progress at a rate that allows for deep understanding and critical engagement.

**Assessment and Alignment**

How can my course assessments capture the full range of student abilities and experiences? Traditional assessments often fall short, however innovative approaches to assessments include diverse methods such as self-evaluations, peer reviews, and collaborative rubrics reflect multiple ways of knowing. When course objectives, learning activities, and assessments are consistent, it leads to well-aligned courses that offer students clear direction and improve learning outcomes.[7] What I learned over the last almost two decades is that even my most well-intentioned and creative assessments can be misaligned to the purpose and objectives of the course.

Alignment ensures that all components of the teaching system including the curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment are working towards the same goals. In the context of innovation integration, this means aligning components not only with academic standards but also with the broader goals of the discipline beyond the classroom. This principle is helpful when contemplating the integration of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools or micro-credentials, where alignment between technology and pedagogy is essential for meaningful educational experiences. As John Biggs notes, “constructive alignment” involves creating a learning environment that supports activities appropriate to achieving desired outcomes.[8]

For example, in a course that integrates micro-credentials, students might be assessed through a combination of peer reviews, self-assessments, and project-based learning. These assessments are aligned with the course’s goal of promoting digital literacy and critical thinking, making sure that all students, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to succeed.

## Integration and Infrastructure

Integration is key to making curricular innovation effective and sustainable. This requires more than just adopting new technologies; it involves embedding these tools within a framework that supports inclusive learning. The integration of digital resources, participatory technologies, and open-access platforms must be intentional and aligned with the purpose of the course. As Malcolm Brown et al. describe, digital transformation involves "deep and coordinated culture, workforce, and technology shifts," which are essential for supporting not only the learners, but all involved in the learning experience.[9]

Infrastructure for this framework refers to the cultural, organizational, and technological support systems that sustain productive learning environments. Effective integration of digital technologies, such as generative AI tools and micro-credentials, requires necessary "culture, policies, infrastructure as well as digital competence of students and staff."[10] Without this foundation, efforts to innovate may falter. In my years as a full-time faculty member, I navigated changes in learning management systems, enterprise resource management systems, and digital asset repositories. What I observed is that oftentimes the systems were only utilized at minimum capacity and poorly integrated with existing systems. From a faculty perspective, frustration was high as integration efforts were low. It became clear that for meaningful participation, institutions need to ensure that the learning environment—both physical and digital—is conducive to equitable engagement. This includes rethinking the layout of classrooms to foster collaboration and making digital tools more accessible and intuitive for both faculty and students.

## Relevance and Engagement

John Dewey emphasized that "if we teach today's students as we taught yesterday, we rob them of tomorrow."[11] This underscores the importance of relevance in engaging students in meaningful learning experiences. In a world increasingly influenced by artificial intelligence, what makes humanity valuable is our ability to connect with students' lives and aspirations. Educators have the opportunity and responsibility to leverage their expertise to curate content that resonates with our shared human experiences, ensuring that education remains impactful and forward-looking.

Engagement in learning is not just about participation; it's about fostering a deep connection to the material.[12] Open pedagogical practices, such as participatory digital platforms and collaborative assessments, provide

avenues for students to actively engage in their own learning. Using ChatGPT as a brainstorming partner can help students generate ideas and refine their projects by providing instant feedback and suggesting new angles for exploration. And in a flipped classroom model students could review the outputs independently and then use class time for applied, hands-on activities discussing the ethics of using generative AI tools. This approach helps learners not only grasp the material but also helps them develop their own frameworks and processes for using innovative technologies.

At the end of the Spring 2024 semester, I transitioned from my full-time faculty position to focus on helping institutions and educators implement innovations such as generative AI, open educational resources, and micro-credentials. As an independent consultant, I now work closely with faculty, administrators and companies to integrate these tools into their courses, ensuring both educators and students can thrive in the evolving educational landscape. I still teach as an adjunct professor because I love the classroom, but now I'm hoping to share what I've learned more broadly. I believe we have a wonderful opportunity to design and facilitate meaningful learning experiences that build on our expertise as educators while also showing students the learning and earning potential of their degrees. After nearly two decades of navigating the shifting tides of higher education and embracing digital transformation within my courses, I've come to understand the critical importance of innovative teaching practices. This journey has shown me that our roles as educators are not diminished by the integration of new technologies or external content, but are instead enriched by them. These tools enable us to craft learning experiences that are more relevant, engaging, and connected to the real world, moving away from the polarization of who owns the curriculum and moving towards the possibility of collaborative and innovative educational practices that foster lifelong learning and create pathways to lifetime earning.

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