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Individualization, Commodification,
Group Collaboration, and Institutional Identity

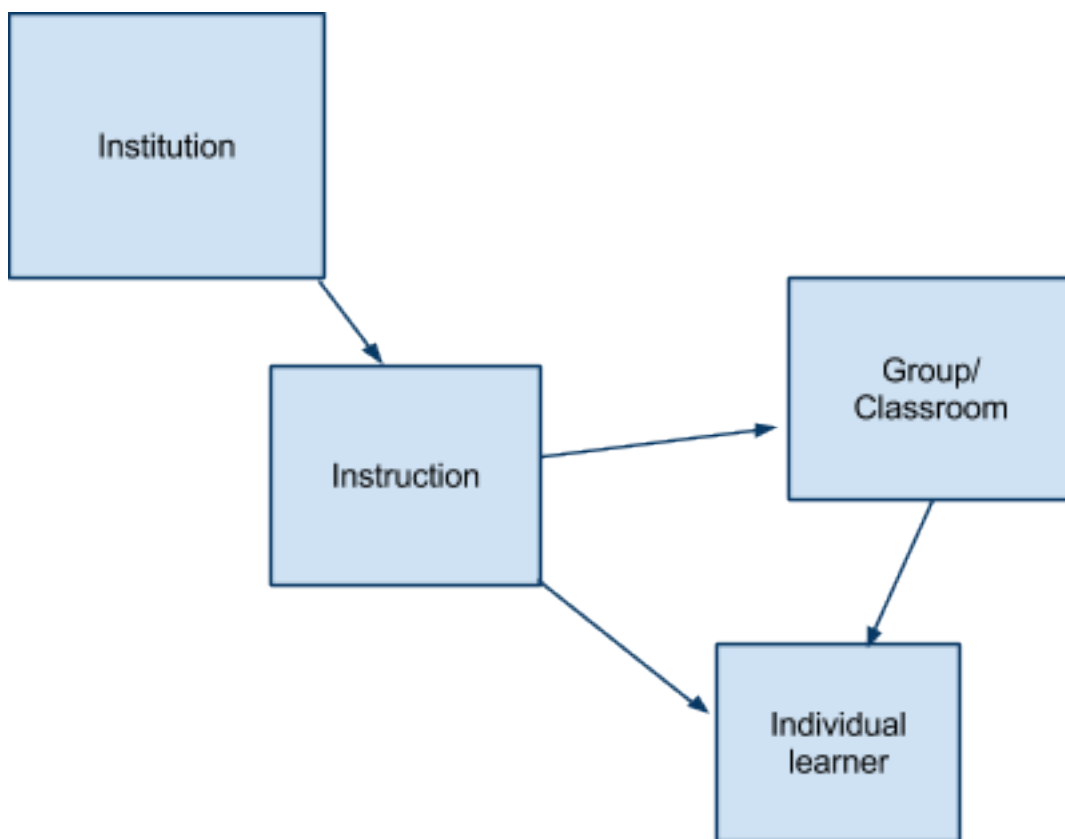
Individualization of Learning

The individualization of learning, a process in which learners are positioned as empowered agents of their own learning progress, has been ongoing for many decades. It has produced a student-centered focus that has repositioned the traditional learning and authority structure of institution to teacher to student. Empowered learners are mostly accustomed to the consumption and production of information, to a participatory educational culture, and to the muted effects of authority. This environment has proven especially fertile to technological communication, which has further repositioned knowledge creation as an economic process of commodification. This project will strive to demonstrate the effect of the individualization of learning on its eventual commodification, further demonstrating the repositioning of institutional authority.

Traditionally, formal learning has taken place in the recognized constructs of space (classrooms) and through the vehicles of authority (teacher as representative of institution). This power dynamic has remain unchanged for quite some time and much of what represents educational pedagogy rests on this information delivery structure. The physical confines of space and social interaction in the classroom proscribed many of the learning activities to which we were exposed, which developed our competencies and literacy as learners, and which we were subsequently assessed.

Traditionally, the power agent in this dynamic was the institution. The institution stood as the final arbiter and authority; it represented a collection of best practices of individual scholars working in their own disciplines to form a collective construct. The subsequent knowledge they brought back to the institution established universities as knowledge repositories and this subsequently established prestige. Teachers, as agents of universities, also enjoyed prestige. They were identified as conveyors of knowledge, of formative agents on the collective student mind.

This structure of learning did not implode in the face of technology. Institutional identity was being pedagogically altered well before the advent of social technology. What really spirited the change we see now in the traditional learning dynamic was the individualization of learning, that process whereby pedagogical focus was placed on the development of the individual as a learner. This involved a reformulation of learning strategies. The focus placed on the individual began the disentanglement of the traditional learning structure.



A secondary process taking place that benefited from this disentanglement was the commodification of learning and its subsequent academic capitalism; this became apparent well before technology intervened as made evident by changing research practices for measurable outputs (Ylijoki, 2003). So we have a situation where two parallel strands of activity were occurring, namely the individualization of learning and the commodification of learning. Technology opportunistically has capitalized on these changes.

The individualization of learning takes many different forms, from individual learning plans to individualized instruction. All of these strategies serve to strengthen the relationship of the individual student towards their learning, to empower them to actively further their learning. This serves to promote the notion of learning as a lifelong activity with no definitive finishing point, an indefinite lifecycle. It implicitly projects the ‘desirability of a formative, reflexive relationship between learning and an individual’s conduct and experience of life”, further diminishing the distinctions between academic and personal silos of activity (Strain, 1998).

The individualization of learning, while still maintaining an emphasis on competitive variables, also promotes an environment where the individual learner is a constructive entity in the learning process. The individual learner is empowered to both analyze and synthesize information within their own personalized learning framework. This structure promotes creative construction of information into knowledge units. This represents both a divergence and allegiance to the existing pattern of knowledge construction. Individualized learning is a divergence in that the empowered learner is free to pursue this process outside the scope of the institutional influence. Knowledge can and is created outside the scope of the institution and their respective disciplinary silos of best practice and research.

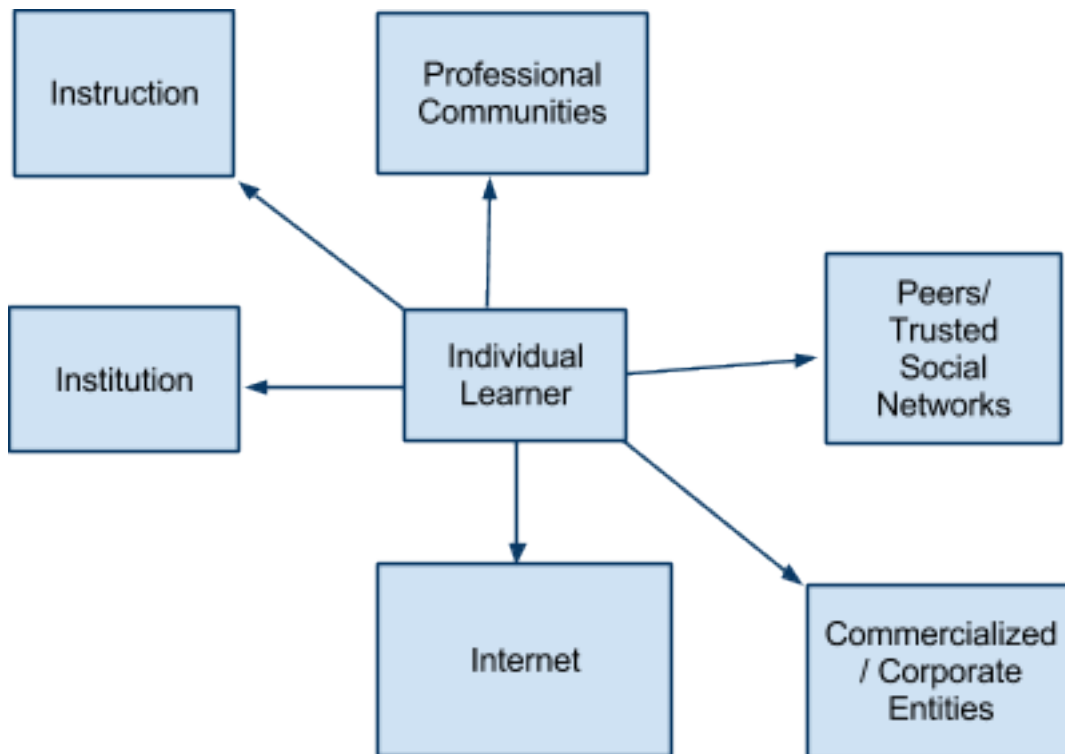
Individualized learning also reinforces the institution in some capacity due the form this knowledge creation takes. Institutional and disciplinary influence extends over the economic variables at work for academics, another instance of the institution as arbiter of authority. Knowledge is disseminated in research form through books and academic journal articles. These publications are often controlled by academic publishing houses ([granted, with great autonomy and no inherent allegiance to the university’s focus](#)); professional acceptance and advancement are dependent on being published. This augments institutional prestige and authority by controlling the measures by which professionals are judged.

Since individualized learning is essentially an independent activity of research, reflection and synthesis, the oft-maligned [publish or perish paradigm](#) of academia

represents a logical mapping of individualized learning to individualized output. There is little to no logical divergence from the focus on the individual and their empowered learning cycles.

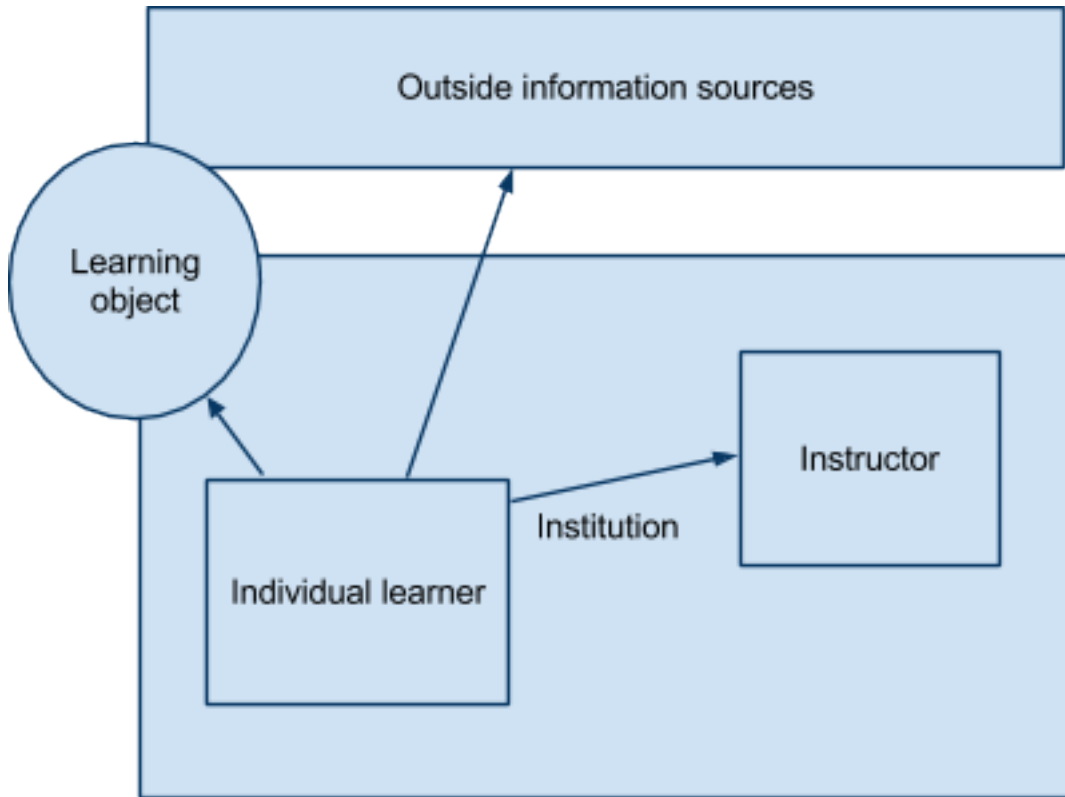
In summation, the individualization of learning has produced elements both at odds with and supportive of institutional identity. What is most important is that the individualization of learning repositioned the change agents in the learning process. Learning continued to be achieved through traditional institutional paradigms; however, the individual as empowered learner spirited the pursuit of knowledge outside these confines as well.

Diagram of the Learning Process



What we can see is that the authority given to teachers has been muted somewhat. Appeals to authority for the individual learner can be achieved outside the confines of this intimate relationship; this can happen in professional communities, disciplinary best practices, or even through a rigorous individual research approach. An empowered learner is capable of pursuing, constructing

and analyzing learning opportunities outside the scope of the traditional learning environment. The effects of this process on the role of the teacher are outside the scope of this exposition, but those effects are considerable.



An individual learner is free to transcend institutional constraints and make associations outside the proscribed path; an empowered learner is more than willing to discern multiple information streams regardless of perceived authority.

Commodification of Learning

Individualized learning proved fruitful in many ways, but the advent of accessible information and communication technologies (ICTs) has energized individualized learning. In turn, this has produced seismic ripple effects on all agents in the knowledge creation process, including the institution and instruction (traditional agents of authority). A general description of ICTs and their effect on the learning process are outside the scope of this exposition, but there is reference to [outside examples](#) on the [bibliography](#) for this project.

Generally speaking, information and communication technologies have further strengthened the role of the empowered individual in the learning process by making any source of authority, whether a [publication](#), [professional organization](#), or [professor](#), accessible. This accessibility is often funded through the institutional acquisitions of information, specifically through the [library's acquisition budget](#).

Perhaps not surprisingly, students acquire this information online, often outside the scope of the institutional library (often through an [open source academic journal](#)) and so we see a gradual shift away from another traditional strength of the institution, namely as a repository for and access point to information. Individualized learners meet their information needs outside the scope of this traditional arrangement of institution to individual, undercutting institutional authority further. Information and communications technology have made it possible to offer individualized and collaborative learning platforms entirely online, giving rise to the elearning phenomena in which we all participate. ICTs offer the individualized elearner vast opportunities for exploration and subsequent knowledge construction.

The internet as an information delivery device offers a diversity of approach with varying layers of [text and multimedia](#) ultimately constructing an understanding of the object of learning. Further to the complexity of content representation, we also have time and spatial elements contributing to a contextualized understanding of the object being studied. A heady mix of asynchronous and synchronous pursuits develops a firm understanding of an object as existing in both time and space.

This multifaceted exploration represents a divergence from the traditional learning process. All facets add a learning dimension to the learning pursuit; all afford a greater degree of conceptualization and understanding. As such, there are very few proscribed paths through this learning cycle. Individualized learning is well suited to this approach, offering suggestions toward a process (based on [personal predilections](#)) without ever proscribing it. This individualized, multimodal approach has revealed a new type of literacy referred to as transliteracy.

[Transliteracy](#) refers to the essential skills for those participating in knowledge creation in a massively participatory environment. More directly, transliteracy refers to “the ability to read, write and interact across a range of platforms, tools and media from signing and orality through handwriting, print, TV, radio and film, to digital social networks” ([Thomas et al, 2007](#)). Transliteracy, and its lesser sibling multiliteracy, pose great challenges to the institutional concern for disciplinary knowledge and learning practices as it repositions student literacies as technologically driven (Goodfellow and Lea, 2007).

Acquiring the skill necessary for transliteracy has proven to be a contentious issue in academic circles; this has a strong parallel in the [digital immigrant vs. digital native](#) debate. It is necessary to establish that when discussing transliteracy we are essentially acknowledging that this process begins as skills acquisition.

The skills being acquired are essentially those involved with the manipulation of the communication tools themselves and their application to the learning and communication process. Further innovation and learning that occurs as a result of this skills acquisition is indeed expansive as it builds upon a multitude of sources investigating a multitude of facets. It is inherently complex and constructive. The notion of transliteracy surpasses technological acumen and ventures into new modes of social interaction and cognition. It is not just technical acumen, but a greater social literacy that is being acquired.

It is often “argued that complex tasks and technologies of the new economy require a new configuration of multiple, higher order skills ” (Naidoo, 2003). These multiple, higher order skills emanate from the complexity of tasks that are made possible by the manipulation of multiple, communication channels; further they offer opportunities for institutions to explore flavors of cognition like discernment, aptness, and new forms of text and knowledge creation (Kress, 2005). The literacies refer to what we can do with the technology, not the technology itself.

The real question becomes how does one acquire these formative, foundational skills of navigation and manipulation? It is the answer to this question that has

provided a firm footing for the further commodification of learning into economic units of production.

The Prensky article [Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants](#) (2001) 'advances' unencumbered argument that digital natives, those born into the communication technologies of recent years, "think and process information fundamentally differently than their predecessors" (2001). Prensky is basing much of this supposition on that the fact that "the sheer volume" of their interaction with these technologies represents an intuitive understanding of their application. He has followed these ideas with the notion of 'digital wisdom', which further builds on this 'inherent' understanding of technology (2009).

Attention should be drawn to the divide espoused by Prensky. The digital immigrant vs. digital native debate implies that the former can never become the latter, that the "rhetoric of the digital 'native' allows us to structure and contain our understanding of their implications, positioning young learners as subjects 'at one' with the digital environment in a way in which older users-teachers, 'immigrants' can never be" (Bayne, Ross, 2009). It presupposes an insurmountable divide towards an issue of skills acquisition, one of applied practice. It does not address the transliteracy described above.

It also places the emphasis on technology, thus establishing (not uniquely) an economic facet of commodification of knowledge construction. That is, without ubiquitous technologies, modern knowledge production is limited.

One could argue whether the ability to think and process information differently is indeed supported by multiple, ubiquitous communication channels. There is evidence to suggest that these multiple channels force a 'cognitive overload' and a loss of concentration, which brings into question many of the presuppositions of the digital native learner (Bennett et al, 2008). Whether or not the communication technologies used by 'digital natives' have forced the development of higher order knowledge construction remains to be seen; however, no evidence suggests that this is a domain exclusive to those born into these types of technologies.

The digital native presupposition is most disconcerting to institutional and instructional agents; these are most diluted by the digital native oversimplification. The educational community, acting on the calls of Prensky, is mistaking technical proficiency for an empowered learning paradigm and recommending wholesale changes to its structure, delivery and influence. It is a dangerous strand of [technological determinism](#) that has created virtually unlimited opportunity for private enterprise to enter the fray.

According to [JISC](#), learners make very little distinction between the different forms of content and the delivery device for this type of content is essentially uniform, ie the computer (2008). Without the buttress of institutional authority and with the accelerant of empowered individual learners, we witness a [leveling process](#) where all information competes for attention regardless of quality or authority. As Dreyfus refers to it, what we see is that "the highly significant and the absolutely trivial are laid out together" (2008).

Subsequently, private enterprise has established footholds in areas which were once the exclusive domain of education institutions. Traditional courses or programs compete side by side with others geared towards skills acquisition or [abbreviated course requirements](#). These ['for-profit' institutions](#) have effectively appropriated the title 'university' and harnessed its resonance in the community, parasitically feeding off it (Barnett, 2005).

Instruction has been reconfigured, often at [the expense of measurable student success](#), as a division of labor between student and instructor; the individual learner sees the consumption of information online as user preference. Despite these developments, there is great opportunity in this seemingly fluid space to construct invigorated instructional and institutional dynamics from new group associations. Thus we have the introduction of the [group](#) as a challenge to the individualized atmosphere of online instruction.

Group Collaboration

The best way out is always through”

-[Robert Frost](#) (1874-1963)

The gradual rise of the empowered learner and the redefinition of institutional authority and instructor has utterly changed the learning dynamic. To say this process is irreversible presupposes that this sequence is linear rather than [rhizomic](#). It has evolved due to multiple fissure points and related developments both in education and technology.

More importantly, the situation affords the educational community an opportunity to understand the nature and strength of learning associations, especially in the online environment. Learning associations are ubiquitous, amoebic entities constantly shifting in purpose and scope. They involve rapid association and dissociation of collegial parties with common interests. This also presupposes that most learning, whether online or in some sort of physical space, is a [social activity](#).

As applied to institutions, this involves classmates all committed to common learning objectives via coursework. All individuals are committed to some degree of association to the course, their classmates or fellow faculty, their departments, or their institution. These relationships are cemented through shared action and purpose, through trust and emotive elements. So a learning network is formed through shared purpose and action.

Therefore, we have what seems counterintuitive, that individual associations born of individual needs foster a group dynamic. The engagement the individual has with information and interaction is essentially a voluntary one; individuals generally choose their own course of action and make associations between individuals and content freely. However, this logic presupposes that the individual is the focus of this online dynamic. That is to some degree false.

In this online environment, content (and related activity) is king. "Socially constructed knowledge has been brought to centre stage, to make the departure from the actor-centered subject of philosophy of consciousness. Knowledge is now mediated socially and not isolated in the individual" (Naidoo, 267). This notion of socially constructed knowledge taking precedence over individual action or authority is indeed the core organizing principle of all communication we now label as social media. It involves the powerful notion of [crowdsourcing](#), of using the natural energies of the group dynamic to create, moderate, and disseminate.

The intriguing aspect of this structure is that individuals are arriving at this group dynamic through no proscribed path aside from common interest. They are willingly, and presumably temporarily, associating themselves with a larger group dynamic for the purposes of knowledge and content creation. The individual stands to gain as much from the relationship as the group; an individual's stature within their community of influence depends on this type of social currency. It is essentially a symbiotic relationship.

Further, this is a muted marker indicating an acknowledgment of their knowledge deficiency, an [information needs assessment](#). These markers represent learning opportunities. An empowered learner will seek to address these learning deficiencies often through the collaborative dynamic. This also represents an attachment point for institutions wanting to reinvigorate the scope of their purpose and influence, a point addressed further in this project.

There are further incentives for individuals to participate in online group collaborations. Group collaboration provides a steady stream of feedback for the individual on their projection of self. This projection of self can be any number of communication channels, including avatars, text for discussions boards, blog posts, a general participation in a participatory culture. Feedback received from group collaboration acts as what [Boellstorf](#) refers to as a mirroring effect- self is projected to the group and the group projects the self back to the individual (Boellstorf, 2008). Individuals can receive immediate and consistent feedback on facets of their projection, often simultaneously. This affords them the opportunity to modify this projection of self accordingly.

The trust secured from effective group collaboration establishes an interdependency of the individual towards the reality created by the group. The human individual subject is a co-producer of this group reality and resides in it; the individual is subject to the culture of the reality they helped create. This interdependency removes the traditional extrinsic grounds for undertaking particular actions, including learning projects (Strain, 269). Individualized learners join the collaborative group for extrinsic purposes, but once trust is established and efficiency is demonstrated (towards common learning objectives) then these extrinsic motivations will dissolve and the group reality will dictate participation. The focus on individualized learning will be ensconced within the group dynamic

and will be subject to its wider demands. Institutional presence can be reinvigorated through a harnessing of this group dynamic.

The next section of this project will pinpoint some measures that educational institutions can take to reinvigorate their mission and influence.

Institutional Identity

Most institutions of higher education have seen the competitive landscape shift and their roles redefined. While the traditional learning dynamic has shifted away from the linear transmission of authority from institution to teacher to student, that does not mean institutions have to scale back their missions or core focus. What is needed to reinvigorate higher education institutions as centers of learning is a firm understanding of the power dynamics of group collaborations online and how those can be capitalized upon.

As stated, online group associations are often temporal and transient entities; once trust and consistent mutual purpose are established, they quickly develop into fairly stable and predictable communities subject to their own shared realities. Institutions can reinvigorate their purpose by acknowledging and experimenting with some of the following recommendations.

Institutions should recognize that elearning is not a mutually exclusive scenario. Existing dually in physical and online spaces does not dilute organizational focus. Institutions should embrace multiple relationships with participating individuals for mutual self-interest and strive towards building a social reality within the group dynamic. Institutions should be readily adaptable to relationships based initially on mutually perceived interest (Strain, 1998).

As individualized learners begin to shed extrinsic motivation for participating, institutions can foster construction of knowledge within the social reality. Within these learning realities, stress should be placed on the online group dynamic, that of both trusted groups as well as temporal learning opportunities characterized by quick assembly and disassembly based on common objectives or knowledge gaps. Institutions should value both types of associations as they provide clear and valuable utility to individualized students. They also establish institutions as innovative constructs that provide 'safe' environments for learning.

Content and knowledge creation are critical to institutional identity; greater focus can and should be placed on this type of creation to reinvigorate institutional impact. Institutions should not narrowly define content and knowledge creation as being solely research outputs. Rather, they should consider research, learning environments, learning activities, and related associations as being part of this greater content and knowledge creation. Institutions become greater than [the sum total](#) of their individual parts/outputs.

Pedagogically, institutions can reinvest in their identity online as being places of radical doubt, where radical innovation is based on an investigation of the basic construction of knowledge (Bayne and Ross, 2009). Further, disquiet, solitude, and spaces of friction can be introduced to parallel radical doubt, by offering an alternative to the commodified vision of linear, logical thinking (Bayne, 2008). This can all take place within the 'safe haven' of an institutional learning platform. The video below is an exploration of what it means to know, of knowledge construction itself. Institutions are free to explore these facets of learning.
done

Institutional learning spaces can also encourage a rhizomic exploration with multiple entry points; further, they can capitalize on the possibilities of an anti-logocentric stance provided by smooth internet spaces (Bayne, 2004). By temporarily eschewing logic, institutions become fertile grounds for free association and exploration.

Institutions can and should provide [these spaces](#) or encourage their exploration; more importantly, these spaces should be designed outside the scope of commercialized outputs. Ideally pedagogy shouldn't contort to technical solutions. An institution online in such a commercialized scenario merely becomes an instrument of consumer choice. Institutions should actively develop solutions catering towards their online learning dynamic; there are several instances of this in [higher education](#) and some have met with success. These developed [learning spaces](#) exist outside the scope of accreditation and standardization. They are agents of discovery and not assessment; they are an environment and not a measured output.

These learning spaces are critical to reaffirming institutional identities as essentially they can serve to surrogate virtual space for physical space (Warburton, 2009). These virtual spaces are a larger network of online learning spaces that an institution can and should provide. According to Dondi the ideal place for elearning is not where consolidated knowledge needs to be spread, but rather where “new knowledge is developed, where innovation objectives are to be shared and achieved in a participatory way” (2008). Greater constructs have been built on lesser mission statements.

In conclusion, the trend towards the individualization of learning hastened the redefinition of institution and instructional authority. Individualized learners are capable of pursuing and acquiring knowledge in decentralized ways, often outside the scope of institutional authority. Information and communication technologies accelerated this trend towards the individualization of learning. Prensky theorized that technology itself had radically altered cognition. This in turn led to prescriptions for the role of the institution within these learning spaces, more agile institutions better able to serve the need of the modern student. Institutions online have often been reduced to the consumerist impulse of academic capitalism.

Institutions can reinvigorate their universalism, their identity as places of exploration into knowledge itself, as places where knowledge is created and recycled. To do so requires a firm understanding of the nature of the online group dynamic as well as the limitless potential that institutions can serve in this space.