

Understanding Student Needs

Stephen Downes

Why We Exist

- Proposal: we only exist because of the needs of students
- Reality: many players are involved in education, and we need to attend to them
- We also exist for our own needs; viability is essential
- We exist in a society, and a technological milieu

What Do Students Need?

- An essential question: who are the students?
- When we sample students, do we sample:
 - Existing students?
 - Potential students?
 - Drop-outs?
- What do we mean by “need”?
 - To graduate?
 - To succeed in life?

How Do We Know...?

- Knowing depends on evidence (of course) but what constitutes evidence?
- The presumption is often that if the knowledge is *about* students, that it must be obtained *from* students
- John Stuart Mill: the best evidence that someone desires something is that they actually pursue it

How Do We Provide?

- The model of service that 'provides' is rapidly changing
- We don't 'provide' an education, we help people become educated
- Education has always been about offering these supports and services
- As learners' capacities increase, we need to adapt in order to extend these capacities

Challenges

- Like never before, people are learning:
 - Informally
 - Outside the institution
 - From many sources
- We need to take into account these external influences, and adapt to *become* one
 - Education delivery to a community, not a class
 - Education *support*, not management

Solutions

- We need to *be there* when and where learners need us and call for us
- We need to have the best information, no matter where it comes from
- We need to *work well with others*, including parents, government, providers, others schools
- We need to *keep adapting*