

21st century learning - waves of trends!

 By [Andrew Hibling](#)

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When I think of trends, I think of the nomenclature in financial trends, which go upward, downward and sideward, or short-term, medium-term and long-term trends. However, the most useful typology for me is the one proposed by Byg Kongsholm and Frederiksen, in which six different trend types are classified on the basis of their duration and influence.



These six types of trends include the following:

1. **Societies:** Historical, fundamental views that persist for centuries and centre on people's power, resources and opportunities.
2. **Paradigms:** Fundamental guiding concepts that last for many decades and relate to people's world views.
3. **Gigatrends:** Long-term trends of ten to 30 years that have a global impact and are associated with economy, politics and technology.
4. **Megatrends:** Medium-term trends that characterise consumption patterns for a period of three to seven years.
5. **Microtrends:** Shorter market trends with a key focus on design and aesthetics that affect consumer behaviour for periods of six months to three years.
6. **Fads:** Very short-lived consumer trends.

These trends move at different speeds. Much like the faster swells at sea catch the slower swells to produce waves with huge amplitude and energy, so shorter-term and longer-term trends can converge to form huge waves that ripple through our society – I think we're in for a storm.

So, what are the trends we can expect to see in higher education, both in South Africa and the rest of the world? For answers, we may be tempted to look to the pantomime of buzzwords (which include 'emergency remote teaching', 'hybrid learning', 'microlearning' etc.) in the media. However, my hunch is that these will be largely fads or microtrends – nothing more than splashes around our ankles. Instead, we need to turn our attention to longer-term trends – the 100ft waves forming on the horizon.

The biggest trends in education right now centre on educational technology (edtech), which brings forward the integration

of information and communication technologies (ICTs) into education. ICT is one of those three-letter abbreviations that we gloss over without interrogating its deep meaning. What is information and communication technology in the context of education and training, and more deeply, in the context of content, teaching and learning?

Unpacking information

The first element of the ICT abbreviation is *information*. We live in a knowledge society in which information is ubiquitous and pervasive, and continues to grow at an exponential rate. By 2018, for example, [90% of the data on the internet had been created in the previous two years](#).

What does this mean for education, which has, for centuries, focused on controlled access and dissemination of information? Well, it has to change. As we move deeper into the 21st century, education will no longer focus solely on information dissemination. Instead, the teaching and learning experiences delivered by our educational institutions will be reconceptualised.

The goal of an educational experience is for cerebral and personal transformation. I believe that content will have value as a conduit for deep and meaningful learning, as the information metaverse alone cannot serve as a curriculum.

Intention and quality

In other words, content will become the vehicle for learning, but not necessarily the learning opportunity itself. Content will be *purposefully* designed, created and curated to align with desired learning outcomes. It requires a more intentional approach that must place greater emphasis on *local relevance*. If we expect students to be able to integrate their learnings into their lives and their beings, then their courseware must be specific to the real-world contexts in which the students find themselves. (We've written previously about local relevance as a key factor in student engagement and motivation in [this article](#).)

In a world where e-learning is prolific, universities will need to take greater responsibility for the quality of their content. No longer will they be able to rely on a list of prescribed textbooks as their content solution; they will need to invest in their *own* content, as it is ultimately their value proposition to their students. Afterall, many students select institutions on the basis of their credibility, and the quality of an institution's content will ultimately become a barometer for credibility.

Communities of inquiry

Communication technology is the second element of ICT, and has the potential to be the liberator in 21st century education, if educators are willing and able to embrace its true potential. Humans do not learn in a vacuum – we learn in communities, we learn socially and we learn from each other. At Edge, we predict that communities of inquiry (COIs) will dominate learning experiences for the next decade. The COI framework focuses on the intentional development of an online learning community (ie. a community of inquiry) with an emphasis on the creation of deep and meaningful transformative learning experiences. This occurs through the [development of three interdependent elements: social, cognitive and teaching](#)

[presence](#).

These presences correspond with three levels of engagement: engagement with peers, with content and with educators. Communication technology has the power to transform the way in which learning experiences are designed. Already, informal learning is inherently social. We learn through our social and messaging platforms that, in the African context, are often the dominant portals to the internet. This inherently social mode of learning will bleed into formal education at an ever-increasing pace.

Ultimately, the paradigm shift that is upon us is the change in our approach to learning, and to life. Education, and particularly higher education, will move toward actively equipping students with the necessary skills to function in a rapidly morphing information and communication age. We will have to acquire skills that enable us to withstand the compression of centuries of evolution into a few decades – and as educators we will have to lead the way.

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