WHO’S TEACHING THOSE ONLINE COURSES?

There are several things going on in higher education lately—a lot having to do with technology and learning—which leave us completely puzzled. One is a new preoccupation with vocabulary by otherwise fairly sensible people. Is it distance learning or distance education? Distributed learning or telecommunicated teaching? The virtual university or universities online? And so on. The debate continues.

We seem to have been happy with terms like “course” and “class” for several hundred years without having much of a problem—despite the hundreds of permutations of the form. What, we ask, is seeking to be resolved by having everyone line up behind a particular descriptor (as if that were even remotely possible!), especially when this new form of higher education is constantly changing and exhibiting all sorts of marvelous variety as it evolves?

But even more mystifying is the obsessive concern about quality assurance in distance education, particularly when it is directed at accredited colleges and universities. This concern manifests itself as an ongoing question: how do we really know that students are learning when they aren’t sitting eyeball-to-eyeball with us in a classroom?

Poor Tom Russell. Tom has done yeoman service to higher education by collecting, summarizing and updating the educational research on this question for more than a decade (see http://www.nosignificantdifference.org/). But rather than receiving kudos for his efforts, he has been subjected to an ongoing attack on listserves and in publications that ought to know better, written by people who appear to have no serious knowledge of the subject.

My latest favorite: "The flaw in the conventional wisdom with respect to 'no significant difference' is, we believe, that it equates education with a mere 'information transfer' and ignores the 'Human Factor' essential to true education. Something happens in the classroom that results from the illusive Human Factor . . . ." (from the July/August issue of Change). Don't you just love the caps!

Even if folks don't want to believe the research (and most of them don't seem to have read the research), they seem to be missing what we regard as a rather central and obvious point. Who do they think are teaching distance and online courses? Their colleagues—the ones they know and love. College faculty are the ones making judgments about whether or not students are learning, just as they do in face-to-face situations.

For about three decades, Empire State College has been awarding college credit for learning acquired outside of a traditional classroom. When the College was undergoing its first accreditation review, the visiting team repeatedly asked the faculty and staff, what is your definition of college-level learning? The best answer to this question was given by a senior member of the faculty: college-level learning is what college faculty say it is.

That answer undergirds our definition of quality today. And until we can agree on a better definition, it continues to serve us both on and off campus.

Every student who receives college credit for a course—whether taken online or on campus—does so because the faculty member teaching the course (who has been appointed and reviewed by his or her colleagues and institution) evaluates what and how well the student has learned. Are we to believe that college faculty suddenly lose all judgment about evaluating student performance simply because the students are not in a physical classroom?

We said that we are mystified by this phenomenon when it occurs in the higher education community in general. But when the AFT and the NEA recently raised serious questions about the quality of distance learning programs—hence directly attacking the judgment of their current and potential members—we were flat out flabbergasted! There's something wrong here. Who's teaching those distance courses anyway?

—CAT
The Pew Grant Program in Course Redesign is supporting efforts of colleges and universities to redesign their courses to create more active learning environments, which can lead to real gains in learning.

Lectures are often cited as incompatible with the varied learning needs of individual students. Redesigns that incorporate technology into the course can result in significant cost savings. For example, a relatively modest redesign of each of these courses using technology will result in about a 30% reduction in costs. The chemistry course will yield an annual savings of about $300,000; the statistics course will save about $116,000 per year. That's a pretty hefty savings that can be used to support ongoing development or other institutional priorities.

Are there lessons here for higher education? You bet! How long will it be before the first education offering on the Net reaches a million customers (students if you prefer)? Your margins can be paper thin, say one percent, and still make for an attractive venture if your product costs $500 and has a million customers. Will someone decide to "give away" the educational product and sell the associated services of faculty consulting, testing and credit granting, and portal services to other educational offerings? Very likely.

And who are likely to be the first competitors for large market share—established institutions with hundreds of millions of dollars in physical plant and extensive vertical integration or new, more nimble ventures that are constructed on the Net model and that operate in Net time? The lesson of the Net seems to be that smaller is better in cell phones and computers, but also in company size. The new, nimble, growing companies seem to have a significant edge over the older, larger, necessarily more conservative institutions.

The lesson of the Net is that centralized planning, whether in standards development or product deployment, doesn't produce the results stemming from flattened, seemingly chaotic organizational structures such as the one that built the Net. Sure, the Net is complex and complicated but its complexity wasn't designed. It simply grew from the premise that by putting the intelligence out at the ends, thereby encouraging innovation, lots of people could make contributions to whole product without needing to understand the whole product. The concept of putting the intelligence at the edges also fostered incredible entrepreneurship. People could dream up ideas at the edges and, if they were accepted by enough others on the edge, they could become quite profitable products.

The lessons for the higher education establishment? Top down institutional strategies for joining the Net community with educational offering are not as likely to be successful as those which encourage entrepreneurial innovation. Service suites (the bundling of all sorts of services around the educational product) force the intelligence to the center and away from the edges, thereby impairing, if not altogether eliminating, innovation. Established institutions of higher education operate on a time frame that is comparatively glacial—smaller organizations, skunk works, and new relationships with the faculty are likely to be much more productive in producing quality educational offering on the Net. They are also much more likely to do it in Net time.

—RCH

LECTURES ARE NOT CHEAP!

Whenever the issue of reducing costs in higher education comes up—particularly in regard to instruction—one typically hears the argument that packed lecture halls and low-paid graduate teaching assistants equal the lowest possible cost-per-student. Not so.

While not as expensive as small classes taught by individual faculty members, lecture-based courses are not cheap, especially when combined with discussion sections—which most institutions employ to give students some opportunity for interaction—as well as laboratories.

The two-course general chemistry sequence, which includes labs, at one of our large land-grant universities, enrolls about 4,100 students annually and costs about $1,053,741 per year in personnel costs alone. This translates to about $257 per student. At another leading university, the introductory statistics course, which does not include labs, costs about $169,000 per semester to teach 960 students, resulting in an average cost-per student of $176.

A relatively modest redesign of each of these courses using technology will result in about a 30% reduction in costs. The chemistry course will yield an annual savings of about $300,000; the statistics course will save about $116,000 per year. That's a pretty hefty savings that can be used to support ongoing development or other institutional priorities.

Lectures are costly—and not just in institutional dollars. We know that many students do not learn from lectures, especially when it comes to retaining skills and knowledge. The passive, one-size-fits-all pedagogy of the lecture is often cited as incompatible with the varied learning needs of individual students. Redesigns that create more active learning environments can lead to real gains in learning.

The Pew Grant Program in Course Redesign is supporting efforts of colleges and universities to redesign their courses to create more active learning environments, which can lead to real gains in learning.
large enrollment courses using technology to both enhance learning and reduce costs. There are examples here that illustrate the cost comparisons. Additional cases will be available in September.

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WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE

When we first talked about what themes to address in this publication, we decided that one of them had to be the backlash that is developing on campus against the use of IT in the academic program. What is its source?

Throughout the eighties and much of the nineties, interest in technology mediated learning was confined to a relatively small group in the higher education community, mostly IT folks and a handful of faculty pioneers. And even though these folks have been saying for a long time that online education is going to be very big, not many believed them.

Today, all that has changed. No one doubts that online education is going to be very big. Just as the Internet has moved from an object of interest for a few university researchers to a household word, so too has distributed learning become mainstream. Suddenly, those who didn't get it in the eighties, now get it. And many of them don't like it!

Rather than being excited about the incredible opportunities for improving learning opportunities for students, these folks fear the changes that inevitably will result from the appeal of networked environments. Most of them have achieved success by playing by the rules of a non-networked world. But today those rules are changing.

While it's understandable that a number of academics who are uncomfortable with change would react to this new world with caution rather than enthusiasm, there is another group who is not so deserving of our understanding. These are the "questioners," the "doubters," the ones who are ostensibly "for" technology-mediated learning but, in fact, wonder whether it's really any good at all. How can you identify them? They say, "I'm for technology in higher education, BUT . . . . " And they are very popular with those who are uncomfortable with change.

Let's consider a couple of manifestations of this phenomenon.

Version 1 is the questioning stance: "I'm all for this IT stuff, but I just have a few questions . . . . " We recently read a report of what purports to be a serious seminar on the topic of "Managing the Cost of IT in Higher Education." This "report" consists of a laundry list of questions ("What is IT and what is it doing to higher education?") about whether it is, indeed, possible to manage those costs, none of which is answered. In essence, all the report accomplishes is to cast doubt on whether IT can be anything other than a black hole of expenditure.

Version 2 is the assertion of some ridiculous position, which is then refuted—e.g., "The idea that technology is a panacea and that it is applicable across all types and sizes of institutions is an extraordinarily dangerous assumption." (Has anyone ever said this or anything remotely like it?) The reader thinks, this person is supposed to be knowledgeable about IT and higher education; ergo, people must be saying that IT is a panacea. Every conservative academic is automatically on the speaker's side. Version 2 frequently goes hand-in-hand with version 1; out come all the questions and concerns about how difficult it is to employ IT.

A more extreme variation on this theme is the doomsday scenario. "Technology is providing a foundation for the reorganization of higher learning . . . . Each time the [technological] revolution enabled unprecedented gains while simultaneously causing real damage . . . and came at a stiff price. " Are you surprised to learn that this article goes on to spend a lot of time on the potential downside of IT use in higher education? It concludes with a flourish, "A nightmare scenario emerging from this opportunity is an academy eventually unable to maintain a coherent curriculum and cohesive community of values." It's amazing what technology can do! According to the Chronicle of Higher Education and other pertinent sources, the academy hasn't had a coherent curriculum or a cohesive community of values for quite some time.

What is significant is that these comments are not coming from the David Nobles of the world, the author of Digital Diploma Mills who is flat out opposed to IT use. They are coming from "leaders" in the world of IT and higher education. It seems to us that we look to leaders to provide answers and direction (it's the vision thing) not an ongoing exhibition of the FUD factor—fear, uncertainty and doubt.

The question for those of you who are working hard to develop new learning opportunities for students with the help of technology to consider is, are these folks helping? To paraphrase another source, with friends like these, who needs . . . ?

—CAT

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UPCOMING LEADERSHIP FORUM EVENTS

What Trustees and Policy Makers Need to Know about IT
September 29, 1999, Washington, DC
Moderators: George Connick and Carol Twigg
A not-to-be missed session for institutional trustees and other policy makers involved with higher education. Building on a monograph recently published by the Association of Governing Boards, Getting Results from Investments in Technology, and The Public Policy Implications of a Global Learning Infrastructure, a monograph published by Educom and SHEEO, this seminar will provide insight into IT's key role in the major issues of access, quality and productivity that are facing higher education today.

The Learning Marketplace: New Resources for Teaching and Learning
November 11, 1999, Atlanta, Georgia
Moderators: Bob Heterick and Carol Twigg

An increasing number of companies are entering the higher education market, offering a growing variety of commercial products and services to support network-based teaching and learning. At this workshop, the leading providers of such products and services will participate in a moderated discussion. If you are involved in decisions regarding expenditure of funds for teaching/learning services and products, you can't afford to miss this workshop!

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