

The NLII's Shifting Agenda

Information technology is about change. Change tends to make people uncomfortable because they often perceive it to be the process of taking something away. In a recent interview, MIT Organizational Psychology Professor Edgar H. Schein talked about the “anxiety of learning” and how “transformational learning” is threatening to most individuals. He noted that few organizations are able to engage in transformational learning because people resist challenging standard assumptions and thus are unable to act in “fundamentally altered ways.”¹ It is not surprising, then, that the underlying assumptions that guide the perception of teaching remain stuck in a centuries-old paradigm, since the implications of entering the online world are sufficiently transformational to toss one right out of the comfort zone.

The dictionary definition of *transformation* is “to change or alter completely in nature, form, or function.” When founded in 1994, the National Learning Infrastructure Initiative (NLII) used the word *transformation* to distinguish its mission as that of attaining change in its most complete form through the use of information technology. Since that time, however, the agenda of the NLII has shifted from demonstrating the power of the technology, to designing and building enabling infrastructure and business models, to exploring the key issues at the nexus of technology and pedagogy.

One example of this shift is the change from a focus on engaging faculty in the process of using the technology to promoting, through technology, the engagement of the student in the learning experience. There is no doubt that the role of the

faculty is to determine the nature of the learning outcomes, guide the learning experience, and facilitate the student's relationship with the discipline. The new focus concerns the perceptions and assumptions underlying the faculty member's expression of that role and whether and how the faculty member uses technology to enable students to engage in a meaningful learning experience. Thus, the May 2002 NLII Focus Session in Vancouver, British Columbia, brought together learning theorists and instructional designers with information technologists to explore the area of convergence of pedagogy and technology and the implications for teaching and learning.

In another example of the shifting agenda, the 2002 NLII fellows Colleen Carmean and Jeremy Haefner, discussing the role of technology in promoting what they term “deeper learning,” have observed: “An online world is social, anytime and all the time.”² Today's students express a natural affinity for working as part of teams or study groups. Technology facilitates the nurturing of these new academic and social relationships by enabling constant communication among group members, leading to a blurring of the lines between the social and the intellectual lives of the student. Learning design for this online world must mesh technology and pedagogy.

Another active item on the new NLII agenda is transformational assessment, in which outcomes, linked to specific objectives, are evaluated systematically at many levels throughout the institution to provide information to determine the appropriate “next steps” to take toward transformation. This type of assessment program requires

the courage to commit to actions that will lead to systemic change and the investment of resources in a multilevel assessment strategy. Student outcomes assessment, including the role of e-portfolios, is part of this agenda area.

Finally, William H. Graves, NLII Planning Committee chair, has recently argued that instead of viewing the resources allocated to information technology as expenses, institutions of higher education should treat them in terms of return on investment (ROI).³ Adopting such a perspective helps the institution to understand that return is in the eyes of the beholder. Students might value aspects of the learning experience, parents might value the employability of the student, and faculty might value the student's potential as a researcher in a given discipline. Learning outcomes assessment needs to be sufficiently sensitive to take into consideration the many dimensions of perceived ROI.

All of these examples of the shifting NLII agenda require a questioning of assumptions and a change in perspective. Those of us who espouse transformation are also challenged to question and to change as we inform our own perspective on these important issues.

Notes

1. Diane L. Coutu, “The Anxiety of Learning: An Interview with Edgar H. Schein,” *Harvard Business Review* 80, no. 3 (March 2002): 100–106.
2. Colleen Carmean and Jeremy Haefner, “Mind and Matter: Learning, Teaching and Course Management Systems” (draft article).
3. William H. Graves, “New Educational Wealth as a Return on Investment in Technology,” *EDUCAUSE Review* 37, no. 4 (July/August 2002): 38–48.

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