

## The Burnsie Phenomenon

**T**en years after the launch of the National Learning Infrastructure Initiative (NLII), founded on the conviction that information technology has the power to transform teaching and learning, the higher education establishment is still loath to discuss freely the implications of the influence of the enabling power of IT on the academy. To do so is too often perceived as an attack on core academic values. Such a discussion does not follow a traditional, well-marked academic path.

This brings to mind the story of Burnsie. As dogs go, Burnsie, who belongs to a colleague, is at the high end of the canine intelligence continuum. He has a very well defined sense of his role and identity. For example, Burnsie loves to go to the groomer, but he does not like to go anywhere else in the car. He knows every landmark along the drive to the groomer. Should the driver attempt to go somewhere else or to take a different route to the groomer, Burnsie expresses righteous indignation; he feels safe and content only when following the well-marked route to the same place. Likewise, Burnsie knows every detail of the grooming process and treats any alteration in that process as an attack and reacts defensively. It is easier for those who have to deal with his behavior to do what Burnsie wants than to suffer the effects of his wrath.

We humans might laugh at Burnsie's persistence in protecting and preserving his comfort zone. He obviously does not realize that there are other, equally advantageous routes to his valued destination. But are we really so different? Don't we fight hard to preserve what we know

and value? Don't we often express indignation or react defensively when our familiar processes are changed or challenged? This is what I call the "Burnsie phenomenon."

So much of our professional decision-making is influenced by perceptions, expectations, and the so-called social mores resulting therefrom. New technologies alter the reality on which these social contracts are based. Networking, wireless connectivity, the WWW, gaming, community-building tools, and so on have, to various degrees, changed the way many of us get and organize information, conduct our personal and business affairs, stay linked with friends and family, and entertain ourselves. New technologies even influence our sense of place, the physical space in which we feel comfortable and secure.

However, perceptions and expectations seem to lag behind behavior. Students, for example, use PDAs and wireless to stay in touch with each other, to get information, and to vet their ideas and thought processes, but they also expect to sit in a college classroom, bored and restless though they may be. Faculty use the Web to keep up with the latest thinking in their disciplines, but they likewise expect to teach in a traditional classroom setting—and woe to the student who fiddles with a PDA or blogs during a lecture.

Higher education institutions, in general, have successfully resisted the influence of new technologies on how they carry out their internal policies, practices, and services, as well as on how they design and use space. Processes and places may no longer be functional, but they are

familiar. Familiar feels right. Right is right; different is wrong.

Or is it? Budget cuts, students who clearly are not engaged in a lecture format, accrediting agencies' growing interest in learning outcomes, and a rising frustration with higher education's resistance to change are causing some to question the familiar processes and places. Could it possibly be that the external forces of transformation have finally become so pervasive that continuing to rely on traditional means to meet traditional expectations, as the only way to preserve core academic values, might be a greater threat to those core values than turning to a systemic transformation program? Could open discourse and critical thinking be used positively to examine reasons to change, rather than reasons *not* to change?

NLII is working with the IMS Global Learning Consortium and others to develop a set of scenarios that express the academic outcomes of technological advances. Scenarios offer nonthreatening ways to imagine new processes and alternative routes. It is ironic that it has taken those of us who claim to understand the positive impact of technology on teaching and learning so long to figure out how to express this impact in terms of genuine academic outcomes. But these scenarios do just that. Typically, when we run a scenario by faculty colleagues, the reaction is: "Oh, isn't that wonderful! Now I get it."

That's quite a change from the Burnsie phenomenon.

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