

## Asking the Right Question

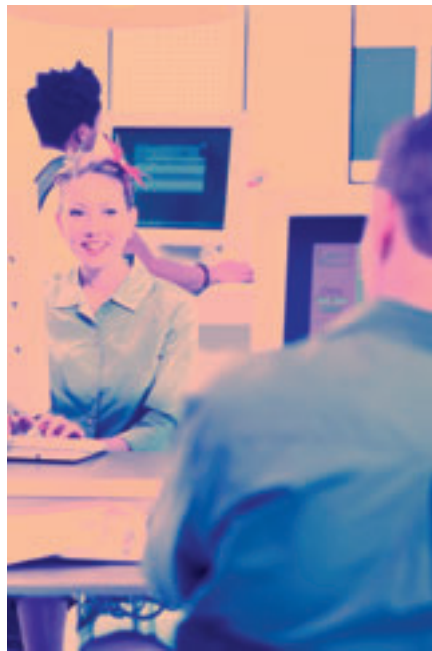
**W**e ask questions so that we can find answers. Most of the time, this works well—but only if we ask the right questions.

Let's focus on students. When it comes to teaching, learning, technology, and students, it is very easy to ask the wrong question. Because students in the current generation seem to be technologically savvy, we often want to know how they use technology. So as part of the NLII's focus on the next generation of learners—the Net Generation—we started talking to students. In fact, we asked a student to interview other students around the country, at all types of institutions.

The first several times we asked students what technology they used, we received blank stares. They weren't sure what we meant by the word *technology*. The way they phrased their responses was interesting. They spoke about “talking” on e-mail, about “IMing,” about “being slash-dotted.” Whereas we expected students to talk about things (nouns), they talked about actions (verbs). Their conversations focused on the activity; for them, the technology itself has disappeared.

We then asked, “What do you classify as technology?” The students didn't consider standard hardware or software to be technology. Essential ingredients for technology, they said, were that it be something new and that it be something customizable. For them, Microsoft Office is not technology: it is software that comes in a box and can't be customized. Instant messaging is not technology: it isn't new. The same was true of blogs and wikis. Most of the items on our technology list weren't on theirs.

Next we asked, “What do you want to



do with technology?” The students said they want to communicate. When they communicate, their vehicles are e-mail, IM, chat, cell phones, IP phones—any technology that allows them to get in touch with each other. They aren't constrained to a single communication channel at any given time. Students also want to socialize and be part of a community. They have long buddy lists; they belong to orkut; they share photos through Flickr. None of this is technology; this is just how they get things done. Technology is simply a means to an end.

Rather than asking students about academic technology, we asked them to describe their ideal learning environment. We expected to hear about games, simulations, online chats, wikis, and the like. Instead we heard that they want faculty who are experts. One student said, “I want my professor to know as much as he

or she can because I only have fifteen weeks to learn as much about the subject as I can.” To be sure, they would like IT to be part of their learning environment, but they don't necessarily desire highly advanced technologies. Online access to syllabi, readings, and old exams was mentioned, as was online submission of homework. A bit of PowerPoint can help, but as one student chided, “PowerPoint is to give power to a particular point; don't use it for everything.”

As we listened to the words that students were using to describe their desired learning environment, we kept hearing *interaction*, as well as *hands-on*. As one student said: “Doing hands-on work and working in groups, students get a better grasp of concepts the professor is trying to teach. Using technology only enhances the hands-on experience, but does not—and cannot—replace human interaction.” If we had asked what technology students were using, we would have missed some very important points.

What about renovating or building new campus facilities or designing learning spaces for specific types of learning activities? If we were to ask students how, where, or when they learn, we might discover that out-of-class time and informal spaces are most important in their learning. But to get that answer, we have to ask the right question.

It is easy to ask questions about technology; it is more difficult to ask the right questions. Only by asking the right question will we get the right answer.

---

**Diana G. Oblinger is Vice President of EDUCAUSE, where she is responsible for the association's teaching and learning activities and for the direction of the National Learning Infrastructure Initiative (NLII).**