

Incremental Innovations: Changing the Culture of Teaching and Learning

Many of us know the parable of the boiled frog. A frog exposed to water that is too hot to live in will quickly jump out of it. However, if a frog is put in cold water and the water is warmed slowly, the frog will stay in so long that by the time it realizes that the circumstances have changed, it is unable to act. And herein lies the challenge of every change initiative:

- If the change is too drastic, the resistance to change might be too high.
- If the change is too slow, the involved stakeholders won't move anymore. They will sit in their warm water, without recognizing that the environment is changing and that they need to act.

With the strategic initiative we launched in 2000 at the University of St. Gallen, we heated the water quite quickly for faculty, students, and administrators. Within the frame of the institution's mission "to assert itself as an internationally leading academic university and to send extremely well-educated graduates into academic research and the practical working world," we introduced a new type of teaching and learning. We called it *technology-enhanced self-studies*, and the challenge was to replace approximately 25 percent of the curriculum traditionally covered by lectures or the like with this new type of study. New learning environments had to be designed, and faculty members had to shift their role from the sage-on-the-stage to the guide-by-the-side. The underlying vision of this new concept was not just to integrate technology-supported self-studies as a

new method but also to pursue new goals: to assist our students in developing competencies for lifelong learning.

In change management terminology, we decided on a *radical* instead of an *evolutionary* approach. We knew that the cultural change would be the major challenge for students and faculty. With this reform, we initiated the most radical change initiative the university has seen since it was founded in 1898.

How It Began

Stakeholder management was extremely important. As a result, our students were involved right from the start. A study group was formed in 1999 for implementing a new concept of studies; the group was intended to plan and develop the complete reorganization of studies at the university into a two-level bachelor and master degree program. The group consisted of the president, a representative from each of the four faculties, and a project group for the implementation. Within the framework of conducting numerous workshops, reaching agreements in internal committees, obtaining external expert knowledge, and carrying out a benchmark study on business schools, the group succeeded in getting a new degree program architecture developed and passed by a large majority in the senate and university council. So, the "frogs" had agreed on heating the water dramatically. But did they fully anticipate

the personal implications? During the implementation phase, the main concern was to prevent the "frogs" from jumping out of the water.

Keeping the Momentum

In my experience, a clear and convincing vision and an easy-to-communicate strategy are key to getting started and managing the change. This strategy is all about winning the hearts of the involved faculty and students. A pure top-down strategy would most likely fail in the culture of higher education. We followed a bipolar strategy, which combines top-down initiatives with bottom-up involvement. The top-down element obliges the faculties to redesign their courses so that at least 25 percent of the curriculum is covered by technology-enhanced self-studies. The bottom-up element encourages the faculty to come up with innovative approaches to implement the set frame. This sounds simple, but the day-to-day realities still need one key trait: perseverance. Our cultural change at St. Gallen is a long-term process. In my experience, the most important interventions are the little ones, which most

leaders forget to do or forget about having done. When change is successful, it is the quantity of the little things that makes the final difference.

Taking the "Little Steps"

Based on our experience, the following are some recommendations for con-

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tinually changing the existing culture of teaching and learning at colleges and universities:

1. *Provide information*: continuous and trustworthy information, ranging from keeping the vision alive to connecting good practices
2. *Communicate attitudes*: measures that pertain to the attitude level and that lead to teachers becoming more interested, curious, and open to the topic of e-learning (within the framework of a communications strategy: e.g., marketing, events, sweepstakes)

knowledge and skills in various formats and levels of intensity (e.g., courses, workshops, presentations)

5. *Design quality development with learning in mind*: measures that monitor, secure, and develop quality support for the acquisition of competence within the scope of certifications or accreditations
6. *Offer advisory support*: support centers that provide help to the faculty in the planning, development, and implementation of e-learning, so that competencies and experiences are developed

and take on responsibility (“process ownership”)

Implementing Constant Change as a Learning Organization

One dimension of our approach is to come up with results that are measurable in precise terms. Apart from these tangible results (i.e., 25% technology-enhanced self-study within the curriculum), a second dimension is to promote, within the university, new potentials and capabilities addressing the challenge of how we can shift from the “organizing of teaching” to the “enabling of learning.” The ideal of a learning culture based on self-responsibility is deeply connected with this concept, in which people have an openness and readiness for change and innovation. This approach needs a dedicated institution focused on learning innovations based on research and practice. Since 2003, the Swiss Centre for Innovations in Learning (<http://www.scil.ch>) has been affiliated with the Institute of Business Education and Educational Management (IWP) at the University of St. Gallen. SCIL connects renowned experts from the fields of educational management, strategy development, learning design, learning technologies, and change management. Such a catalyst and promoter for innovations in learning is the grounding for continuous development and improvements.

Clear strategic aims and visions communicated vigorously, bottom-up innovations facilitated and funded at a considerable scale, and an innovation center orchestrating, fueling, and reflecting the processes of change—these are the main ingredients of our innovation strategy. We call it “unbended flexibility”: searching for new ways and methods in a highly flexible manner but at the same time sticking to the vision and major objectives of the innovation. Colleges and universities must spend their time inventing and planning for the future rather than defending the past. If they do not, they will end up like those frogs whose only choice is to die fast or to die slowly.

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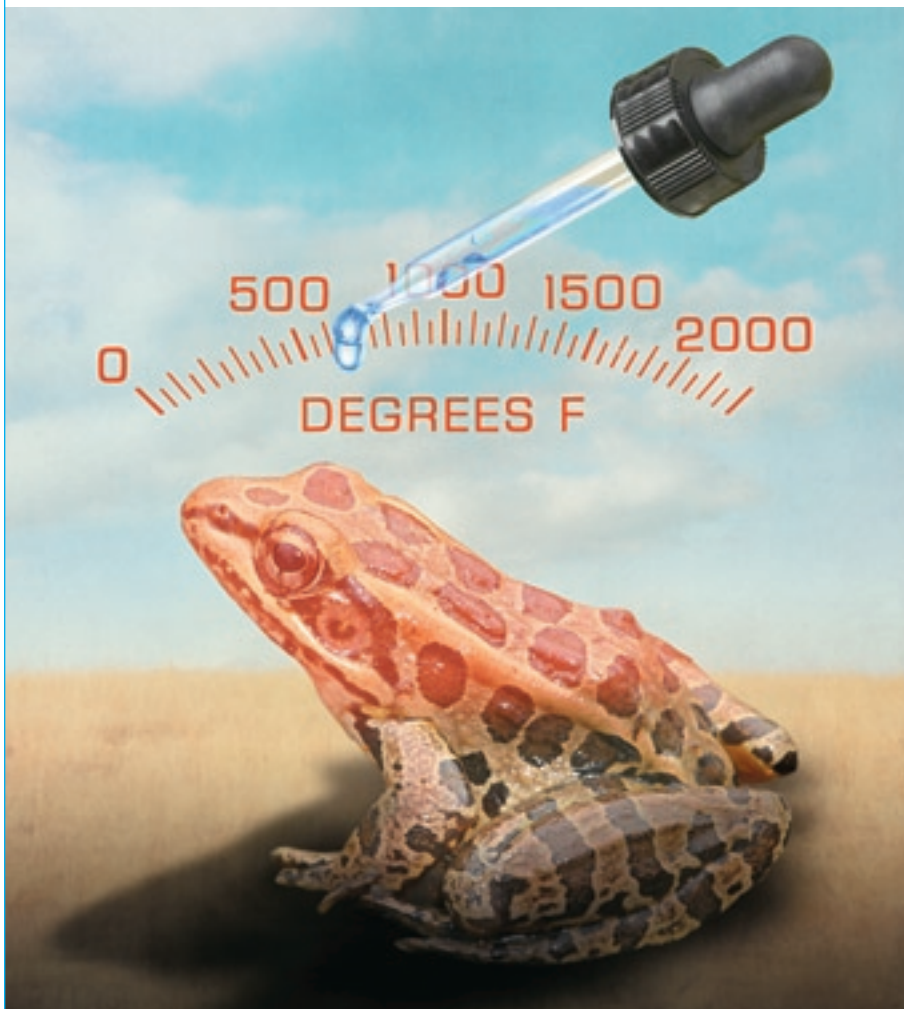


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3. *Increase the willingness to take action*: incentives that lead to teachers becoming more involved in the area of e-learning (e.g., announce e-learning projects, award premiums for good projects, implement project fundraising)
4. *Organize educational events*: all types of organized measures that impart

7. *Encourage exchange*: all measures that support communication among faculty about new forms of using instructional media (e.g., encourage meetings between colleagues, set up work groups)
8. *Evoke the desire to try out new approaches*: measures that play a role in ensuring that the participants become involved