

Business Cards for the Future

Handing out our business cards to new acquaintances outside of our field of educational technology is often an awkward moment for us. “Instructional Technologist,” the stranger reads with a puzzled frown, before adding the predictable question: “So what do you do?” We’ve actually had several informal meetings in our group, Curricular Computing at Dartmouth College, to try to solve our problem and come up with a better title. “Learning Technologist” is the latest contender, and although this one is more meaningful to us, it is highly doubtful that this job title will put an end to the looks of confusion.

The ill fit of our profession in the nomenclature of established job titles is symptomatic of the fact that the field is relatively new: instructional technologists were few and far between even a decade ago. But this is more than a problem of titular semantics. Our job descriptions themselves have been changing and evolving quite drastically; what we do now is very different from what we did a few years ago (as it is, presumably, from what we’ll be doing a few years hence).

A brief look at the professional biographies of the two of us can serve as an illustration. We both went through graduate school in the 1990s, Barbara receiving her Ph.D. in French literature and Josh his Ph.D. in sociology. We both started our careers as instructional technologists in 2001, coming from faculty backgrounds. In our roles as faculty members, we had been early adopters of web and educational technologies in our own classrooms, taking leading roles in our departments in promoting early technologies

and often supporting our colleagues’ efforts to introduce these technologies in their courses. At some point, our interest in and passion for teaching technologies surpassed our interest in and passion for our academic areas of expertise. We were both able to turn these early enthusiasms and skills for educational technology into full-time positions.

Yet despite our backgrounds in the classroom, pedagogy took a backseat during our first years as instructional technologists. Barbara, in particular, spent much of her time using HTML, CSS, JavaScript, and newly acquired design skills to build websites for early-adopter faculty. These were beautiful boutique sites, custom-designed for each course—definitely not following a self-service model. In true Web 1.0 fashion, our faculty content experts used the web primarily as a means to distribute materials and learning objects, and our role was that of a technically savvy bottleneck through which the content had to pass on its way from the content expert to its reincarnation on the web. Curricular computing groups did get to conceptualize and promote interactive widgets—driven by PHP or CGIs—but the bulk of our time was spent, essentially, on “putting curricular stuff on the web” and on dealing with a growing list of legacy websites, which all still needed attention.

Then came Blackboard—our first institution-wide, self-service solution to the business of “putting curricular stuff on the web.” As our course management system gained traction, and as we were able to steer faculty away from custom-designed websites and toward sites that they themselves built in Blackboard, our

roles gradually changed, along with the nature of our interactions with faculty. HTML, CSS, and advanced Photoshop skills became much less important, as did thinking about optimal interfaces on a per-course level. Instead, our Curricular Computing group began managing, developing, and customizing a campus-wide system, which quickly gained mission-critical status. Our focus shifted from creating our own widgets, often for a single course, to developing expertise in discovering, evaluating, deploying, and promoting tools that could plug into our Blackboard installation and, potentially, serve all courses. We were no longer technology experts without whom faculty could not get by. We became enablers and troubleshooters: delivering workshops, answering questions, and teaching faculty how to use a toolset we were maintaining for them. This lessened emphasis on technological expertise opened the door to a refreshing return to pedagogy, and our workshops shifted away from teaching faculty how to use technology tools and toward teaching them how to implement best practices and establish teaching and learning goals.

The advent of the Web 2.0 (r)evolution has changed our roles yet again. It’s not merely that the available toolset keeps changing and that we are now researching new and different solutions to the same old challenges for our faculty clients. Yes, we’ve adjusted our workshops to include many new tools (e.g., blogs, wikis, podcasting), but the more qualitative change is that these tools are participatory in nature and are no longer primarily “faculty tools.” Instead, we are now active players in a paradigm shift toward a new conceptualiza-

tion of teaching and learning—namely, one in which the roles of teacher and learner have been transformed. What Chris Dede recently called “a seismic shift in epistemology,”¹ one often mediated and nurtured through technologies (particularly emerging Web 2.0 social learning tools), has somewhat unexpectedly evolved into the central organizing principle for our professional identities.

There is increasing consensus among educational technology professionals that postsecondary education must move away from the traditional faculty- and lecture-centered models toward a student-centered, active and social

Also like many others in our field, we are latecomers to the theoretical frameworks, fundamental research, and conversations around pedagogy (particularly constructivist models). We are the products of an educational system that still posits the individual faculty member as the keeper and dispenser of knowledge at the top of the educational hierarchy; and we are more than familiar with the epistemological stance from which the majority of the faculty with whom we work approach teaching, a stance that does not yet allow much space for “active learning.”

And so we come with an agenda for change, and this is perhaps the most

consensus and empowered with an increasingly agile set of educational tools, change the culture and organization of the institutions in which they work? Basing our opinions on our own professional backgrounds and our own experiences observing and participating in this shift, we are both hopeful for the potential to fundamentally improve the organization and delivery of education, and we are both mindful of the potential pitfalls. We understand that in pushing for a new model of postsecondary educational delivery, we are taking a stand against the old model of faculty-centric, lecture-based courses. We are challenging a system that has worked very well for many stakeholders and institutions for many years. We firmly believe, however, that change is inevitable, primarily because new cohorts of students steeped in the norms of knowledge creation, information abundance, and constant communication and collaboration will no longer accept the traditional lecture model, in which they are passive receptacles of scarce knowledge. Learning/instructional technologists will have an essential role to play in the transition to a more participatory model of higher education.

What might the title on our business cards say in the near future, in this more participatory model? How about “Educational Change Agents”? Of course, there is a deep irony in any attempt to encode a desire for change in an item as richly symbolic of the status quo and established hierarchies as a business card. So we will probably have to settle for “Learning Technologist” for a while longer yet. But deep down, we know it: we’re out to change some of the fundamental practices of the academy, whether our business cards say so or not.

Note

1. Chris Dede, “A Seismic Shift in Epistemology,” *EDUCAUSE Review*, vol. 43, no. 3 (May/June 2008), pp. 80–81, <<http://connect.educause.edu/Library/EDUCAUSE+Review/ASeismicShiftinEpistemolo/46613>>.



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approach situated within a constructivist and participatory framework for learning. Belief in the need for such a paradigm shift—which can be called an “active learning consensus”—is now widely and deeply shared within our profession, if not yet among all the stakeholders in our institutions. For the two of us, efforts to bring pedagogical research, best practices, and a move toward active learning to courses—efforts often mediated and catalyzed through technology—are undertaken within the context of faculty who have both a wide range of technical competencies and limited formal training in pedagogy. Like many other learning/instructional technologists, we were subject specialists in an academic discipline and got into the field of educational technology due to our competence in and passion for the technical side.

radical shift in our job descriptions. Learning/instructional technologists are beginning to lay claim to a seat at the table for defining the strategic goals of the colleges and universities in which we work—goals that are framed around a new learning paradigm. In moving from being “support” entities to “change agents,” learning/instructional technologists and their departments are finding themselves in uncharted cultural and organizational territories. Each of us must engage in a constant balancing act between advocating for change (the active learning consensus) within institutions with long-established faculty and organizational roles and status hierarchies and working effectively within these structures.

How will the emergence of a discipline of learning/instructional technologists, coalesced around an active learning

Joshua Kim and Barbara Knauff are Educational Change Agents at Dartmouth College.

