

Support for Teaching and Learning: The Dilemma

During a question-and-answer session at the 2002 National Learning Infrastructure Initiative (NLII) annual meeting, a participant asked two students: "What is the most difficult thing about being a student these days?" The students had the same answer: "Having to sit through a class lecture without being able to check e-mail, surf the Web, and listen to music." Another participant then asked a faculty member: "How would you have answered that question?" The faculty member thought for a moment and said, "I would have answered calculus." This enlightening exchange typifies the current clash between faculty and students' cognitive styles on college and university campuses.¹

Today's "digital kids" take the socio-technological context of their world for granted.² They assume that faculty share and respect their cognition. They are first bewildered and then frustrated by the traditional lecture format and are beginning to equate convenience (learning anytime and anywhere) with the quality of the educational experience. Meanwhile, the possible loss of control over the time, place, and mode of learning is profoundly unsettling to many faculty members. Some feel that active learning, enabled by the Internet, ignores the importance of reflection and rhetoric and diminishes the role of the faculty member in guiding academic "taste." Yet faculty members who fail to adapt will risk finding themselves standing on the periphery of the students' learning experiences instead of orchestrating those experiences.

A growing majority of faculty recognize this risk and are thus seeking the support of their institutions in making the

necessary adaptations to design active-learning and knowledge-creation environments that immerse students in the cognitive style of the discipline. The problem is that most extant support practices and structures do not scale and are not sustainable. Designed to serve a few entrepreneurs who were largely technology-literate, most faculty-support services and associated institutional practices do not provide adequate resources for the faculty who now need significant help in revamping their pedagogy and indeed in coming to terms with their new role in the teaching and learning collaboration.³

In another session at the NLII annual meeting, David Brown and Sally Jackson argued that faculty would feel more comfortable if such assistance came from within the cognitive style of the faculty member's own discipline. Brown and Jackson postulated that the cultural values of independence and control are so deeply embedded in academic life that the effort involved in gaining acceptance of centralized support services would be better invested in developing structures and practices that facilitate departmentally based services.⁴ However, there is an opposing fiscal need for standards and consistency among services across the institution.

Resource constraints and the need to bring several areas of professional expertise to bear on course redesign require new forms of collaboration among support units that have traditionally reported through different administrative lines—for example, instructional design, instructional technology, and information technology. Herein lies the dilemma. The route to the right structural and fiscal arrangement to provide adequate instruc-

tional support for faculty on any given campus is neither simple nor risk-free. The immediate need for new support structures, for practices that allow some departmental control, and for changes in resource allocations to fund an appropriate balance of centralized and decentralized services requires forthright declaration as the means to the creation of a new, active-learning environment on campus.

It is ironic that higher education leaders continue to face political pressure, emanating from the rubric of shared governance, to maintain the status quo while individual faculty members, who face daily pressure to adapt their relationships with their students to the sociotechnological context of learning enabled by the Web, largely cannot secure the assistance they require within the confines of existing higher education culture and conventions. We should not expect the guidance for change of this magnitude—in institutional culture and values—to come from the faculty ranks. After all, faculty are deeply rooted in the traditional values of higher education. Fundamentally, this is a leadership issue.

Notes

1. Christopher Arismendez, John-Michael Warner, Colleen Carmean, and Jeremy Haefner, "Who Is This 'New Student,' Who Grew Up Being Digital?" NLII Annual Meeting, San Diego, January 28, 2002.
2. Vicki Suter, "A Different Kind of Legacy Problem," *EDUCAUSE Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (spring 2002): 9–11.
3. Paul R. Hagner, "Combining Faculty Engagement with Readiness Assessment: A Case in Point," NLII Annual Meeting, San Diego, January 28, 2002.
4. David G. Brown and Sally Jackson, "Discipline-Specific Teaching Support," NLII Annual Meeting, San Diego, January 29, 2002.

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