

Applying Change Creation to Improve Online Learning

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INTRODUCTION: ONLINE LEARNING AND TECHNOLOGY

Status in Education

Technology offers tremendous opportunities for increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of online learning in the future. Over the past few years, technology has been integrated into most areas of education. Most students, faculty, staff, and administrators now use technology extensively in their daily activities and have become reasonably computer and technology literate. However, with this rapid and broad introduction of technology into education and online learning, it, unfortunately, has done surprisingly little towards significantly enhancing the quality and productivity of our learning programs. Meaningful examples of where technology has led to significant improvements in the quality or productivity of online learning are atypical.

According to the report, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U. S. Higher Education* (2006), “American higher education has taken little advantage of important innovations that would increase capacity, effectiveness and productivity.”

The report goes on to say that:

Institutions ... failed to sustain and nurture innovation in our colleges and universities; ... that results of scholarly research on teaching and learning are rarely translated into practice ...; that little of the significant research of the past decade in areas such as cognitive science, neurosciences and organizational theory is making it into American classroom practice, whether at the K-12 level or in colleges and universities; our postsecondary institutions have not embraced opportunities for innovations, from new methods of teaching and content delivery to technological advances; both state and federal policymakers have failed to make sup-

porting innovation a priority by adequately providing incentives for individuals, employers, and institutions to pursue more opportunities for innovative, effective and efficient practice.

Among the report’s “strategic action” recommendations is:

Our colleges and universities must become more transparent, faster to respond to rapidly changing circumstances and increasingly productive in order to deal effectively with the powerful forces of change they now face.

In an interview for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on “E-Learning Successes and Failures” (January 5, 2007), Robert Zemsky, Chair of the Learning Alliance for Higher Education and co-author of *Thwarted Innovation: What Happened to E-Learning and Why* (Zemsky & Massy, 2004), puts much of the above in perspective for us relative to e-learning: “I thought that e-learning, through media-rich technology, might provide some solutions, but it hasn’t.” ... “But what we call e-learning is often just electronic workbooks.”

Neugent and Fox (January 1, 2007) provide an overarching reflection on the question of the “status of technology in learning” as follows: “Unfortunately, despite the large outlays of funds for hardware, software, and connectivity, the degree to which technology has been integrated into teaching and learning remains largely disappointing.”

BACKGROUND

Key Limiting Factors

With so much powerful technology available in the educational arena and with it comprehensively permeat-

ing education and online learning, why have we been so unsuccessful in using technology to substantially improve general and online learning?

Among the several reasons, five stand out:

- *Preoccupation with the technology itself:* The propensity for people to become overly enamored with the technology for its own sake as opposed to discovering how to use it as a powerful tool to improve the quality and productivity of the learning programs, especially online learning.
- *Cultural paralysis:* A lack of adequate cultural change. The strong, traditional academic culture is one of the most rigid and strongest cultures in society, often preventing leadership from nurturing an environment that encourages and rewards progressive change, taking sensible risks, new learning-system creativity and change-adaptability.
- *Technology mostly applied to the old learning systems:* Old learning systems are ingrained in the educational culture, successful relative to existing standards and optimized in effectiveness (i.e., reached their upper limit of productivity, Branson, 1998). Consequently, applying new online learning and technology to old learning systems provides little increase in learning quality and productivity. For substantial gains, new, more effective *learning systems* using online learning and technology must be created.
- *Wrong local focus for learning improvement:* Efforts to create genuine and meaningful change in learning systems at the local level *must* be done by the faculty and technology support people, where the new learning approaches are being designed and offered, with the overall encouragement and assistance of others at the institution. Regardless of what goes on elsewhere within the institution, if the faculty and technology support people do not collaboratively work together as a learning team to create the improved online learning systems targeting valid and valuable objectives, new effective learning approaches will not exist!
- *Lack of transformational leadership:* The proper environment and encouraging support for the development of more effective learning systems in online learning do not just naturally happen; they require intentional transformational leadership. Such leadership is good leadership plus leader-

ship that has the capability to help transform the existing circumstances, culture and processes, and realign human capital so that something new and more effective can be created and sustained. It is leadership that:

- a. Generates an inspiring and compelling vision for the direction of future efforts of and in the institution and one that is broadly supported across the institution;
- b. Has deeply held human values and respects people's unique talents and contributions;
- c. Creates an environment that nurtures excellence, risk taking, and creativity; and
- d. Becomes a strong and effective sponsor for all proposed change (as discussed in the later section on Roles and Sponsorship of Change).

Failure of Learning System Change Efforts

Efforts to develop more effective learning systems in education, in reality, are major change efforts, and must be effectively treated as such to be successful. A critical question is: Why do most of our significant learning and organizational change efforts involving online learning and technology seem to fail or be only partially successful? Educational leaders and faculty often avoid this question because it is natural to fear the answer. Bolman and Deal (1999) found that two-thirds of all organizational change efforts fail to meet their goals. But what is the answer? Typically, leaders and faculty would find the following:

- They had not fundamentally reframed their own thinking relative to major change involving online learning and technology. For example, effective leaders must be capable of reframing their own thinking and the thinking of those whom they guide, enabling them to see that significant change is not only imperative, but also achievable. Reframing often requires that old goals and cherished means must be changed and must be created based on relevant research and data, not just fantasies.

A new framing is demanded, a different teleology (i.e., dealing with different purpose or meaning that directs what we do toward a definite end for indi-

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