



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

February 22, 2018 ♦ Vol. XL, No. 6

Legacy Edition

Rip Van Winkle Goes to College

Most of us are familiar with Washington Irving's story about a man in colonial America named Rip Van Winkle who fell asleep in the Catskill Mountains and woke up 20 years later, having missed the American Revolution. Just imagine how different the world would be if you returned to it after an absence of 20 years. Those of us who have lived day by day through the astonishing technological advances of the past 20 years or so may not recognize just how dramatic they have been.

In March of 1995, Bill Flynn and I wrote an *Innovation Abstracts* titled, "Using Media to Deliver the Message." In our article, we talked about the emergence of technology to support distance education. We said, "We are witnessing a revolution in teaching and learning." However, we did not believe then that technology was being used to its potential outside of the classroom, and we would have been astonished to see how today's technological advances have continued to impact teaching. We wrote, "If we have the technology to make instruction more exciting and meaningful, should we not use the same technology to make our professional development activities and daily communication tasks easier and more enjoyable?" Just how far have we come in using technological advances in our teaching and in communication?

Technology Changes Operations

In 1958, when Ed Gleazer was appointed president and CEO of the American Association of Junior Colleges (now AACC), the primary method of communication to the field was typed newsletters and memoranda delivered to colleges by the United States Postal Service. When Dale Parnell succeeded Dr. Gleazer in 1981, one of his priorities was to secure funding for the installation of facsimile (fax) machines in community college presidents' offices around the country to expedite communications. When Dave Pierce succeeded Dr. Parnell in 1991, he began to communicate with the field through email. During my tenure at AACC, beginning in 2000, the *Community College Journal* and *Community College Times* newspaper (now *Community College Daily*) were published and searchable online, and the AACC website became a valuable information resource for community colleges.

Technology has also changed the way community colleges do business. In the 1980s, when I was president of Palomar College, we moved away from in-person student registration lines to telephone registration, and

then in the 1990s, to online registration. Today's students can order books online and may never visit the college bookstore. The card catalog is long gone from the library, and current research tools are more targeted and efficient.

The Technology Advancements Within My Classes

In the doctoral classes that I teach today on emerging issues in higher education, I use videoconferencing technology to beam well-known education leaders and policymakers into my classroom for discussions about current issues affecting our colleges and students. Students have their laptop computers, electronic tablets, and cell phones on during class, taking notes and searching the internet for the latest information about topics that come up during our discussions.

Between face-to-face class meetings, the students and I engage in lively online discussions about assigned topics or in response to questions that I ask, usually about an issue addressed in a recent higher education newspaper. I post information on the course learning management system (LMS) or engage in email exchanges with students daily for the duration of our course. Every student in the class participates in the discussions and exchanges with me and their peers. This new environment is a significant departure from the days when I began teaching chemistry in the lecture halls of the 1960s and 70s where ridged seating made it almost impossible for students to interact with one another and where students in the back row may never have asked a question or been called upon. Today, between face-to-face meetings, we sometimes schedule a virtual class session often involving a guest presenter whom the students can see and with whom they can interact. These sessions can be recorded and links to the sessions can be placed on the course LMS.

My students also listen to prerecorded interviews with policymakers and education authorities by clicking on links in the course LMS. Rather than a textbook, students access articles and books through electronic links or through the university virtual library. Students turn their assigned reports in electronically to the LMS, which automatically checks for original work. I grade the written work, typing comments and tracking suggested changes using word processing review tools. I can even record oral comments on individual student work. Students then view their grades and see or listen to my comments and suggested edits through the LMS.

Although I no longer lecture in my classes, I am frequently asked to speak or to consult in situations in which

a presentation is most appropriate. My speeches today make use of presentation software instead of 35-millimeter slides or overhead transparencies, and I often use internet connections to go to a website or to show a video clip to illustrate a point. Of course, presentations using newer technology can be as boring as any dull lecture if not prepared in ways that engage the audience. However, they do have the advantage of allowing the presenter to efficiently assemble a customized presentation.

Technology Leads to a Greater Understanding

Today's educational technology has almost forced a greater engagement between faculty and students. It is helping faculty to focus more on the learning environment for their students. However, classes that are mostly remote can be a challenge for students who would benefit more from the structure and motivation experienced in a physical classroom with an instructor and other students. Therefore, instructors need to regularly interact electronically with online students to encourage their engagement in class activities.

College leaders are also making use of technology to plan and to make data-informed decisions. They can evaluate the effect of new strategies to improve college completion rates and to improve operational efficiencies. Analytics can now help colleges identify students who are most at-risk of failure or dropping out, allowing college personnel to intervene and provide needed individualized support.

Should We Only Rely on Technology?

I am not an expert on educational technology, and other writers are likely to be much more knowledgeable about the topic. I am an educator who has been privileged to be a teacher, administrator, and observer during a time when new technologies have made it possible to increase student engagement and to make college processes more efficient and effective. With my experiences in mind, I have recognized a few complications when only relying on complex technology. Community colleges were early adopters of online education and, today, online courses are usually the first to fill during class registration. However, studies have shown that student attrition is higher in online courses than in hybrid (part in-person and part online) or in-person courses. Unless an online class is highly structured with built-in tools for engagement and evaluation, students may not have the self-discipline that it takes to complete the course. For that reason, entirely online courses may not be the best method of promoting student learning in developmental courses.

Massive open online courses (MOOCs), once thought to transform higher education, proved to have limited potential to replace other methods of instruction. Because of the high student-to-faculty ratio, engagement between faculty and students is limited, and the attrition rates are shockingly high. However, MOOCs may have potential uses for those who are not interested in a degree or credential or as supplementary material for a

more traditional college course. MOOCs are still alive and delivering instruction in some developing countries.

We also need to be cautious of overreliance on technology. Not too long ago, I was stuck in an airport for several hours because an airline's reservation system malfunction caused all of its planes to be grounded. In an earlier time, planes were able to fly without computers, yet on that day a computer problem paralyzed the company. Recent news stories carried reports about how wearable fitness devices enabled hackers to determine the location of U.S. military installations, putting our soldiers at risk. We need to be sure that our college systems have appropriate security to ensure student and employee information is secure, and redundancy to serve as a backup in case information is lost or stolen.

Conclusion

Higher education institutions have been historically slow to change. We probably all still know about some faculty members and administrators who resist using technology. Paul Elsner, the former chancellor of the Maricopa Community College District in Arizona, once told me a story about a faculty member at one of the Maricopa colleges who used his office computer only as an expensive doorstop. I have seen significant changes in educational methodology during my career, and newly-hired faculty have grown up in a technological world in which they have generally used social media and other electronic methods of communication, entertainment, and learning most of their lives. Instructors and their students will drive the use of technology to improve teaching and learning in our colleges. Pressure to improve student success rates will force institutions and systems to use technology to support students and to make data-informed decisions that lead to improved outcomes. What will the next 20 years bring?

George R. Boggs, Ph.D., is *President and CEO Emeritus of the American Association of Community Colleges* and *Superintendent/President Emeritus of Palomar College* in California. He is a *Clinical Professor in Community College Leadership for the Roueche Graduate Center of National American University* and an *Adjunct Professor of Community College Leadership for San Diego State University*.

For further information, contact the author at Palomar College, 315 Sycamore Creek Lane San Marcos, CA, 92069. Email: gboggs@palomar.edu