



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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SOME THOUGHTS ON "INTERACTIVITY"

It seems everywhere you look there are conferences, seminars, and workshops focusing on educational technology—and for good reason. New developments in technology are truly enhancing the educational process in exciting ways. In fact, many of the innovations discussed only 10 years ago have become standard in today's educational setting. However, in the years ahead, I think we will come to appreciate one positive effect of the present technological revolution that has little to do with technology. It is ironic that what we may gain from technology is not only its potential as an instructional medium but its power to serve as a catalyst for quality control in the realm of traditional classroom tactics.

We've all heard it before—"technology will never replace the classroom teacher"; "technology is only an aid, a supplement"; and, one of my favorites, "technology is just a tool." However, if we follow each of these statements, we discover there is something more to consider. Specifically, the prediction that technology will never replace the classroom teacher usually stops short of suggesting the particular type of teacher that might be replaced. This is important because, in reality, there is one type of instructor destined for the list of endangered species as a direct result of technology—specifically, the static lecturer.

No More Talking Heads!

Of course, lecturing will always be a valuable part of the educational process. However, the increasing importance of supplementing narrative with some other activity hit me like a ton of bricks when I attended a recent lecture delivered by a well-known professor emeritus. Although the experience was informative, in the midst of the event I found myself asking the following question: "What am I doing here?" Not in the sense of what am I here for, but rather, what is really going on. Subsequently, I found myself asking three more specific questions: 1) Why do I need the professor in this par-

ticular physical location simply to listen to this lecture? 2) In what ways are his physical gestures enhancing his message? 3) What would I forfeit if the lecture were delivered to me electronically, perhaps in the comfort of my own home?

With regard to the first two questions, I had a hard time thinking of anything significant. However, answers to the last question came immediately. I would have to give up the uncomfortable chair, the ice-cold room, the professor's soft voice that made hearing difficult, the annoying comments by my neighbor which made listening difficult, and the heavy traffic I had to negotiate on my way to the lecture. In short, if there was any reason I needed to be in that specific location for the professor's lecture, it was so that I could ask a question, if necessary. However, based on my growing experience with the various products available for real-time audio exchange via the Internet, I realized that even this was no longer a serious obstacle.

The technology required to deliver a lecture off-campus has been with us for a long time. The tape recorder, phonograph, and television have always had the potential to be effective educational tools. However, it is the recent advances in instructional technology that are forcing us to reassess the real possibilities of education at a distance. Specifically, the emergence of synchronous (real-time) communication in a variety of formats has become commonplace. As people spend more time interacting via computer-based communications, their worldview is rapidly shifting toward a paradigm in which electronic interactivity is accepted and, in many instances, expected. The Internet and supporting programs that promote the concept of simulated presence are obvious contributors to this environment.

Education and the New World View

So what is the point? Well, it is important to realize that, along with the advances in information exchange, the whole concept of "interactivity"—integral to the marketing of most new computer-related products—is spilling over into our traditional worldview. One now expects a degree of interactivity to be found in automo-



biles, kitchen appliances, telephones, and the classroom. Students experiencing this interactive world are no longer content simply to listen. Just as the latest technogadget vies for market share with a promise of some interactive feature, instructors at all levels are finding it necessary to adopt, and effectively utilize, methods that foster interactivity—with or without technological aid—or be replaced by those who can. An interesting fact is that although the sudden emphasis on interactivity is largely due to technology, in most cases the wonders of technology are not required to deliver a truly interactive experience in the classroom. The simplest of interactive techniques (thanks to Socrates) can prove to be extraordinarily effective strategies.

It is no coincidence that popular phrases encountered in educational dialogue—e.g., “engagement learning,” “collaborative learning,” and “learning community,” all of which suggest an interactive element—have emerged at the same time instructors face growing competition

COMMUNITY COLLEGES AS NATIONAL PARTNERS

As a political scientist and historian, one of the most challenging aspects of my teaching has been to interest students in government and history. To a large extent, students do not see the relevance of government actions and policies on their lives. One of the realities of changing demographics is the growing impact of government decisions on average citizens—even more profound in this era of post-September 11. More than ever before, students must be proactive in using their libraries and reading books about government policies to understand better the many post-attack decisions by the current administration and how current and future policies will continue to affect their daily lives.

As of fall 2001, Baltimore City Community College (BCCC) students can pursue a transfer degree with a public policy option. This option gives students a rare opportunity to study federal governmental policies, as well as policies made locally. Students examine policies from a practical standpoint, to some extent even offering themselves as studies in motion. Students pursuing this new degree are enthusiastic; they are learning that government is not an abstract notion, that it has breath, and that it breathes heavily on them.

One of the unique features of this option is that it is being offered within the axis of the national political trilogy (Congress, the Presidency, and the Courts). Students at BCCC have excellent access to critical institutions where they can witness public policy in its

from technology that fosters interactivity. On the positive side, this is an indicator that some educators are stepping up to the challenge of providing educational experiences that will rival the best video games. At the same time, however, some instructors have good reason to be worried. Students are growing tired of being fed a stream of monotonic facts and opinions. As students begin to discover the rewards of playing a bigger part in the learning process, the more they will come to acknowledge their own capacity for learning. When this happens, educators have truly earned their pay.

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development and in action, as well as to major four-year and research institutions with programs in public policy (all within a five-mile radius)—e.g., the University of Maryland, the University of Baltimore (with whom BCCC has a transfer agreement), and Johns Hopkins University. In addition, the location of other important focus groups within the Baltimore-Washington and Baltimore-Towson metropolitan areas gives BCCC a distinct advantage for attracting high school students, as well as more mature students, who are looking to pursue college studies in public service but hesitant to go directly into major research institutions. Clearly, students appreciate the community atmosphere in community colleges where they can foster practical intellectualism with professors who are dedicated to fostering their limitless academic potentials. In 2003, BCCC awarded transfer degrees with a public policy option to two students who are now pursuing baccalaureate degrees in government and public policy.

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