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Out of the Cabbage Patch

It is not a secret to readers of *EDUCAUSE Review* that the challenge of curricular relevance and student engagement in higher education is a national concern. One aspect of this challenge is that students' social networking and technology proclivities are rarely met by conventional curricula and pedagogies. Educators have much to lose if we fail to transform current practice. Just how much we have to lose was profoundly illustrated to me on a recent trip I took to Malawi, Africa, where a group of educators and an affiliate non-governmental organization (NGO) have been working to expand opportunities for Washington State University students as well as for our partners in Africa.

Although they have water in Malawi, the rainy season is not long. One of our projects has been to help farmers irrigate their crops. A team of students and faculty helped local farmers build and implement treadle-pump technology. The team included engineering students who did a brilliant job of adapting the foot pumps so that the pumps could be developed with materials available to Malawians. One farmer used the treadle pump and went from twenty cabbages in a season to two thousand. But when the local NGO decided to show off the project and brought in a group of dignitaries, the farmer complained: "Before, I had twenty cabbages. I could eat them and share them with my village. What can I do with two thousand rotting cabbages? *This treadle pump is very bad technology!*"

The story provides several lessons that illuminate implications for technology, education, and beyond.

Lesson 1: It's Not the Technology

In pronouncing that the treadle pump is bad technology, the farmer echoes an old, but not well-learned, lesson: the availability and readiness of a technology—*however useful it might seem*—does not ensure a corresponding readiness among those who use and might benefit from the technology. For the farmers, as for students, our "success" may not be their "success." No educational technology has made this point more clear than the course management system, which is used pervasively (and successfully) as a courier system for content and grades. Though there is nothing wrong with those uses, they hardly justify the costs or touch on the potential envisioned by early innovators before the technology was saddled with its current name. The metaphor embedded in that name—*course management system*—is perhaps the best indicator that a tool with the potential to crack open educational space and time constraints now provides mostly powerful leverage for the reigning dominance of in-the-box thinking—thinking that fails to leverage the social and burgeoning technological aptitudes of learners, fails to harness the power of collaborative learning and peer critiques, systems thinking, and global awareness, and most important, fails to cultivate learners' pro-social instincts that ultimately make learning interesting. Subsequently, we educators find ourselves acting much like the farmer, clutching our red pens and cursing the piles of half-baked student papers as if they were rotting cabbages.

Lesson 2: It's Not the Course

The Malawian farmer's lament also indicates the old wisdom that instead of giving

a man a fish, we would do better to feed him for a lifetime by teaching him how to fish. The story of the cabbage farmer demonstrates that it is not enough to aspire to feed ourselves alone on our farm—or to teach alone in our classroom. Meaningful prosperity requires a new vision of collaboration. It isn't just one course that matters; it is the sum of lessons and learning experiences inside and, more than ever, outside of the classroom, precisely where blogs, wikis, e-portfolios, and the Web have evolved to take us. As Colleen Carmean has noted, "Technology and the learners have left us behind."¹ Already a majority of students are taking courses simultaneously from more than one institution (a practice called *swirling*), and they are taking courses offered in both online and blended modes. Curricular coherence is a myth. Course designs vary dramatically, with disparate and often ill-defined goals, caused by a growing disparity in students' preparation for that curriculum and, perhaps most deeply challenging, by a crumbling of the bedrock assumption that current (or any imaginable) curricula can anticipate the jobs, the life, and the world that graduates will encounter. The old news that a small percentage of graduates actually wind up working in careers related to their majors continues to elude the current approach to curriculum and instruction. Add the recent news that most of the future jobs for those students now entering higher education have not yet been invented, and the curriculum as usual, wrapped around either a faculty member's idiosyncratic expertise or a textbook chock-full of (obsolete before printed) facts, grows more alarming—as do the future pros-

pects for the efficacy of a degree.

All of this has profound implications for the emerging Web 2.0, e-learning 2.0, and Personal Learning Environments (PLEs). Yet even as applications like e-portfolios again push the locus of learning out of the classroom and back to the student, even as institutions scramble to maintain some value for credentialing student progress, there is only dubious evidence that students are emerging from the labyrinth of their educational experiences prepared to prosper in the rapidly shrinking, flatter world that awaits them. Why? In part because there is even less evidence that educators are doing what we need to do to impart the critical and integrative thinking skills and the global perspectives that will enable students to embrace the potential of PLEs in the world of Web 3.0 and beyond. We've known for a while that only about half of Americans see a four-year degree as essential to success in society.²

A world waits beyond current educational practice. Preparing to participate in that world requires more than in-the-box thinking. The educators who will succeed are those who recognize that the job of educating has also changed. It is no longer about content delivery (if it ever was). It is about designing deeply engaging, media- and socially rich experiences and helping learners develop their abilities for critical and integrative learning. And it is about facilitating their abilities to help each other learn. Doing so means that we can't just stand at the lectern and piddle with PowerPoint. We need to recognize that "our" classes are, at best, parts of a much larger whole and that our educational goals won't happen in a single class or grow in a single season. But doing so will also require that we overcome the one challenge that educators have traditionally found to be the most difficult: collaborating outside of our silos.

Lesson 3: It's Not the Digital Divide

The most obvious and compelling lesson of the story of the farmer and the cabbage is that the most critical divide is not digital. Technology access is a symptom of

deeper global challenges. More people on the planet live like the Malawian cabbage farmer than like those of us who waltz on the deck of the *USS Higher Education*. Pressing global and even local civic issues go largely unattended while learners lament that so much of their learning is "irrelevant to the demands [they] feel they will face."³ The issues we all face are more complicated than current notions that call for the preparation of students to compete in a global workforce by requiring more science and math courses

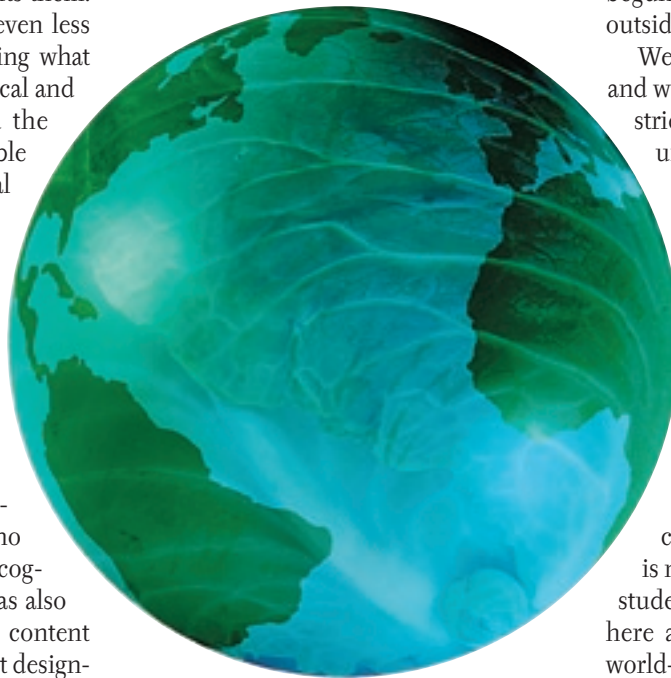


Illustration by Randy Lyhus, © 2007

without also re-envisioning those skills in the larger interdisciplinary context that gives them meaning. Two thousand cabbages are more than twenty cabbages, as even a poor farmer knows. The explanation of why (and whether) it is better to have surplus crops—and how to turn a surplus into meaningful advantage within an economic, psychological, sociological, and political context—is something that takes, well, a village, a *global village*.

Epilogue

Our colleagues in Africa have already helped establish a cooperative for a more effective distribution of crops. At Washington State, we have implemented a wiki and have engaged faculty and students from many disciplines in the real work of project design, development, and man-

agement. We have met with educators in the university and agricultural schools in Malawi and, using the Internet, are bringing them and their students together with faculty and students in many disciplines, ranging from political science, community and rural sociology, and food science and nutrition to world civilizations and fine arts. Faculty and students are working together to identify and design real projects and establish new social networks. There are technology-access and bandwidth issues, of course, but we have begun work with professionals inside and outside of education to move forward.

We are only beginning our efforts, and we are far from being the first. Great strides are being made in schools and universities worldwide to promote global awareness and global engagement. K-12 programs are in many ways leading the way. "We cannot consider ourselves literate," elementary educators remind us, "if we don't have an understanding of global issues, cultural similarities and differences, and the interconnections between peoples and countries from around the world."⁴ What the cabbage farmer teaches us, finally, is not only that it is possible to engage students with the very real challenges, here and abroad, that are shaping the world—but that it is *urgent* we do so.

Notes

1. Ali Jafari, Patricia McGee, and Colleen Carmean, "Managing Courses, Defining Learning: What Faculty, Students, and Administrators Want," *EDUCAUSE Review*, vol. 41, no. 4 (July/August 2006): 62, <<http://www.educause.edu/er/erm06/erm0643.asp>>.
2. Jeffrey Selingo, "What Americans Think about Higher Education," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 2, 2003.
3. Jafari, McGee, and Carmean, "Managing Courses, Defining Learning," 62.
4. Diane Demee-Benoit, "Putting Global Education Front and Center," *Spiral Notebook Blog*, December 13, 2006, *EduTopia: The George Lucas Educational Foundation*, <<http://www.edutopia.org/community/spiralnotebook/?p=199>>.



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