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In spite of boasts and hopes from many quarters, the window of opportunity for significant instructional change made possible by new technologies appears to be closing. Certainly technologies are gaining increased acceptance and are changing at an amazing pace. And those changes certainly support innovation for the many instructors inclined to take advantage of them. But evidence of that innovation and of broad and substantial pedagogical change is being eclipsed in mainstream education by efforts to make the technology more marketable and easier to use. The new and challenging instructional role of faculty in helping students learn is being blurred, bundled, and shrink-wrapped for cyberspace without much discussion.

I make these observations from a sampling of recent articles in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*—the bellwether of the academy. Tracking technology news in *The Chronicle* (paper and online) is like monitoring the *Academic Guide*; one gets a sense of the topics and the trends brought to the surface by the churning changes in education, changes stemming in large measure from the technology revolution.

For instance, a recent issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* notes the steps institutions are taking to prepare their students for online learning. Jeffrey Young's (1999) report identifies Penn State's "World Campus 101" course designed to prepare students for taking online courses. The opportunity to orient students to the demands of online learning is a useful strategy for helping them adjust to new technologies and to the nuances of technology-based learning.

What ought to be noted, however, is Young's observation that "the course site reads more like a computer instruction manual than a lecture." Perhaps even more interesting is the Penn State vice provost's closing note that though "the main goal of World Campus 101 is to help students feel comfortable in online classes . . . the course is a promotional tool as well."

Such statements certainly illustrate the emergence of competition in higher education. These are responses to the change in instructional mode to online environments. But changes in mode, style (from lectures to computer manuals),

and even purpose (comfort and promotion) are probably not what most of us identify as indicative of productive pedagogical change. By productive change, I mean new strategies that challenge students to think more deeply; that foster students' engagement with faculty, their peers, and diverse points of view; or that encourage students to consider the social and political implications of the content they learn, even helping them to apply that content in new contexts.

The emergence of market competition in higher education in particular has complex implications beyond designing promotional courses. Among them are the challenges confronting faculty who are being urged to convert their materials for online delivery. It is not surprising, therefore, that approaches to capturing and orienting students have counterparts designed to get faculty involved in the conversion process.

The University of Missouri at St. Louis, for instance, now promotes an easy-to-use software program that, as the title of Florence Olsen's (1999) report indicates, "Helps Professors Put Their Course Information On Line." More specifically, as the article later states, the program is designed to help faculty do their work "easily and quickly." Its developers report, that "any faculty member can pick [it] up in a half hour and use [it] effectively." The article concludes: "'New faculty members arrive on campus wanting to put their course syllabi on line,' he says, so his staff is always 'getting the new ones started, while we proselytize to the people who have been here awhile.'"

There is nothing wrong with designing technology that is easy to use. These programs appear to be well-intentioned and even successful for their intended purposes. But it is interesting to note that the "proselytizing" attending this effort does not mention improved student learning or improved pedagogy. Instead, the focus is summed up by one of the developers: "We're really looking for simplicity."

The focus on comfort and simplicity is reminiscent of the work of Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) on the development of teachers. The researchers observe that most instructors arrive, relatively early in their careers, at a professional crossroads. At this crossroads, instructors opt either for the path that leads to the challenging and inherently messy business of teaching and learning and, ultimately, to expertise and quality instruction, or for the alternative path that allows them to adopt strategies characterized by systematic problem minimization and, ultimately, less effective teaching and learning.

Touring the online literature and assessing the forces and the trends shaping higher education's adoption of technologies, one can not help but wonder whether the profession as a whole is facing an analogous crossroads. And if *The Chronicle of Higher Education* is indeed a measure of the mainstream, or, consistent with the root of the word *bellwether*, the leader of the flock, it seems we're being herded down the path of problem minimization.

If the pedagogical consequences of making it easy for students and faculty to work

online are only suggested by their absence in the preceding articles, at least one important aspect of the issue begins to take a more palpable shape in Goldie Blumenstyk's (1999) article, "The Marketing Intensifies in Distance Learning." Blumenstyk frames the issue in the sub-headline polemic: "Some educators value the options; others fear vendors set the agenda." Again, however, the pedagogical design is implicit in the "options" and even the teaching and learning implications of the "agenda" materialize only minimally.

Blumenstyk explores the influx of "marketing brochures, information kits, and CD-ROMs that distance-education companies use to promote course-design tools and other competing services." She documents the marketing race exhaustively, investigating the issue of market share leaders. She looks closely at various vendors and their quest (notable in the ubiquitous full-page color adds peppering the pages of the paper version of the *Chronicle*) to keep "moving vigorously to get more visibility for their products."

But still we are left to wonder. How do these products improve instruction? Where is the articulation of the critical marketing angle for a product that helps faculty promote deeper learning?

We almost get there. In the middle of the marketing frenzy, Blumenstyk reports the struggle of administrators and faculty who "meanwhile, are hashing out issues of cost and control over course content." Yet even as Blumenstyk points to the skeptics who "question whether colleges' educational interests or companies' aggressive marketing tactics are what is fueling the frenzy," it is not clear that the teaching that might be at the heart of the debate is really being discussed. At best, the debate centers on "issues of faculty control over the content of courses."

Without more attention to the instructional role of mediating the learning of that content, or teaching, even the issue of control over content may become irrelevant—a casualty of what a spokesman of the American Federation of Teachers identifies as the "'keep up with the Joneses' mentality that's out there" (Blumentstyk, 1999). As educators debate "how quickly they need to begin offering online options to students," the simplification of course development and delivery and next—the content itself—continue to presage what Jeffrey Young (1999) identifies as "a glimpse into higher education's future."

Young (1999) introduces us to a "little-known company" that "offers a kind of Cliffs Notes for the MTV generation." The company, Cerebellum, markets "study aids with up-tempo soundtracks, flashy graphics, and undergraduate-age actors who look like they just danced out of a Gap television advertisement." Young identifies the concern of educators who worry that "students might be tempted to skip class and watch the movie version instead," and those who "wonder whether the company could one day compete with colleges" with their "lighthearted and irreverent" materials in which "complex concepts are explained with skits, jokes about dating and drinking, and the occasional song."

Ironically, the preceding is as penetrating into actual teaching strategies as any of these articles get. "Everything's focused on the content," a Cerebellum developer points out. "The content is just written in a much more approachable fashion." The "steady stream of jokes is meant to hold students' attention and make the material seem less intimidating," and, "corny, yes, but more interesting than some university lectures."

So how should educators respond to the trend? "William C. Parke, a professor of physics at George Washington University who served as a consultant for the [Cerebellum] astronomy video, isn't worried about competing with videos." He says, "By that argument, students could just read the textbook instead of coming to class, too, but they would miss the emphasis and reinforcement that only direct human interaction affords."

But just why that human needs to be a live instructor and not some "hip," "less intimidating" actor is again glossed over and even contradicted. Parke also argues that the videos are ways to "get the students excited about the subject," so we can't help but wonder just what it is that is so special about "direct human interaction" as we ponder Parke's unspoken corollary—that compared to flashy videos, traditional instruction and traditional instructors, do not "get students excited about the subject."

Parke's response is not satisfactory when he argues that a student who watched only the video wouldn't do very well in his "Introduction to Astronomy" course because "it doesn't have even one-tenth of the material that we cover." This is a poor defense, and it exposes the real danger of supplanting content, regardless of quantity or who controls it, with instruction. After all, at some point some wily entrepreneur will realize that if it is the quantity and the simple accessibility of content that matters, Mr. Parke will remain viable in the new educational enterprise only until ten more "corny" Astronomy videos pop up on the market.

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