

The Ivory Tower of Babel

We often hear the concern that information technology has not fulfilled its promise for education. Why is this so? I believe one of the reasons is that when we speak about technology on our campuses, each constituency may be speaking a different language—without even being aware of it. Translation is needed if we are to move forward successfully.

Let's begin by identifying some of the major IT issues for various campus constituencies.

Presidents may think first of runaway costs. Actually, the issue is not cost alone—it's cost relative to reliability, or to return on investment, or even to need; it's "bang for the buck." A second top-priority issue for presidents is security. And following closely behind that is media management. For presidents, technology is a Janus-faced medium. It can provide access, attract prospective students, and deliver distance learning. Or it can enable a local campus issue to explode into a national media firestorm, usually with quite regrettable results for the college.

Faculty typically have different concerns about technology. For many faculty, academic IT still raises anxieties—about the faculty member's autonomy in his or her classroom and about the investment of time needed to learn, un-learn, and continually upgrade skills (thus, about feeling inadequate). As well, the dot-com spectre of being replaced by a machine—or at least by the distant "star lecturer" broadcast to the desktop—has not entirely faded from faculty members' imaginations.

Students' concerns around IT are quite distinct from those either of the

president or of the faculty. Students' needs are simple; they tend to want ubiquity, reliability, endless capacity, variety, and the cutting edge. Like faculty, they want autonomy with respect to their technology. But to students, the term *autonomy* means something different than it does to faculty. Whereas the faculty member doesn't want IT devices to impinge on his or her classroom, the student doesn't want the college to impinge on his or her IT devices.



What about the IT professional: what are his or her top technology concerns? Certainly an increasing amount of time, effort, and ingenuity needs to be paid to network security. And right along with that technical issue comes reliability. Increasingly, when the server is down, the campus is down. Additionally, most IT professionals have a strong interest in cutting-edge technologies. This is a good thing, in that any professional wants to keep abreast of his or her field, and IT folks are watching out for phenomena on the horizon that may benefit the campus. But this can be less than ideal if an interest in innovation is too far out of sync with the actual needs, desires, or resources of campus users.

And there are many more campus

constituencies, with their own respective interests: trustees (who want economy); alumni (who want access); staff members (who want never to have to learn another new software program); and still others. Even this brief perusal shows substantial divergences in the users' technology interests and issues. Moreover, I'd claim that even when the same terminology is used (e.g., *autonomy*, *security*, or *cost*), the term in fact means different things to different people.

To a parent, *cost-containment* equals the price of a laptop; to a president, it may mean the number of personnel in the IT division; to an IT professional, it refers to the unending need to upgrade the network. These folks are in a sense speaking different languages, and as a result they can't progress effectively to build the most effective IT infrastructure for the campus. When interests and priorities are so different, what hope is there for mutual understanding? Some kind of translation needs to occur.

If we consider methods of translation, there are two main ways to proceed. Let's call them "fidelity to the letter" and "fidelity to the spirit." A translator either can try to mirror one language in another word-

for-word or can step back, grasp the larger concept the first language is expressing, and seek an equivalent concept in the second language. This second path seems to me the most promising in trying to find common ground among the different languages we use when speaking about IT on our campuses.

To identify those larger conceptual issues that will enable us to communicate more effectively with one another, we may find it valuable to turn our attention away from technology per se and to open a broader campus conversation about our objectives—the ends we seek to achieve. Identifying the priority of each objective and its relation to our institution's mission may then enable us to ask: how can or should technology play a role in achieving this objective? Let me offer a few hypothetical examples of how this focus on the mission of the institution, rather than the use of technology, might reorient the conversation.

Let's start with an institution whose primary mission is classroom teaching. We are understanding more and more about cognitive processes and how learners learn most effectively, and it would seem that a good deal of this knowledge might be implemented through pedagogical technology. But for institutions that espouse the value that *nothing* affects learning like human relationships do, is using technology to modify classroom pedagogy or the student/teacher interaction really the best alignment of application with mission? Perhaps it would be more desirable to utilize IT to achieve efficiencies in administrative functions and thus free up resources to be devoted to the faculty/student relation in the classroom.

By contrast to an institution where intimate, face-to-face contact is a cherished standard, a heavily research-oriented institution may see technology as an end in itself—either as a tool enabling unprecedented research (e.g., supercomputing centers) or as a way to develop tech-transfer products that produce revenues that themselves can be devoted back to the institution's research agenda.

A different situation might obtain in an institution with a newly diverse student body. Could technology play a role in access, affordability, retention? Perhaps universal IT training could serve as an

equalizer to level the playing field—or even to highlight the differing talents of individual students.

As examples of considering technological applications in relation to institutional mission, I offer two recent experiences from my own institution:

■ **Arabic Instruction.** Like many campuses, we have experienced a sudden, burgeoning interest among our students in studying Arabic. We found ourselves able to partner with a neighboring institution, find an Arabic instructor, and begin offering classes through a combination of distance learning and part-time on-site instruction. This might seem (to the president or the IT professional) a perfect use of IT. But the students' view is quite different. Our college prides itself on the intense, close relationship between faculty and students. Distance learning, in a class of twenty-three, with a part-time instructor, is just not what our students came here for. It doesn't align well with our mission.

■ **Library Cataloguing.** In a very different example of collaboration with the same neighboring institution, our truly visionary CIO has worked for several years to bring to fruition an ambitious "re-engineering" project that combines the back-office, library cataloguing functions of the two institutions into a single operation. No faculty or students are complaining about this transformative project. In fact, they probably aren't even aware of it. Our ability to catalogue library holdings has never been a particular selling point of the college: prospective students don't come here for the cataloging, and alumni don't look back on it fondly. In this instance, the effective use of IT is transforming our campus community, providing opportunities for additional and/or more economical services, without visibly disrupting the practices and values (such as close contact in the classroom) that lie at the core of the college.

My hunch, my *hope*, is that more is yet to come in this latter vein. Managing accounts payable—or work orders? Purchasing paper towels—or periodicals? For a

teaching-intensive institution, these uses of technology outside of the classroom may be the ones that hold more effective transformative (and cost-reducing) power than would video-streaming lectures, developing costly simulations, or funding the creation of learning objects that often languish, unattended and unused, after the initial flush of excitement—and funding.

For technology to serve us well—and not be a "bolt-on," an undesired mandate, or (perhaps worst of all) a squandered expenditure—I believe we need to find ways to translate the varying needs and understandings of our campus constituencies to one another. One way to do that is to move up from the level of the technology or application itself to the broader objectives of the college or university, finding there a "common language" that may in turn filter down to guide the institution.

If we speak together about the larger concepts, the objectives that the institution is trying to achieve, we may find a common language that does not founder on the translation of the individual terms, as it were, of technology. And by this I don't mean technical or semi-technical words—*bandwidth* or *terabyte* or *Bluetooth* or *metadata*. I am thinking, rather, of IT applications themselves as terms in a language that is not spoken with equal fluency across the many campus constituencies.

When the discourse is shifted to the level of institutional objectives, we can all—presidents, faculty, students, IT professionals, and others—take part and speak a common language. The questions of how much bandwidth to provide or what devices to support or where wireless connectivity is needed (questions that require translation across constituencies) are not lost. Rather, they follow as a natural consequence from a broader, shared understanding of common goals. If we do *not* reach a higher level of common discourse, we stand to miss out on realizing the highest potential of our information technologies.



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