The Human Element: Faculty Collaboration in an Increasingly Digital World

Like most technologies, Web 2.0 learning tools can connect or divide us. The path we choose depends on how we understand and use the tools. Since ancient times, technological advances have stoked fears (among some) that our humanism will erode when new technologies grab hold of how we interact. No less a scholar than Socrates warned us that writing words down on parchment would kill our memories. Conversely, technological advances have also been seen as life-giving and nourishing, particularly by early indigenous populations who innovated to advance agriculture and irrigation. This fundamental separation—whether technology is bringing us together or pulling us apart—is alive in the 21st century, including within U.S. higher education. Students and faculty are the most impacted.

Here are the challenges that face our faculty today:

- Students who have access to smartphones and high-speed Internet may be distracted by a bombardment of quick and often shallow information.
- Students who do not have access could fall behind through no fault of their ability to learn.
- Faculty expectations and practices are changing at many institutions because Web 2.0 learning technologies are continuously evolving.

With too little technology, we risk losing our edge. With too much technology, faculty can feel like Sisyphus with a boulder in one hand and a tablet in the other. But the technology in which colleges and universities invest, usually with an eye on the student experience, need not be limited to improving classroom learning. This gets at the crux of what is next for many faculty as well. Adult learners are adapting to an increasingly digital world. Generation Z and Millennial students were born into it. Digital content, open-source materials, and online and blended learning are opening doors to exciting and sometimes daunting spaces in higher education. But they also leave many wondering about the role of the human element and our needs for authentic interaction, a sense of belonging, and being cared for on a personal level.

In light of all of this, how can those of us who are leaders in higher education show our students and faculty we care about them as people? How do we make them feel they belong to a community of learners irrespective of the space in which they teach? How do we foster the human presence that makes all of this possible? How do we use our technology to connect everyone—not just students to educators? And in the context of digital fluency, how do we ensure that faculty are prepared for today's learners?

Most of Rasmussen College's courses, programs, and faculty are online. Many of our students are first-generation adult learners who belong to the "digital native" generation, though not all grew up with full digital access. Since 2013, Rasmussen College, which has a number of campuses across several states, has brought together our faculty for an annual symposium that explores major themes facing our classrooms. Themes have included the digital divide, prioritizing the human element in online classrooms, wonderment and creativity, and design thinking. These symposia were initially held in person but now use campus-based telepresence technology to allow faculty participants, generally numbering from 400 to 500 each year, to collaborate and learn synchronously despite the distance.

Our first symposium explored the digital divide. In my opening remarks, I urged all academic affairs professionals at the college to commit to ensuring that our students have access to the tools and infrastructure needed to flourish in a 21st-century knowledge economy—an era in which the most fortunate of us walk around with much of the planet's information in our pockets. It is our obligation to help students gain access to digital learning resources and to help them learn the skills to be digitally fluent. If our students don't have this access at home, we can and must provide these resources at our various campuses. Faculty embraced this goal with an enthusiasm beyond what I expected. Today, most Rasmussen College students have at least one online course within their academic schedules, and most of those courses utilize digital content and weekly synchronous web collaboration. Rasmussen College even adopted "Digital Fluency" as one of our institutional learning outcomes.[1]

Throughout the subsequent years, I learned that faculty embrace high-tech learning tools such as campus telepresence and webinar platforms not only to connect with students but also to connect with each other. An example is Carly Hearn, a writing and communications faculty member for Rasmussen College. At the 2015 symposium and using telepresence, she presented a session to faculty on the importance of having in-field and

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ties, and as our footprints move beyond brick-and-mortar campuses, can our technology also connect faculty to each other in ways that form rich relationships? And how can we expose our faculty to technology and support them in developing digital expertise?

Colleagues who have suffered through meetings with me know that I often start by asking about family, hobbies, or a recent vacation before we get to the work at hand. In turn, I build trust by sharing those parts of myself that are relatable. I try my best to be intentional about living out loud and sharing stories that reveal my authentic self. I do this because I care about my colleagues as individuals and I want to give them permission to enter into a deeper conversation with me and those around us. I am also aware that this level of inquiry and caring is much easier when we're standing right next to each other. But as Hearn taught us, technology can help us foster meaningful long-distance relationships across our systems—even across states and countries.

It is essential that our faculty remain connected and able to consistently engage in rich academic exploration *both with their students and with their faculty peers*. Technology must facilitate that connection, not hinder it. To that end, I offer a call to action: college and university leaders must invest in and use Web 2.0 technologies to benefit both students *and* faculty. Effective training must be part of this equation, so that faculty are not left alone to determine the value these tools may offer. These steps will allow our educators to collaborate with purpose, meaning, and inquiry. We are obligated beyond email, online forums, and other asynchronous platforms. Let us see faces, share anecdotes, joke and laugh, ask big questions aloud, listen to the answers, and embrace the human element. Even when we connect online. ∎

general education coursework coexist within the curriculum. She said that technology has been effective in creating long-distance, meaningful relationships: "I can say I have friends and colleagues across the country—from Florida to Minnesota—that I truly care about. It started out with phone calls. Now we can see each other." This sentiment, which I heard repeatedly from other faculty, led me to realize that Rasmussen College's emphasis on "the human element" in a world of online learning must apply both to student learning and to faculty collaboration.

We know the benefits that a human presence in the classroom can have on student learning and long-term success. A poll from Gallup and Purdue University found that college graduates are nearly two times more likely to be engaged at work—and to be thriving in all areas of well-being after graduating—if they recalled having a college instructor who cared about them as a person.[2] This data suggests that caring counts when it comes to helping our students have meaningful lives and careers.

We also know the benefits that faculty collaboration can have on online course development, learning, and teaching.[3] The amount of research done specifically around online collaboration, however, is limited. It begs the question: As online learning and Web 2.0 tools are employed by more colleges and universi-

Notes

1. See the Rasmussen College "Digital Fluency" web page, July 29, 2016.
2. Julie Ray and Stephanie Kafka, "Life in College Matters for Life after College," Gallup website, May 6, 2014.
3. See Ortrun Dorothea Zuber-Skerritt, "Action Learning and Action Research: Paradigm, Praxis and Programs," in Shankar Sankaran, Bob Dick, Ronn Passfield, and Pam Swepson, eds., *Effective Change Management Using Action Learning and Action Research: Concepts, Frameworks, Processes, Applications* (Lismore, Australia: Southern Cross University Press, 2001).

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