Innovation, Gambling, and a Love of Wisdom

The following excerpt is based on an interview conducted by Gerry Bayne, EDUCAUSE multimedia producer, at the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative (ELI) 2008 Annual Meeting held in San Antonio, Texas, in January 2008. To listen to the full podcast, go to <http://connect.educause.edu/blog/gbayne/eli11conversationgardner/40170>.

Bayne: I am going to quote from Dieter Euler's ELI 2008 presentation abstract entitled “Changing Learning Cultures on Campus: From Theory to Practice.” He stated: “A large number of innovation efforts are taking place at universities at the moment; however, many of these endeavors typically result in few changes and in high frustration for the people involved. The change promoters feel dissatisfied by the perceived resistance of their colleagues, and the skeptics feel confirmed in their opinion that a lot of time and money is wasted for nothing.” What are your thoughts on that, and how do you foment institutional change?

Campbell: I think in many ways that this is a situation of trying to pour new wine into old bottles. I have heard Dennis Trinkle talk about this… His point is that when these innovation efforts are trying to get some leverage within a traditional academic community or even an online community—something like the University of Phoenix—where the processes are really well understood, it is about credit earning and credit-bearing courses, it is about bounded terms, it is about particular disciplines…the innovation has a hard time getting any leverage, any toehold, at all. The whole set of processes is working against it. So it is almost as if it’s a self-fulfilling kind of prophecy. How are you going to make change within an environment that is fighting you from the beginning?

And I want to be clear about this. I think a lot of the traditional processes we have in higher education are venerable. They are wonderful and have tremendous values and principles at their core, values and principles that I support. Nevertheless, there is a way in which we have scaled higher education along accounting or industrial vectors; we move people through in a way we think is effective and efficient and very easy to track, very easy to account for, very easy to assess. What we end up with is an educational process that actually thwarts real learning.

When you begin to try to innovate within that process, you run into walls pretty quickly, and everything can seem impossible within and without the institution who are trying to get some leverage within a traditional academic community or even an online community. There are a lot of folks within and without the institution who will want to be nay-sayers and to get back to something that seems well understood, whether or not it actually supports the mission.

Bayne: But after the experimentation, isn’t committing to a given technology with large amounts of money and effort a bit of a gamble?

Campbell: Sure, it is a gamble. One of the difficulties we face here is that we think: “OK, we are going to commit to a technology. This commitment will take this many dollars. It will take five or six years. We will ramp up for the first two years, then we will assess.” That all makes sense, but not in the world of technology, where stuff is changing far too rapidly.

It seems to me that for a fair assessment of the use of technology in education, you have to be thinking about it at the level of ideas, not just in terms of the particular technology. What kind of
behavior do you want to reinforce? What kind of community do you want to enable within your environment? Then look around and ask: “Are there lightweight tools, small pieces loosely joined, that we can bring together into a particular environment to support that kind of community?” Maybe the idea is not to buy some big product and deploy it as an enterprise activity but instead to encourage people to innovate and experiment in small, lightweight ways with open source tools, web-enabled tools, sometimes even in a kind of ad hoc way depending on the particular course and the particular set of learners in the course.

The difficulty with that approach, frankly, is that it makes institutions uneasy. There is not a good set of metrics that you are going to be able to apply. At least there isn’t yet; somebody will come up with that, I am sure. And that approach can raise privacy issues and all sorts of issues with regard to intellectual property. But I don’t think you are going to solve the hard problems by asking easy questions. You ask an easy question, you get a direct answer. You say, “Where can I buy X?” or “What course management system can we move to now?” Problem solved, but it isn’t. You really do have to ask those hard questions to get to any kind of meaningful answers.

Sure, it is a gamble. The question is always: What are we gambling for? What are we gambling on? For me, it is the future of our learners. That’s worth taking some risks, especially if what we are doing now works at a level of basic functionality but doesn’t support what I think of as true or deep learning.

Bayne: Do we have a generational struggle with our changing attitudes about technology? How do you unite newly minted, “digital native” professors with faculty that are not digital-savvy?

Campbell: That’s a really good question. It is ironic. We have been told for many years that as the professoriate ages and people retire and we get new people in, there is going to be this sea change in terms of attitudes toward technology. I am not sure I am seeing that. I am not sure that attitudes toward technology link with generations in quite the way that we may have thought….

The new Ph.D.’s that we are seeing today are still the product of an older view of graduate education. The Carnegie Foundation just came out with a report on doctoral education. It insisted that for graduate programs to be truly effective, they have to emphasize learning within a community. My graduate program did not emphasize that. Almost the opposite: it was a fairly competitive program, and not always in a productive way.

What will have to happen is not just getting an infusion of youth into the academy. That may help: young people will be a lot more comfortable with some of the tools. But I think it is going to involve rethinking what we do in graduate education, what it means to be a Doctor of Philosophy, which literally means “a teacher of the love of wisdom.”