A Commitment to Learning: Attention, Engagement, and the Next Generation

In spite of ample evidence of the value of learning, efforts too often fall short of what is needed. Students fail to graduate from high school. Others earn a diploma but do not have the skills to succeed in college. Many of those who enter postsecondary programs do not complete a degree or credential. Even those students who successfully complete degrees often stop with their learning. High school graduation, college readiness, college completion, and lifelong learning are essentials for a well-educated population. We all must commit to learning.

To start, we must understand what learning entails. Learning is much more than accessing content. In the 21st century, learning is a complex blend of skills, competencies, and the will to continue learning throughout life. These skills and competencies include the ability to think critically and solve complex problems, work collaboratively, communicate effectively, and pursue self-directed learning or metacognition.

In addition, we must be aware of how today’s digital environment introduces subtle and significant shifts in learning. In this issue of EDUCAUSE Review, Howard Rheingold challenges us to go beyond skills and technologies and to think in terms of literacies, particularly social media literacies: attention, participation, collaboration, network awareness, and critical consumption. He stresses that we need to learn how to “exercise mindful deployment” of our attention (e.g., full attention vs. partial attention). In her article, danah boyd reaffirms this idea: “What matters is not the act of distribution, but the act of consumption. . . . The power is now in the hands of those who control the limited resource of attention.” She cautions that we must learn how to stay in the “information flow” and have the discipline to not simply consume what we like or what is easy to access. As Rheingold reminds us: “Authority is no longer vested in the writer and the publisher. The consumer of information has to be a critic and has to inquire about the reality of the information presented.”

Attention stems naturally from engagement. In “A Dialogue for Engagement,” five faculty members illustrate the variety of ways in which they have committed to enabling learning by engaging their students. Their strategies involve using new technologies such as social media and digital storytelling to deepen students’ involvement and capitalizing on technology through asynchronous communication and podcasts to support as many students as possible. The result, as Malcolm Brown notes, is engaged learners who “work willingly, instead of by coercion, and approach their assignments as something that matters to them personally.” Helping the faculty understand and use these tools in class is the work of instructional and information technologists. Veronica Diaz and her colleagues describe additional technologies that can be used to attract students’ attention, thereby supporting deeper student engagement with learning. The authors highlight three technologies from the 2010 Horizon Report—electronic books, mobile computing, and open content—and answer the questions of “why?” “how?” and “who’s doing it?”

Finally, in addition to committing to the technologies, pedagogies, literacies, and skills that increase engagement and focus attention, we must commit to helping the next generation of students move beyond the common “loss points,” or challenges, such as enrollment, gatekeeper courses, scheduling, engagement, and advising. “For the Next Generation,” the final article in this issue, shows that we have
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evidence of programs that work. But we are not successful with enough students. Too many efforts remain as pilot programs that affect only small numbers of students. Perhaps the greatest challenge of information technology and education is to commit to implementing the strategies that we know work to improve learning—by scaling effective programs to reach the millions of learners who need education. Scale involves more than increasing the number of adoptions, however. It requires a focus on instructional change at a deeper level, it requires a rethinking of beliefs, and it requires a sense of ownership. We have in hand many of the tools, policies, and technologies to create the next generation of learning. Although many institutions are committed to addressing these challenges, and are making progress, we must do more.

We must create a community that is committed to learning.

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