Disrupted or Designed?

Information technology is often a disruptor. Disruption connotes something unplanned, disorderly, or confusing. Yet though information technology can disrupt, it can also be a powerful element of design. As higher education IT professionals, we believe in the power of technology. We also believe in the fundamental mission of higher education. Our task is to design a better future thanks to our understanding of technology and higher education’s mission—by using technology in service to education. How do we turn disruption into intentional design?

The path from disruption to design is illustrated by President Ed Ayers of the University of Richmond, who observes that twenty years into the digital revolution, “the foundation of academic life—the scholar-ship on which everything else is built—remains surprisingly unaltered. The articles and books that scholars produce today bear little mark of the digital age in which they were created.” A pioneer in digital scholarship, which he defines as “discipline-based scholarship produced with digital tools and presented in digital form,” Ayers notes that the promising field has not caught on. “Today few scholars are trying, as they did earlier in the web’s history, to reimagine the form as well as the substance of scholarship.” Where have we fallen short? “Digital books and digital articles that mimic their print counterparts may be efficient, but they do not expand our imaginations of what scholarship could be in an era of boundlessness. . . . They do not encourage new kinds of writing, of seeing, of explaining.” Ayers advocates for “generative scholarship—scholarship that builds ongoing, ever-growing digital environments as it is used. Generative scholarship is framed with significant disciplinary questions in mind, offers scholarly interpretation in multiple forms as it is being built, and invites collaborators ranging from undergraduate students to senior researchers to public historians. . . . Generative scholarship does not claim to have the last word but, rather, to be a way to open scholarship to new ideas from many directions.”

Continuing with the theme of ongoing scholarship, James Hilton, Dean of Libraries and Vice Provost for Digital Educational Initiatives at the University of Michigan, and his co-authors remind us: “At its most basic level, scholarship is an enduring public conversation among scholars. The particular form of that conversation, whether it is based in data, rhetoric, or creative expression, matters less than the fact that it is both public and enduring.” But there is a problem. “Digital expressions, despite both their ubiquity and their centrality to modern life, whether they are words, data, or images, are inherently fragile.” As the authors illustrate using the case of astronomical data, once it is lost, it cannot be replaced. They make a compelling case for furthering digital preservation. Our pattern of individual efforts will not be enough, however: “Isolated preservation efforts are inherently at risk. Without coordinated replication across a diversity of preservation environments, digital collections are one catastrophic, economic, technological, or organizational failure away from irrevocable loss.”

Digital scholarship and digital preservation thus present us with problems, as does also higher education more broadly. University of Wisconsin–Madison Interim Chancellor David Ward points out: “Much of our current thinking about the performance, policies, ideals, and innovations of U.S. higher education is based on assumptions derived from the post–World War II era.” Costs, revenue, capacity, access, quality, and students’ needs have changed. Ward states: “We need to define ways to respond to these irreversible changes.” He believes technology has a key role to play in doing so: “We need to apply our expanding capacity in information technology and the growing knowledge base of the learning sciences to meet not uniform needs but, rather, students’ wide range of varying capacities.” The need is for customization not solely because technology can provide it but because students need it. “Innovations in pedagogy and technology should increase the pathways to educational degree success.”

But technology cannot be a panacea, of course; it cannot solve all our problems. In the Leadership
column for this issue of EDUCAUSE Review, Bennington College President Elizabeth Coleman highlights the risk that arises when Luddite myopia is replaced by technological fundamentalism: “In the current claims for the vast transforming power of technology, emphasis is almost exclusively on methods of delivery, combined with a startling complacency about what is being delivered. . . . Things that should matter most in addressing educational reform—the substance, quality, and purpose of what is being delivered—are largely ignored.” She adds: “Technological fundamentalism invites us to believe that transformations of possibilities—doing things that might make the world a better place—can be accomplished without imagination, courage, uncertainty, and confusion and, most worrisome of all, without deeply considered purposes.” She invites us to think about intentional design rather than random disruption.

In spite of the power of technology, in spite of the growing belief that technology can provide answers, we must continue to look beyond the tool to the goal. Information technology has made possible many advances, contributing to the globalization, economic development, and democratization of society. Yet technology is neither good nor evil. It is the purposes for which it is used that make the difference. Technology must be applied to scholarship, preservation, and higher education more broadly by people who have critically considered the purposes for which it can and should be used. As Ward noted: “Technology is often viewed as the driver of the changes, but technology simply opens new possibilities.” Design, rather than disruption, will help us ensure technology lives up to its promise.

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