

# Making a Difference?

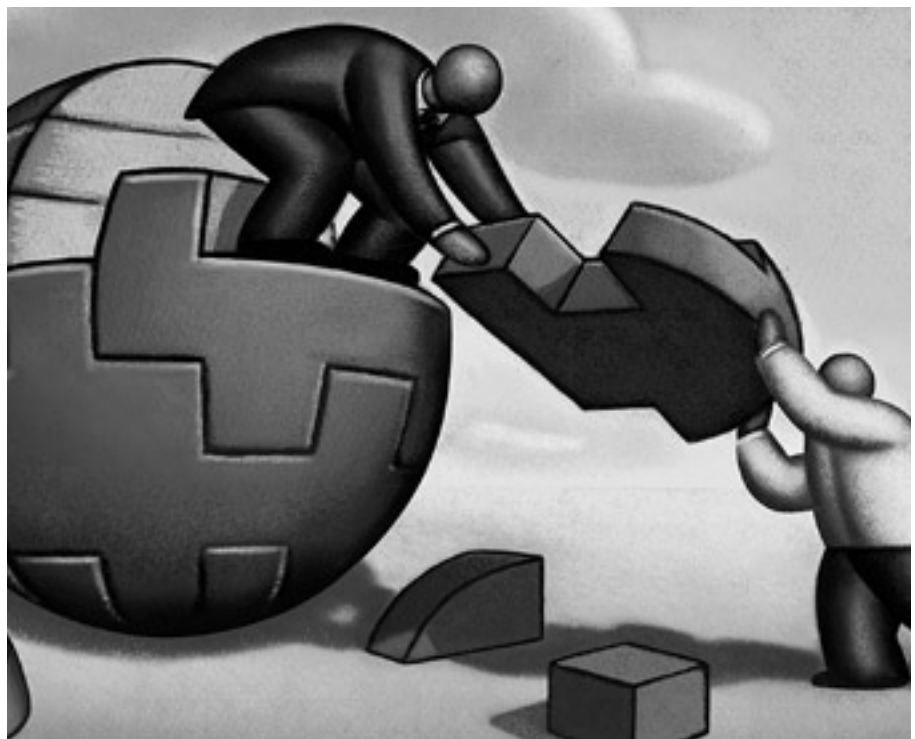
*Instructional technologists must challenge assumptions about their own goals and roles to promote a broader context for instructional improvement*

By **Robert G. Henshaw**

It is not uncommon today to hear university leaders and students lament higher education's failure to more fully capitalize on its investments in information technology (IT), especially in support of residential instruction. While instructional technology's potential is being realized in isolated pockets of innovation, its impact at the institutional level has been marginal on most campuses. To avoid a similar assessment 10 years from now, what changes must occur? How should instructional technologists—often charged with promoting effective use of IT—respond to the challenge?

The scholarship of teaching and learning with technology has matured significantly since widespread experimentation with the instructional use of IP-based technologies began in the mid-1990s. Focusing resources on a handful of early adopters and unproven technologies was appropriate when proof of concept was a prerequisite and computing infrastructures were in the early stages of their development. Today, however, many of the technologies and practices that were leading-edge at that time are interwoven into the fabric of campus life.

The instructional technology community has not updated its collective résumé to reflect these changes. Its vision for realizing technology's instructional potential remains narrow—more representative of a nascent movement. Some of its key metrics for progress are misleading, and its role as a voice for institution-level instructional improvement is



too passive. Instructional technologists are at a crossroads with respect to their advocacy goals and roles. In order to make a difference, they may need to reflect on lessons of the past decade and broaden their perspectives beyond the IT toolkit. The following issues characterize the instructional technology community's current approach to instructional improvement:

- Over-reliance on exemplars
- Overselling technology
- Equating technology with instructional improvement
- Giving lip service to assessment

- Settling for a marginal voice in instruction

## **Over-Reliance on Exemplars**

Many instructional technologists have become complacent, supporting exemplary innovative projects that nonetheless contribute little to broader instructional improvement goals. Small projects look attractive because they constitute a low-risk, diversified approach to instructional investment. The public-relations payoff for projects that attract the right attention and press can be significant. Instructional improvement initiatives

at the institutional level, however, cannot flourish or be sustained as a series of well-intended but disjointed exemplars. Absent sufficient scope and high-level sponsorship, many such efforts assume the characteristics of a typical research project—important to a few individuals within an academic unit, but not crucial to the overall success of the institution.

Similarly, the instructional technology community still depends too heavily on early adopters. For the most part, instructional innovation has been the domain of the most conscientious instructors and those with a compelling interest in technology. Instructional support organizations know this committed minority on their respective campuses and often look to them for help piloting new technologies and techniques. The arrangement works well as long as the context for collaboration is a project that complements an instructor's existing pedagogy. Its limitations become more apparent when instructional support investments shift toward course redesign and other projects with an instructional development focus that challenge prevailing assumptions about instructors' roles and course materials. An institution's most committed educators may actually be the most reluctant to buy in, simply because they have invested so much in their own courses.

Support for low-stakes innovation is still important, as it helps inform future best practices. The real challenge now, however, is shifting technology investment away from the entrepreneurial interests of individual instructors to more strategic implementations that impact student learning at the institutional level. To continue to be satisfied with a few shining examples only contributes to the underperformance of technology in this arena. Instructional technologists can make a difference by promoting more ambitious, well-defined, institution-level goals for instructional improvement.

### **Overselling Technology**

Instructional technologists must adjust to become effective voices in

campus-level discussions about instructional improvement. By playing the technology card too early and too often, they may find themselves pigeon-holed into roles that limit their potential contributions. Instructional technologists are first and foremost advocates for improved learning. To what extent does use of the phrase "instructional technologist" limit their roles? It might already be dated.

Advocates must also be aware of IT's cumulative baggage. Technology is a red flag for many skeptical administrators and faculties and is too often perceived as a reform driver rather than an enabler. The important issue for technology advocates and skeptics alike is not technology's role in teaching and learning but rather higher education's commitment to optimizing learning outcomes. A sustained institutional context for genuine instructional improvement makes it possible to realize the potential of proven instructional strategies and techniques, both technology-enabled and otherwise. Instructional technologists can make a difference by recognizing the appropriate role of technology in the instructional improvement process.

### **Equating Technology with Instructional Improvement**

This is another trap that ensnares many instructional technologists. A closer look at some of higher education's most widely adopted instructional technologies underscores the point. Most campuses have seen a steady increase in the use of template-based learning management systems such as Blackboard and WebCT that give instructors a Web presence with a minimal investment of time. The research to date, however, suggests that the majority of instructors use learning management systems primarily to disseminate schedules, syllabi, assignments, and so forth and less as a tool to implement effective pedagogy.<sup>1</sup>

Is it any surprise that instructors have adopted applications like learning management systems that may help them squeeze a little more time out of their busy days? Is it any surprise that students have come to expect their use

for many of the same reasons? Learning management systems have become essential productivity tools, and few faculty can afford not to use them. But while convenience and time-savings can contribute to improved learning, they are not foundations for institution-level improvement. Instructional technologists can make a difference by guarding carefully against technologies of convenience becoming a distraction from greater pedagogy-driven goals.

### **Giving Lip Service to Assessment**

The instructional support community, like most in higher education, has been uneven in its commitment to measuring the impact of innovation on student learning. Student satisfaction data is abundant simply because it is easy to gather. Student satisfaction is not always an effective metric for evaluating applied instructional strategies, however. Without reliable data about impacts on learning outcomes, it is difficult to draw many conclusions about the efficacy of dominant instructional models in higher education. It is, in fact, the absence of a framework for measuring student learning that perpetuates the status quo and undermines efforts to be more accountable to students.

Unfortunately, few campuses can claim vibrant assessment cultures in support of teaching and learning. Instructional technologists can make a difference by making their own resource-allocation decisions more dependent on the willingness of instructors to accommodate and contribute to legitimate assessment efforts.

### **Settling for a Marginal Voice in Instruction**

This Viewpoint questions the efficacy of instructional technologists, not instructional technology. Technology's contribution to student learning takes place within an institutional context defined by a complex set of values, interactions, and decisions that guide instructional oversight. What is the instructional technologist's role in this process? Is it merely to serve the interests of faculty? To become more effective

tive in discussions about the future of teaching and learning, instructional technology advocates must first convince themselves that they belong at the table.

Administrators and campus organizations charged with supporting the instructional use of technology in residential settings have largely settled into niche advocacy roles that conform to the instructor-centric view of the instructional process dominant on most college campuses today. The instructional technology advocacy most commonly employed is a passive brand that tiptoes carefully around issues of faculty autonomy.

Faculties and chief academic officers must undoubtedly own and lead any sustainable instructional improvement efforts, but instructional technology advocates have an obligation to help educate campus leaders about the strategic promise and limitations of IT. They must also be willing to point out existing barriers to the effective use of instruc-

tional technology on their respective campuses.

High-quality instruction is identified explicitly as a goal in the mission statements of most higher learning institutions. The education of undergraduate students is a massive, complex undertaking that involves a wide range of individuals and expertise across any given campus. Within the classroom, one need only acknowledge the difference between subject-matter expertise and pedagogy to realize that the instructional process generally benefits from an interdisciplinary approach to solving problems and recognizing new opportunities.

Despite traditional roles that tend to place the burden of high-quality instruction squarely on the shoulders of individual instructors, no one in an academic environment who cherishes open discourse should apologize for wanting to improve the performance of a key institutional mission. In fact, most quality assurance efforts benefit

from multiple perspectives. By adopting a more collaborative approach to instructional design, the interests of all stakeholders can be considered in a shared context that emphasizes student learning. Instructional technologists can make a difference by assuming more active voices in campus discussions about instructional efficacy, by questioning prevailing assumptions, and by offering their own ideas for improvement. *e*

#### Endnote

1. R. B. Kvaivik, J. B. Caruso, and G. Morgan, *ECAR Study of Students and Information Technology, 2004: Convenience, Connection, and Control* (Boulder, Colo.: EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research, Research Study, Vol. 5, 2004), <<http://www.educause.edu/LibraryDetailPage/666?ID=ERS0405>>.

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