From Learning Commons to Blogs: Sharing Technology Solutions

Several months ago, I posted to the EDUCAUSE Community Colleges Constituent Group online discussion forum. I was looking to connect and “cross pollinate” with members at other community colleges regarding how they identify and share technology solutions within and perhaps outside their institutions. For example, in 2006 my institution, Kirkwood Community College, created the “Tech Scouts” initiative. The mission of the group is to identify new and emerging learning technologies and innovative applications and then to communicate those findings to faculty members. Tech Scouts serve as the technology “antennae” for the college, “constantly scanning the technosphere to see what is emerging on the horizon so that the college can be proactive and remain cutting edge.”

Six faculty and adjunct faculty members, with a nominal three-year term of service, make up the Tech Scouts. There’s a small yearly stipend, intended to help pay for technology purchases. Scouts meet monthly during the spring and fall semesters with staff advisors from Information Technologies, the Kirkwood Center for Teaching and Learning, and Technology Services. While meetings always include a lively round of “have you seen . . . ?” and “I know I said I loved it, but you won’t believe what tech support told me,” and “you’ve gotta try . . . ?” we spend most of our time trying to figure out how best to communicate with our peers about what we’ve found, what we’ve learned, and (sometimes) what we’ve discarded. Efforts to “share out” include classes in our EagleTech store or as part of our Center for Teaching and Learning. We regularly offer presentations, singularly as well as in team formation, at professional development events or conferences.

Over the years, the Tech Scouts have also undertaken various research projects on behalf of college faculty:

- Investigation into classroom response systems (“clickers”), culminating in the purchase of several sets of hardware that are available for check-out by faculty, along with links and training on associated applications
- Survey and evaluation of classroom screen-monitoring software, recommending a particular application for licensing by the college
- Research into better ways to integrate the college’s learning management system with social media and student devices (i.e., how can we get better info in front of students in a timely fashion?)
- Exploration into the advent of tablet computers, helping instructors find and implement useful applications
- Identification of applications and hardware to facilitate lecture capture and flipping the classroom
- Volunteering as “guinea pigs” for the Information Technology department’s testing of everything from new learning management systems to a potential conversion from personal computers to dumb terminals in at least some classrooms
- Brief experimentation with Google Glass, with continuing interest in virtual reality gadgets and platforms.

One project that I particularly enjoyed was our research into the creation of a learning commons space here at Kirkwood. The idea behind the learning commons is that even though much library reference content is now easily accessed online, a central commons area in which to study and learn and to encounter new people, new ideas, and new perspectives remains critical. As a result, some institutions are adding learning commons space, often where book stacks used to reside. In an attempt to fully visualize the possibilities of the concept, we visited three nearby institutions that have created learning commons spaces and talked to the implementers to discover what they liked and didn’t like about the spaces.

At the University of Iowa, space is extremely varied: lots of desks and tables with critical power points for charging devices, intermingled with glass-walled “conference” rooms. Scattered throughout are small, open-walled “classrooms,” with movable tiered seating and a giant wall-mounted display. Our guide told us about a recent event when a campus veterans support group had reserved one of these public areas in which to play the video game Call of Duty. This drew in random onlookers and ended up in a passionate but thoughtful give-and-take about the role of the military in the United States—a very compelling scene at a time when digital devices sometimes promote more separation than inclusion and when “free speech” is often reduced to anonymous trolling. The University of Iowa has a terrific online reservation system for all these resources and a great little café right in the middle of the space. The area includes a couple of
“one-button studios,” small rooms equipped with a camera and green screen for lecture capture and other video projects. But the facility designers admit that they wish they had made things even less hardwired and more flexible. They have come to believe that anything that is fixed in place will become an issue at some point. They’ve generously made the usage analytics for their learning commons available online.

At Coe College, we found a very structured, elegant, and formal space that perfectly fits their lovely historical building. The guide was a bit apologetic about the frenetic color and “props” in the small room devoted to writing, but that personalization and passion seemed to signal a space that was both well-used and well-loved. The ability for students to customize and personalize the space, even if only while in the space, is key to its usefulness.

At the University of Northern Iowa, we happened onto a special event. The learning commons technology pieces and seating options had been incorporated into an amazing “Around the World in 90 Minutes” festival, with natives and devotees of foreign lands presenting the culture of those countries to hundreds of visitors from the community as well as the student body; visual travelogues were displayed behind tables of cultural artifacts and local delicacies, and their “one-button studio” was devoted to creating “vacation” pictures of attendees wearing ethnic garb taken in front of the green screen so that images of famous landmarks and representative scenery could be swapped into the frame. A dedicated makerspace for use both by students and by the local maker club was under construction when we visited but has since been unveiled. The UNI team echoed the University of Iowa designers in saying that the biggest challenge in creating and using the commons space was the physical confines of the building, including too-frequent support pillars and often-inconvenient access to the electrical mains.

The challenge we see at Kirkwood—one that is particular to community colleges—is that our population is generally not residential. We don’t have dormitories, and our classes are spread not just over a commuter campus but throughout seven additional regional county centers. We continue to grapple with the question of whether there is value in putting in little bits of learning commons hither and yon (e.g., adding comfortable seating, charging stations, and perhaps a wall-mounted display in an otherwise underused nook) or whether it is important to centralize the commons and motivate people to come together for that critical interchange of ideas. Can the latter be done virtually in any useful way? The end result will probably be a bit of a compromise between those things. My kingdom for a holodeck…

The Tech Scouts’ most recent effort to communicate with faculty (and others) is our blog, KCC Tech Scouts. Initially, it sat inside our institutional SharePoint system—an exercise in navel-gazing, for sure. Now, it’s publicly available, thanks to WordPress. We’re having a lot of fun with this communication strategy; however, I cannot claim that the strategy has caught fire with faculty. Thus in my original message to the EDUCAUSE Community Colleges Constituent Group, I asked how other community colleges identify and share technology solutions within their institutions.

I heard back from a few colleagues. For example Bo Yang, instructional support specialist at the Woodbridge Campus of Northern Virginia Community College, wrote that his college has implemented an Instructional Support Services blog—an easy, asynchronous channel to which faculty can turn when they have a need or a question. Meanwhile, Hostos Community College in the South Bronx has an entire EdTech department. Carlos Guevara, director of the Office of Educational Technology, reports that his department “develops, implements, supports, and promotes innovative integration of technology into teaching and learning by empowering faculty, serving students, and creating a supportive environment for all types of learners.”

In support of this, the department maintains a dynamic and up-to-date EdTech website.

I suspect all of us at community colleges can agree that the only thing harder than keeping up with technology is trying to share the information with busy faculty. Whether you’re pursuing elusive technology solutions or struggling to find ways to make them interesting, useful, and available to faculty in a friendly, supportive, and timely fashion, you are not alone. Do you have a blog or social media account? Has your college undertaken individual or group efforts similar to our Tech Scouts? Let’s share!

Notes
2. We would love for you to drop by the blog when you have a chance. Please provide your own thoughts on whatever techno-gadget or gee-whiz app is under discussion. We also heartily welcome a post from you about technology exploration at your institution.

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