Engaging Today's Conversations on Learning and Technology: Issues In Our Face and On the Horizon

Mark David Milliron and Steven Lee Johnson

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We have long been proponents of thoughtful dialog on campuses about key trends in technology and learning. Especially when it comes to doing the hard work of targeting programs, practices, and policies toward improving and expanding learning, we argue that leaders are called not only to allow, but also to *engage* these conversations.

When these conversations are left to chance they are all too often dominated by loud voices. One set of loud voices rings from the "caustic cynics." These fellow educators are almost always against change, no matter the issue or the innovation—often to the point of irrationality. When asked, most college employees can trip the names of the caustic cynics off their tongues with little or no effort. Another set of equally loud voices bursts from the "true believers." In their zest to support their cause they will scream from the rooftops to all who will give them audience. Over time, most true believers over-promise and under-deliver, cutting the credibility of change initiatives.

To avoid this all-too-common dialectic dialog of dogmatic diatribes, leaders should seize the initiative and create venues for the less angry or innovation-enamored educators—practitioners who are, after all, just as concerned about the health and welfare of the institution—to join meaningful conversations. This strategy is essential to develop a thoughtful and nimble college culture ready to take on critical challenges and new trends.

A useful tool in these conversations is a framework for discussion. In our work with colleges nationwide and in supporting one of the largest technology conferences in higher education—the League for Innovation's *Conference on Information Technology*—we have worked over the last year to create a framework based on major trends, choices, and issues that interested and engaged educators can use to begin their dialogue. Most of these issues fall into two categories: *in your face* or *on the horizon*. Those

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that are in your face, you are likely already dealing with in some way, wrestling with formalizing plans of action or sharing lessons learned. Those on the horizon are also likely being dealt with in some way, but as a field we are less clear about how we will handle these issues. We have piloted this framework with several groups, and most find it a very useful tool for exploring today's issues, particularly when combined with a deep commitment to make any solutions or decisions work toward the primary end of enabling the college to improve and expand learning.

In Your Face

• Return vs. Investment
Most of our technology advocacy discussions in the last few years have centered on the investment in technology to improve learning and service to students. "If you build it, they will come," was often the mantra used to support large-scale Internet learning efforts such as Western Governors University and U.S. Open University. The conversations are increasingly turning—particularly in a down economy—to return on investment, with a major focus both on efficiency and effectiveness. Boards, legislators, and the more humanistic faculty are asking whether we are better served by budget allocations for high-profile technology or high-touch faculty and counselors. Decision makers are now asking for outcomes measures that document results from multimillion-dollar investments. Of course, some benefits are not easily measured, and other investments really are a modern cost of entry into education (can you imagine a college without a website?). Still, more often than not, educational decision makers will act less like venture capitalists.

• Ubiquity vs. Specialization
For many years, technology advocates have argued the equivalent of a trickle-down-theory version of technology adoption. Give the best, brightest, and most motivated faculty and staff the technology tools and goodness will flow to the institution. There is an increasing call, however, to change this philosophy, which sadly can lead to exacerbating the true-believer control of budgets and isolated, high-end technology efforts with little application to the college as a whole. One college administrator asked the question this way, "Do we want 80 percent of our instructional technology budget to support 10 percent of our students (pure-play online learners) who have a 200 percent higher dropout rate?" The answer in this college's case was to pull the lessons learned from their online college into providing collegewide Web support for all classes, stronger Web tools for all student services, and increased phone support for the tutoring center. In short, they wanted to sustain ubiquity over specialization. The college was still committed to supporting pure asynchronous learning; however, they were no longer going to have that be the dominant force in driving the instructional technology budget.

• **Security vs. Open Systems**
While our faculty and staff clearly want and need easy, on- and off-campus access to technology tools, there are increasing calls for heightened security in campus systems. The Health Insurance Portability Act, Children's Online Privacy Act, Electronic Communications Privacy Act, and the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act are all looming, each with implications for our networks and services. Moreover, with the national call to fight cyberterrorism, this issue is likely to surge even more to the forefront. In addition, fair-use policy guidelines and intellectual privacy challenges add academic freedom into the conversation. A college community needs to be aware of these issues and not just assume the techies are handling them. How do we open access to students, faculty, and staff while keeping data secure and our values from being violated?

• **High-Tech vs. High-Touch**
For too long the conversations on campuses sounded like this: *Which is better, online learning or in-class learning?*. Of course, each has its pros and cons. Of course, students access each type of learning for very different reasons. Of course, the dominant model emerging is actually more of a hybrid than one or the other. Of course, the conversation in this area has now started to shift. The issue in our face now, thankfully, is how best to thoughtfully blend these tools to best connect with students and help them connect with learning. What is refreshing is the increasing acceptance by the technology advocates of the necessity and value of human interaction—and their work to facilitate it. Our favorite example is the Beep a Tutor program at Rio Salado College (AZ). Online students who get lost in learning can literally beep a tutor and usually get a call back within the hour to shepherd them through the challenge. Talk about just-in-time learning with a nice human touch!

• **Vendors vs. Colleagues**
This is a tricky issue, but one that is beginning to shift. When constructing buildings, we could call five colleagues who likely had built a similar building and had solid specifications and suggestions. Not so in putting together modern technology infrastructures. More often than not, college administrators are sold on a "system in development" or what will be coming in the next version of the software. The cynical term for this is "buying vaporware." Colleagues are little help, as most have the same or less experience in developing these systems. Often, we are at the mercy of slick marketing professionals who very well may have our best interests at heart. Still, how do we know? Even more challenging is the often undiscussed reality that many of our technology professionals are biased toward certain platforms or tools because that's what they know or can keep up with. This isn't always bad. If they want to serve their institutions, they have to go with what they know. However, how can we get the critical reflection on our technology endeavors that colleagues with experience often give? Commitments to sharing, learning together, and conducting the equivalent of

technology audits are some of the solutions suggested for handling this issue in our face.

On the Horizon

• From Development to Adoption

A nascent issue, but one that seems to be rapidly taking shape: For the last few years we have worked hard to train faculty and staff in the creation of technology resources—particularly websites. As the Internet becomes more mainstream, however, publishers are creating adoptable tools for class resources. In addition, Learning Management Systems (LMS) are maturing into simple tools to port in standard material that we can then modify to suit our teaching or service style—much as we have always done with our print materials. Is your institution committed to development and/or ready for adoption?

• From Experts to Expert Systems

Higher education is replete with experts in the classroom and in the service offices. Indeed, senior registrars or financial aid officers have often held the fate of students and staff in their hands because of their expert knowledge. The same issue has plagued business for years and businesses are now moving toward the creation of expert systems that can capture and share more openly this vital information. "Knowledge Management" is the most common term used to describe what may well be something your college might want to consider. A large-scale pilot is now in progress at Cuyahoga Community College (OH).

• From Amtrak to Cluetrain

The traditional PR and marketing machines in our colleges are stuck in the mass-media, one-to-many method. The authors of a challenging and humorous book, *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, challenge us to realize that an international conversation is going on behind the scenes. They are talking about our colleges via e-mail, in chat rooms, on bulletin boards, and on listservs. Online, student-driven teaching evaluations are already happening on some campuses. We are moving from the linear "Amtrack" information exchange to something quite different, less hierarchical, and easily accessible. Have you got a Cluetrain?

• From Internet to Evernet

The Evernet is an always-on Internet, accessible everywhere. From Web cafes to Web phones to wireless airport connections, everyday citizens are just beginning to see this reality in action. How are we going to use wireless technology in our institutions? How do we leverage cellphones, PDAs, e-books, and Web slates to improve learning and service? How do we make sure our students have access to these tools, learn how to use them, and still maintain secure networks?

• From Digital Divide to Digital Democracy
The conversation about haves and have-nots, vis à vis technology, is transforming into a forceful conversation about not just solving access and instruction issues, but confronting what living well in a connected world means. How do we make sure that our students are not at the mercy of terrorists, scam artists, pornographers, unscrupulous corporations, and hate groups that are actively using the Internet to touch the most vulnerable in our society. The most vulnerable, by the way, are most often touched in higher education by our institutions. To get an idea of how one group is confronting this, visit the Southern Poverty Law Center's Tolerance site www.tolerance.org.

Conclusion: Doing the Dialogue

Of course there are even more exciting issues over the horizon, such as voice recognition, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, wearable technology, and holographic technology (a particularly exciting possibility for education). But we must remember the Elvis factor: In 1977, on the occasion of Elvis' passing, there were 250 registered Elvis impersonators; today, there are more than 25,000. At this rate of adoption, one out of four people in this country will be an Elvis impersonator by 2050!

With the Elvis factor in mind, we'll hold off on major predictions about where we will be in five years. What we can say is that we'll be much better off in our colleges if we take the time to engage a dialogue about crucial issues in technology and learning. Moreover, we should work to create a culture where these and other issues are regularly tackled using catalyzing frameworks or other tools, to the end of improving and expanding learning for our students. With these as regular components of our academic communities, we turn our focus from the loud voices of the caustic cynics and true believers to the needs of our students in the 21st Century. A conversation worth engaging indeed!

Mark David Milliron is President and CEO of the League for Innovation in the Community College; Steven Lee Johnson is Provost and Chief Operating Officer of Sinclair Community College (OH).

Cynthia Wilson, Editor in Chief
Boo Browning, Managing Editor