REIMAGINING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES: A REFLECTION ON COLLABORATION AND TECHNO-PEDAGOGY

INTRODUCTION

The following is an ethnographic reflection regarding the conversations in which I was a participant observer at a workshop, entitled *Talking toward Techno-Pedagogy: A Collaboration across College and Constituencies* supported by a Mellon Foundation grant.[i] This document is neither an evaluation nor an assessment of the workshop; rather, the conference facilitators have asked me to prepare a reflection that charts the themes of these conversations. Like other ethnographic work, this reflection makes no special claim to summarizing the "truth" of these conversations. I imagine the other workshop participants may have been privy to numerous conversations of which I was not a part, and from their own vantage points have different interpretations of the workshop. Nevertheless, I would be quite surprised if workshop participants failed to recognize the interpretive value of the following.

The workshop took place at Bryn Mawr College from May 22 to May 25, 2000, and included four-member teams from Amherst College, Bryn Mawr College, Haverford College, Hampshire College, Mt. Holyoke College, Smith College, Swarthmore College, Vassar College and the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Each team was composed of a faculty member from the social sciences, a student, a librarian, and an information technologist. According to the workshop's mission statement, the major task was one of role clarification and collaborative integration: "What is the role of each of these constituencies in creating, storing and retrieving knowledge and how can the constituencies work together to fulfill those roles? The goal of this workshop is to develop ways in which faculty, librarians, information technologists and students can work together to integrate information technology into classroom teaching."

The workshop design was open ended. While teams from each college and university were meant to have a general sketch of how technology would be integrated into a course by the end of the workshop, this sketch was to be, at best, preliminary. During the first two days, participants were steered towards having conversations outside of their college team, sharing time and information within their constituent groups. Conversations were broad in scope and theme in an attempt to identify the challenges and benefits of techno-pedagogy. During the third day, five "experts" presented case studies of how they integrated technology within their curriculums. On the fourth and final day of the conference, participants came together as college teams to develop an action plan outlining how a particular course would infuse technology in the curriculum in the next academic year. In short, the workshop moved from broad brainstorming discussions to institutionally specific action planning during the course of four days. That the workshop was so successful in forming collaborative teams is a testament to the skillful planning and facilitation of the workshop designers.

Throughout this document I will refer to the constituent groups of the conference - students, faculty, librarians and information technologists. This is not meant to suggest that these are monolithic positions. Rather these professional identities are arenas of knowledge, interest and discourse from which specific participants speak their own views that are sometimes quite at odds with other members of their constituency.

OBSERVATIONS

GOOD WILL AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES

One after another, workshop participants remarked about how much "good will" there was between participants. It seems then "good will" is not something workshop participants would automatically assume of college colleagues. Taken away from the daily institutional structuring of

professional identity and relatively equalized in terms of authority by the liminal quality of the workshop, participants expressed pleasant surprise that "underneath" the professional identities of faculty member, librarian, information technologist, and student were people willing to collaborate. As one student put it: "I've found the good will, the belief that collaboration is both worthwhile and doable really inspiring. Although I realize we've all been pre-selected to feel this way."

Perhaps one of the most immediate effects of the proliferation of information technologies across college campuses is how these technologies have transgressed boundaries of authority and expertise associated with professional identities. The example most frequently indexed at the workshop was the greater expertise that many students have with these technologies than the faculty that teaches them. A consequence of these transgressions is that participants are made aware of their investments of the self in "professional identities" that require, following Cohen (1985, 1994), a quite self-conscious accounting. If students have more expertise than faculty members, then faculty must account what expertise they actually have and what constitutes important expertise. In symbolic terms, accounting for identity is often relational (insiders defining themselves in relation to how they perceive outsiders) but less often mutual and dialogic. Accounting for identity while creating symbolic parameters of belonging too often creates stereotypes of outsiders. Now, the stereotypes that professionals hold of each other, while not as invidious as other stereotypes, can still powerfully dissuade people from collaborating with each other. For instance, during the workshop students kept commenting on how they didn't realize that librarians "really wanted to help." When reinforced by an institution's structures and organization, symbolic boundaries of professional identity become experienced as barriers and borders that are vigilantly patrolled for violation. Therefore, the surprising and inspiring "good will" of the workshop was the marker by which participants could mutually and dialogically begin to reimagine their own professional identities without having to establish strict symbolic borders. To put it another way: information technologists could imagine themselves as professionals not in opposition to students, faculty and librarians, but alongside these other constituencies. In many ways, while the manifest content of the workshop was on fusing technology and pedagogy, the more latent content of the workshop was beginning a process to imagine and model a more fluid understanding of professional selves.

LIBRARIANS

While the library is metaphorically considered to be the heart of a college, librarians have increasingly found that information technology, especially the internet, has displaced this centrality. To paraphrase one librarian: "A lot of research is no longer happening in the library, but in dorm rooms and in labs. [It is now a] question of what do we do; where do we fit?" However, the filtering, discernment and evaluation of source material has become even more critical to the scholastic enterprise. While professional librarians have been dealing with electronic source materials since the late 1970's, the library as the central repository and access point for this material has been usurped by the recent ubiquity of internet access. Emblematic of this peripheral status is the perception that librarians have of the lack of seriousness evinced by both faculty and students around issues of copyright and intellectual property. So, although the highly professional cadre of librarians at the workshop have greater expertise with the whole gamut of electronic resources available than any of the other constituent groups including internet resource, librarians are too often under utilized by both students and faculty in the pedagogical process. The perception of their professional role is to closely tied to the actual bricks and mortar of the library and not to the expertise, skill and support they provide.

For instance, students are under the misperception that they have "cheated" or "done something wrong" if they ask a reference librarian for specific help on a course project. At the same time, without an understanding of the specific pedagogical purpose of the project from the faculty member, librarians find that many students aren't particularly clear about the actual information

they are after. For librarians the question seems to be how to become appropriately involved in the pedagogical process outside of the library. All of the librarians spoke of the dismal intellectual returns from doing a traditional presentation in a class at the beginning of semester. Because of the presentation's generic quality and lack of assignment focus, most students quickly forget what has been presented. While many of the librarians have collaborated with faculty on faculty research projects, very few have ever collaborated on the pedagogical process. Most librarians suggested having meetings during the design of a syllabus to help craft assignments, projects, and course web pages that can fully take advantage of primary and secondary source materials, as well as providing a forum on issues of source discernment. Instead of one-shot generic presentations, librarians would become much more integrated in the classroom experience; facilitating both student and faculty activities.

The dilemma for librarians lies in imagining an identity that takes them outside of the library and more into the classroom, and in imagining what would happen if such a move were successful. Or as one librarian expressed this major concern regarding collaboration: "Being too successful; i.e., not having enough time, staff to handle a positive response."

FACULTY

If information technology has made librarians wonder how to get more successfully into the classroom, then, for faculty at the workshop, information technology has left them wondering what a classroom would look like and what teaching would mean if faculty were not the sole proprietor of the class. Faculty have a general perception that technology is unavoidable. The daily exchanges of email between students and faculty already point to a degree of contact and collaboration that barely existed a decade ago. Traditionally, the classroom has been the special, private domain of the professoriate. It is the arena in which their particular expertise is presented and performed to undergraduates. The professor is not just the bearer of the pedagogical message, but is in some senses the actual embodiment of that message. They way that faculty speak of "their class" frames the sense that faculty display of being ultimately in control of topical content and responsible for student evaluation. The class experience is shared with students, of course, but pedagogical authority is traditionally understood as a highly personal moral quality. One doesn't "teach well," but, rather, is a "a good teacher."

As one faculty participant pointed out, collaboration has generally meant creating a course and teaching with another faculty member(s), but has not meant collaborating with librarians, information technologists and students. Students take classes, and librarians and information technologists provide faculty support but are not a part of the actual course. So unlike collaborating with another faculty member, some faculty suggested that what would constitute a successful collaboration with an information technologist is that the technology would be "transparent." Trying to imagine faculty members discussing with each other how their relative contributions should be transparent in a collaboratively taught class renders a sense of the ambivalence that many faculty have over information technology. The collaboration between faculty and technologist should "enhance" the course content and pedagogical strategy of the faculty, but both the technologist and technology should not intrude. They should remain invisible in the process. Other faculty wondered how a professoriate trained as "linear" thinkers could formulate, model or evaluate "hypertextual" modalities of learning or presentation, such as sophisticated web sites produced for and developed by students. At the same time, faculty participants were aware of how technology was often used in the classroom just for its own sake. The workshop rubric for this phenomenon was the "PowerPoint syndrome."

For faculty, then, sharing the stage requires a profound reexamination of their pedagogical identities. Because of their sense that information technology might engender a loss of both control

and authority, faculty participants often framed techno-pedagogy as a matter of relative costs and benefits. While something might well be gained, it was assumed that something would always be lost. Compounding this sense of loss were doubt whether making an investment in such collaboration would pay off. Junior faculty who may well have some technological fluency wonder whether there will be rewards regarding promotion and tenure. There is a perception that senior faculty have more "leisure" to "experiment" in collaboration. Senior faculty can afford collaboration. They have the credit of enough symbolic capital to afford success and endure failure, but they may be the least disposed to do so because of their perceived lack of technological sophistication. Of course, this calls into question the structural conditions in which faculty find themselves. But what does seem to be clear from the workshop discussion is infusing technology into pedagogical practices is considered inevitable; yet faculty experience this as a set of generational reversals of expertise. Students have greater fluency in information technology than many junior faculty, and junior faculty have greater fluency than senior faculty. Regarding promotional and tenure issues there is a cultural lag at many institutions in the criteria through which pedagogical practices are valued and rewarded.

However, all other constituent groups recognize that faculty must assume the leadership position in collaboration. After all, faculty will "invite" collaboration, or it will not occur. Nevertheless, faculty express reticence about assuming this leadership position. The complexities surrounding the coordination of technological initiatives seems daunting to many faculty. Faculty are unsure of what degree of technological fluency and expertise they need or should have to be credible to students. For some faculty the learning curve seems very steep indeed. There is a disheartening perception that course planning and syllabus preparation to infuse technology must take place far in advance. A course syllabus becomes a restrictively tight timetable - becoming more like a train schedule than an intellectual travel guide. However, many faculty throughout the workshop questioned the accuracy of their own perceptions regarding these difficulties. These preliminary conversations with students, librarians, and information technologists were greeted quite enthusiastically by faculty. As one faculty member wrote: "I am inspired by learning about new ways how IT can (relatively) unobtrusively and noncontrivedly facilitate student learning, especially in areas I am less strong in teaching: data retrieval, visual learning, team analysis, student self-evaluation." To paraphrase one of the expert presenters, John Grayson, collaboration requires a commitment from faculty to learn the "languages of technology" while collaborators learn the "languages of an academic discipline."

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGISTS

While we walked out from lunch on the third day, an information technologist said to me, "I've been to so many information technology conferences that just show off what technology can do. What is interesting is having the faculty perspective. To get their input on what are their goals; what they want to have happen in the classroom." Most of the information technologists at the workshop were professionally focused on instructional technology, and most of these instructional technologists were women who commented upon how "male" information technology was as a professional field. Their discussion about collaboration focused on the complexities of organizational culture. While faculty and librarians may be reimagining their professional identities, instructional technologists are trying to imagine a role for themselves and fashion an institutional niche. With some heartfelt irony, a number of instructional technologists wondered, "do faculty know what we do?" In many ways, the answer to that question is "no." Perceiving themselves for the most part on the lower rungs of the institutional hierarchy, instructional technologists admit a personal hesitancy in approaching faculty about pedagogical issues. Initiating pedagogical discussion was felt to come best from the faculty; instructional technologists provided support but not curricular leadership. At the same time, there was a general consensus that early faculty adopters of technology had already come and integrated technology into their specific curriculums without necessarily inspiring other faculty to do so. The model that predicted early adopters would spur their colleagues on had, for the

most part, failed.

This isn't meant to suggest that technology hasn't been readily adopted by faculty. In fact, instructional technologist often find themselves as the "friendly face" that faculty continually call for desktop support. As one technologist put it, "we are constantly putting out fires. We are the EMTs (emergency medical technicians) of technology." To maintain cordial relations with faculty and to appear accessible, instructional technologists are constantly called upon to solve problems that would be better directed to a "help desk." As one technologist wrote: "As a member of computing services it becomes so easy to function solely within the confines of our day to day maintenance of the critical college functions that I find I do not focus on the components of technology that really enhance the curricular mission of our institution."

A number of technologists described their experiences of being perpetual outsiders and go-betweens shuttling back and forth between faculty requests and computer services. They often say yes to faculty when computer services would prefer they say no. A number of technologists suggested that they experienced brokering in particularly poignant gender terms, with mostly women in educational technology negotiating on behalf of faculty with the mostly male "hardware end" of computing. Compounding this delicate sense of negotiating from an institutionally weak position was the dilemma that many instructional technologists felt that while they should be evangelists for technology, they at times really wanted to dissuade faculty and students from attempting to use some technologies. Often, this was when the technologists felt that institutional resources wouldn't fully support a faculty or student initiative, or that the technology was weak in terms of pedagogical application. Yet, technologists feared that faculty would perceive them as nay sayers. Consequently, a number of instructional technologists have had the painful and time consuming experience of supporting initiatives even when in their judgment these initiatives were unlikely to be successful.

While they'd been hired by these elite liberal arts college precisely to foster collaboration regarding technological issues, a number of information technologists felt too stymied by issues of organizational structure and workflow to facilitate actual collaboration. One of the most significant aspects of the workshops was how information technologists began to view librarians in a new light as strategic institutional partners. As one technologist put it: "Working collaboratively on a faculty project is a natural mechanism for creating permanent tier working relationships between libraries and IT people. Libraries – IT can be a very positive, helpful and critical resource for each other, a supportive resource."

STUDENTS

In many ways the student participants at the workshop provided some of the most technologically refined voices. First, traditional aged students at liberal arts college have had technology infused throughout their educational experiences in a fashion that few of their instructors had. In other words, students have been on the receiving end and have suffered through experiments with technology. Second, many students have a familiarity, fluency and expertise with information technology that is actually greater than that of their instructors. Third, the use of information technology is part and parcel of their daily existence to a much greater extent than that of many of the participants in the other constituencies. Therefore, students provided the voice of seasoned criticism. But these are not the critical voices of "consumers" of technological products. Rather, students voice a truly aesthetic set of concerns around issues of techno-pedagogy. Unlike many faculty who want technology to be invisible in a course, students want to form collaborations where technology is aesthetically appropriate in the course, where it intellectually fits and "feels right." Part of the aesthetic concern for students is that information technology must also fit with the larger student culture outside the classroom. What student voices do provide is a very savvy, powerful

sense of how techno-pedagogy is practically experienced and aesthetically appreciated.

Students perceive that faculty tend to fetishize technology without really understanding how the practical pedagogical application of technology occurs. For instance, students remarked about how inappropriate PowerPoint presentations seemed in a small seminar class. In this case, technology blocked the give and take of conversations. Or as one student put it, "technology is just like a wheel, a great invention, but you won't necessarily put a class on wheels." Fully aware of the required time it takes to create techno-pedagogical processes, students see how faculty feel compelled to use these processes even when their application may not be particularly pedagogically relevant. A number of students pointed to establishing on-line asynchronous discussions as rather useless and very time consuming if faculty merely require students to make a specific number of postings. Many students post without ever reading any of the other postings because of the sheer volume. Without password controls for course web sites, threaded discussions tend to devolve. While anonymous posting in web boards may actually allow those who are usually silent or embarrassed to find their voice, in practical terms anonymity often means that a kind of intellectual spam is posted. Web coursework packages, such as WebCT and Blackboard, in some versions have banner ads flashing, and students are annoyed about viewing advertising as they are studying.

This isn't to suggest that students aren't enthusiastic regarding technology, but rather their enthusiasm is tempered by practical and aesthetic concerns. While technology has allowed a course to meets as a class virtually, this has many very real implications. On one hand, to have class resources – a syllabus, assignments, e-texts – available on the web and via email is marvelous, but on the other hand, students must often print lengthy e-texts because of how unreadable they are on a computer screen. Often, the cost of paper and peripherals is more expensive than the actual text. While handing in papers via email is convenient, invariably translation of file formats across different operating systems and word processors leaves many of these papers stylistically lacking. Or as one student put it, "for some of us it would be so much easier if I could just leave a paper copy under an office door." The very benefits of flexibility in having a syllabus and assignments on line can, in practical terms, become a scheduling nightmare. Students criticize that this very flexibility allows professors to change continually the schedule and requirements of a course. Attempting to juggle a schedule full of such ever-changing courses becomes a logistical morass. While the peer review process is much facilitated by using the web as central access point for student work, much of the peer review that was previously done in class is now taking up time outside of class.

So as the boundaries of the classroom experience become more virtual, the negotiation of these boundaries has become quite complicated for students. For students technology doesn't have to be transparent; rather, it should facilitate the face-to-face experience of an undergraduate education. Most students privileged face-to-face interaction, whether in class, faculty office or student study groups, as the place where intellectual growth takes place. Technological initiatives are appropriate when they aesthetically enhance these interactions. Depending upon the departmental climate and institutional culture, many students feel that they must be relatively silent regarding their pedagogical critiques as to whether a technological initiative is appropriate. Students fear to give negative evaluations of these technological initiatives without some "shield."

For students the collaborative environment of the workshop provided this shield. The challenge for students was to reimagine a collaborative identity in which they would be partially responsible for constructing their own educational vehicles. For their fellow collaborators, the challenge is recognizing the actual authority of student voices, and institutionally facilitating these voices by providing such "shields."

FINAL COMMENTS: TIME, SCALE AND SUSTAINABILITY

For most of the participants, the workshop provided a respite from their busy professional lives. It was a time to focus and discuss issues of collaboration. The workshop was a liminal space precisely because for most it was at once an institutional space but not their institution's space, and the workshop was held over a sustained period of time, allowing for conversation to emerge. In a sense, time was felt to be expansive during the workshop. During the course of the workshop, many expressed the sentiment that there is really too little time in institutions of higher education to reflect upon professional roles. As Harvey (1990) has suggested, all of us are living through a period where both time and space are being compressed vis-à-vis information technology. However, the experience of this compression is somewhat different for each constituent group because of how they conceptualize time. In many ways, time was the central notion through which workshop participants expressed their concerns regarding the future possibilities of collaboration. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Lakoff and Turner (1989) have suggested time is one of the most fundamental of our ontological metaphors.

For faculty time was something that was in "short supply," but one could "make time for collaboration" if the benefits outweighed the costs. Here, faculty mark their institutional position of relative privilege and power by conceptualizing time as a quantity over which they have some partial control. Time can be invested, but this investment must be made wisely. In the schemas of promotion and tenure, faculty must account for the way that have invested time, and whether their time has reaped intellectual and symbolic profit for themselves and their respective institutions.

This is metaphorically quite different from the way that both librarians and information technologists spoke of time in terms of a race. When librarians and information technologists asked whether there would be enough time to collaborate, time was metaphorized as a rather relentless pursuer. Time moved. Without enough time to accomplish the numerous tasks that collaboration takes, without the time to run the race, collaborations were bound to fail. This similar understanding of the experience of time led many librarians and information technologist to see their institutional and possible collaborative roles as being "parallel." This was a rather new and surprising insight for many of these participants. They were the efficient support staff who would try to gain as much time as possible for the runner. Librarians and information technologists were concerned with the "pace" of change. Both groups perceived students as only being able to provide "intermittent" support as collaborators. Therefore, both of these groups wondered about the issues of success and scale. Given the perception of how much time support takes, both of these groups wondered whether successful collaboration would be institutionally sustained through all the races to be run.

For students time is constantly "juggled." Much like the faculty, time must be invested wisely and has the quality of an object. However, time is not something that is ever in student's control. Unexpectedly a course requirement is changed, and suddenly one doesn't have "enough" time. Poor pedagogical strategies lead students to feel that they are "wasting" time in courses. Nevertheless, students recognize that this particular period of their lives, undergraduate education, is a "special" time; what is wasted is time's possibility for creating powerful and meaning transformation in their lives. For students, this awareness of the potential of time's alchemy is what makes them such aestheticians of information technology, and leaves them resenting being treated as the consumers of education.

All of these are metaphors of time; all of them are perfectly correct interpretations of the experience of time. Nevertheless, I wanted to draw attention to these different metaphors because they subtly express the different institutional positions of professional roles as they are personally

experienced as aspects of the self. In the reimagination of professional identities, workshop participants were negotiating more than the instrumental tasks and duties associated with collaborative enterprises. In the projects that teams are preparing, successful and sustained collaboration may very well entail participants' clearer understanding of the different "metaphors we live by" (Lakoff and Johnson). Forging professional identities where authority and expertise is shared and acknowledged requires a mutual accounting where investments are made of the self without the disenfranchisement of the other.

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