



THE LEAP OF FAITH INTO EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION

SURF

INTERVIEW WITH LAUREN HERCKIS

How to preserve the tradition of the ‘hallowed halls on the hill’ at universities while at the same time innovate your education with new tools and techniques? That’s a challenge says Lauren Herckis, anthropologist at Carnegie Mellon University in Pennsylvania and keynote at the SURF Education conference in the Netherlands. “Give people time to experiment, to fail, to try again, to learn and to rearrange the pieces of the puzzle. And make meaningful learning experiences for students your key driver.”

First let's go back 20 years. What was the situation in 1998?

Universities started providing email addresses for their students. Computing moved from punch cards to zip disks and cd's, and powerful tools in research were mainly used for the analysis of data. There was a lot of potential and great expectations regarding technical possibilities.

Did they also find their way into the field of education?

Yes and no. The adoption and integration into teaching, as opposed to research, was very uneven. To rapidly see the potential and translate these tools into meaningful learning experiences, depended very much on the ability on an organisational level and on that of the individual instructors. You really have to take a leap of faith when you integrate new technologies.

And are they willing to take that leap?

I think the university model is very much about tradition. About deeply held ideas of form and structure, and strong cultural and social values. Think of the hallowed halls on the hill: a place where knowledge is valued above everything. In such an environment, change that gets at the heart of these things is very challenging.

This means universities are conservative?

Well that depends. For individual researchers, experimentation with new tools and techniques is a second nature. But a systemic, integrated and sustained change is a very different story. In higher education there is a long tradition to populate classrooms with passionate leaders in their field. Think of the brilliant biologist who loves teaching and knows everything about her subject but nothing about teaching effectively.

So teach them to do so

Most universities in America don't have extensive requirements for their faculty to learn the skills associated with instructions. And while the heart may be in the right place when it comes to teaching, a lot of professors still work in the old-fashioned model of expert and disciples.

And that's not very effective when it comes to teaching?

No, because students all learn differently, and some need different kinds of support than others. Some faculty teach students to solve problems by throwing them into the deep end of the pool. But that doesn't automatically go well for all students. Some might even drown! They might learn better from personalised, guided feedback and support. And that's not always on top of the mind of most professors.

A good student experience is important?

Absolutely. As a matter of fact it's one of the main key drivers for educational innovations. Bad student experiences are a big concern, therefore it's important that universities give their students meaningful learning experiences. And that also means experimenting with new tools and techniques to meet the demand and the expectations of young people who are already very at ease with state of the art techniques.

Time to go to work

Sure, but it's also a matter of believing. Sometimes even people who believe in evidence based research can be skeptical about education innovation. Why? Because the new ideas don't resonate with their own and they don't see clear benefits for their own course.

How can you change this mindset?

Give people time. Time to experiment, to fail, to try again, to learn, to feel comfortable and to rearrange the pieces of the puzzle of your course. And it's better and easier to experiment when developing new courses instead of adjusting present ones.

You make it sound simple and easy!

The truth is more complex. In a large institution you need a top down approach for some basic technologies that can bring integration for a long period of time. Then you need to identify a clear and limited set of pedagogical challenges. But you also need a bottom up and collaborative approach that will integrate the specific needs, expectations and experiences of staff and students. That can be very successful. But it also takes a lot of time, work and meetings.

And how do you tackle organisational problems when they pop up?

Very carefully! Haha! You need a lot of agility and versatility on the organisational and individual level. But overall it remains a challenge. Educational technologies have to be tailor made and at the same time potentially customisable and adoptable on the fly.

What do you foresee for the future?

First of all an enormous potential for simulations in education. Realistic recreations of events, reactions, problems and challenges that are almost impossible to present to students directly. New technologies will make this possible. And then there is distance education. That will explode and will have a great impact. Students of all stripes and with all kinds of backgrounds and goals will be able to join in. Over the next 10 years this inclusive and diverse community will create new modes of education, with different global perspectives, cultural frameworks and value systems. Education not only for but also by people from all over the world. Absolutely wonderful!

Words

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If you'd like more information about the SURF Education conference you can email owd@surf.nl

Lauren Herckis is an anthropologist at Carnegie Mellon University (Pittsburgh, USA). She is specialised in organisational and contextual barriers and affordances to the adoption of innovative tools and practices in higher education. She applies anthropological methods and theory to analyse human engagement with the material world in her field research, and applies lessons from implementation science to bridge the gap between research and practice.

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