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Reflections on "dealing with Technology: Administrative Issues" - a chapter in a new book...

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Julia Gelfand

Steven W. Gilbert and Stephen C. Ehrmann are authors of Chapter 20, "Dealing with technology: administrative issues," in Field Guide to Academic Leadership, edited by Robert M. Diamond, Jossey-Bass, New York, NY, 2002, ISBN: 0787960594. This book addresses contemporary issues facing leaders in higher education and is appropriate for all global landscapes. This particular chapter emphasizes the challenges facing administrators and managers who have oversight for planning and implementation of technology. It is not specifically about library technology but, since libraries are usually among the highest consumers of technology and Internet traffic, many of the issues are particularly relevant. With the expansion and proliferation of distance education, remote access, expectations of 24/7 communication and access, campuses around the globe are stretching themselves to serve their primary constituencies of students and faculty in most efficient and cost-effective ways.

The authors have great credibility in this subject area. Steven Gilbert founded the Teaching, Learning, and Technology (TLT) Group, an independent non-profit organization, originally affiliated with the American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), in January 1998 and prior to that had a significant career at Educom/Educause.

Stephen Ehrmann is another founder of the TLT Group, where he has led the Flashlight Project, which helps educators evaluate and improve their own uses of technology, on- and off-campus (see www.tltgroup.org/about/index.html).

We probably all agree with one assumption and that is that we hope information technology leads to improved teaching, learning and scholarship but, as the prefatory paragraph to this chapter notes, it is not clear how successful this has been. The experience needed in academic settings to oversee the investments in technology equipment, training, and planning is great and how do we make sure that we have all the talent needed to do this insightfully and strategically? This book focuses on technology to support the educational mission and goals for instruction and learning.

What makes this chapter an interesting read is that it describes some of the "perceived and actual" obstacles associated with advancing an institutional mission with technology. Without giving away all the secrets of the chapter, the myths and misperceptions preface the "real obstacles" to dealing with technology so that it is used effectively and appropriately in a campus environment. The obstacles include:

- lack of achievable visions;

- contention and diffusion;
- lack of collaboration;
- changing technologies;
- scarcity of knowledgeable academic leaders;
- unavailable or unprepared professional staff;
- lack of support staff;
- a focus on low-level outcomes;
- little understanding of classroom dynamics;
- pendulum extremes as solutions;
- too much hype;
- not enough time;
- demanding new work paradigms;
- lack of training, tools and taxonomy for instructional options; and
- lack of training, tools and taxonomy for assessment of learner needs and achievements (p. 333).

Most members of the academic community are advanced users of a range of technologies. They include word processing, e-mail, analytical data and spreadsheets, presentation tools, bibliographic management software, publishing practices, computational software, surfing and navigating the Web, and others. These users are also possessors of many technology devices, including personal computers, hand-held devices, CD burners, scanners, and an array of printers and multimedia, to name a few. Learning how to use these tools, products and services is part of independent discovery, formal technology training, and some institutional responsibility.

According to the chapter, institutions benefit from technology through gains:

- in content;
- in access;
- in effectiveness;
- in efficiency;

- from standardization or personalization; and
- in productivity (p. 335).

We all know that planning for technology does not fit into the formula for planning. Learning to live with ambiguity and constant change is the current experience now flushed with more trying economic times. Thus, the authors' attempt to offer a portfolio of strategies for using technology effectively is an ambitious effort. The Portfolio of six strategies for using technology effectively contains:

1. Develop a vision.
2. Explain minimum requirements for the technology infrastructure.
3. Offer something for almost everyone, every year (wide-shallow strategy).
4. Offer more focused, extensive programs for a few (narrow-deep strategy).
5. Determine review and budgeting processes.
6. Aim for clarity, openness – inclusivity (p. 338).

Ubiquitous computing, a term that has become synonymous with pervasive computing and embedded technologies, is defined by Marcia Riley as "the paradigm shift where technology becomes virtually invisible in our lives. Instead of having a desk-top or lap-top machine, the technology we use will be embedded in our environment," and more widespread because of developments in "user interfaces, displays, operating systems, networks, and wireless communications" (see www.cc.gatech.edu/classes/cs6751_97_fall/projects/say-cheese/marcia/mfinal.html). When Gilbert and Ehrmann share some of the key variables to consider when making a commitment to ubiquitous computing, they note these institutional issues:

- Level of commitment.
- Capacity to support almost universal usage of computing technology.
- Enthusiasm and tolerance.
- Financial resources of the institution and student body.
- Planning and assessment capacity (p. 343).

Faculty teaching loads, use of adjuncts, and professional development for faculty are major issues that warrant serious discussion as institutions plan and assess the role of technology in the classroom. Expectations run high from students, and disappointments are severe when faculty are not on a par with them in using the technologies. Sometimes it is a generation gap, but addressing how to fill the gaps and maintain solid and consistent ways to introduce

and sustain technology initiatives is essential to long-term success. It is hard to think back even a short time without using media in the classroom, or making assignments that could only be accomplished in the physical building of a library. Today, we are living in a dynamic society, and teaching and learning take place concurrently.

Chapters like this may not be "cutting edge" but they clearly help the planning process and the references and resources listed at the conclusion of the chapter are good reminders of where one can go for further ideas and help. Technology in all education sectors remains among the most expensive investments an institution makes because it requires appropriate leadership, management, installation, space and support to be effective.

Libraries can benefit from some of these simple lessons and consider the role that computing in the parent organization has and how to work best with it to be a critical link in the learning process. The larger and more complex the institution, the greater the impact of both academic and administrative computing and additional lessons are required.

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