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Review: Using Technology to Promote Student Learning: Opportunities for Today and Tomorrow

Michael D. Coomes

Bowling Green State University, mcoomes@bgsu.edu

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Book Review



Michael D. Coomes

*Using Technology to Promote Student Learning:
Opportunities for Today and Tomorrow*

by

Catherine McHugh Engstrom
and Kevin W. Kruger (Eds.)

San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997
111 pages, \$24

Catherine McHugh Engstrom and Kevin Kruger's book reveals how the widespread use of technology is reshaping the higher education and student affairs landscape. Just the arcana of the Internet leads one to conclude that, like Dorothy and Toto, "We're not in Kansas anymore." Concepts like structured query languages, intellectual property infringement, cybernars, technology clusters, computer use policies, MUDs (multi-user domains), MOOs (multi-user domains, object-oriented) and Mushes (multi-user shared hallucinations) require that student affairs educators reconsider their roles and purposes on the college campus. The authors and editors of the sourcebook have done an admirable job of guiding the reader through this quickly shifting

Michael D. Coomes is an associate professor of the Department of Higher Education and Student Affairs at Bowling Green State University in Ohio.

landscape and present a thorough analysis of the challenges and opportunities that information technology offers to student affairs educators.

In chapter 1, Larry Moneta explores the factors that educational decisionmakers must weigh as they consider the future of managing student affairs on college campuses. These factors include economic considerations, the demands that students attuned to a 24/7 lifestyle will place on student services, technological developments (e.g., information dissemination, entertainment technology), and education technology. Moneta also examines how the increasing cost of technology, the need for continual training for staff and administrators, and the role of email in expanding organizational communication (and potentially constraining organizational understanding) influence the operation of student affairs divisions of the future.

In chapter 2, Paul Truer and Linda Belote employ the electronic version of the *Student Handbook* of the University of Minnesota Duluth as an extensive case study for demonstrating how a web-based application can be used to foster student learning. In addition, the authors offer insights into a number of salient issues related to World Wide Web usage by college students, including “student forays into pornography on the WWW and inappropriate use of chat lines” (p. 25); cocooning; the dissemination of outdated, erroneous, and shoddy information; and concerns about equality of access to technological advancements.

In chapter 3, Gary R. Hanson addresses the use of technology to facilitate assessment and evaluation efforts in student affairs. This chapter provides a well-written and comprehensive overview of a range of technological interventions that are changing the ways institutional researchers are collecting and analyzing data. It is Hanson’s primary conclusion that new evaluation methods (e.g., World Wide Web surveys, real time audio and video data collection, data mining, structured query languages) when coupled with the methods and tenets of naturalistic inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) will lead to enhanced ways of understanding how students grow, learn, and develop and how colleges foster or hinder those processes. In exploring the future use of technology in assessment and evaluation, Hanson shares a conclusion supported by many of the other

authors of this book—new (and future) technologies facilitate “a movement toward user-friendly ways for assessment and evaluation information to arrive in the hands of individuals who will make the most of it: program decision makers and student participants” (p. 44).

In chapter 4, Rodney J. Petersen and Marjorie W. Hodges cite numerous court decisions to illustrate how the courts and postsecondary institutions are dealing with issues of privacy, freedom of expression, hate speech, intellectual property, and copyright infringement. The authors conclude their chapter by offering a number of suggestions to assist campus administrators charged with the responsibility of developing or modifying an institutional computer policy. These include what should be contained in an effective computer policy (e.g., preamble, expectations, procedures for reporting infractions); guidelines for who should have access to the computer resources of the institution; and policy formulation and implementation suggestions.

Catherine McHugh Engstrom has written perhaps the most narrowly targeted chapter in this book: in chapter 5, she presents an examination of the use of technology in graduate student affairs preparation programs. While the focus is on graduate education, Engstrom also offers a number of interesting pedagogical interventions that could be applied in undergraduate classes or as staff training activities. These interventions range from attendance at the now familiar teleconference on a student affairs-related issue or subscribing to a functional area-related listserve, to “moving around” a MOO (“shared on-line environments”) to discuss a topic related to a student’s course or a staff training need (p. 62). In addition to suggesting pedagogical interventions, she suggests a set of skills that graduates of student affairs programs must develop if they are to be considered computer literate. Yet, many of the skills Engstrom feels students need to develop through their graduate preparation are skills that are already possessed by the majority of traditional age graduate students.

In chapter 5, Karley Ausiello and Barry Wells examine the application of information technology to student affairs work, particularly the work of the senior student affairs officer. The authors suggest that student affairs officers will need to develop the roles of information technology policy architects, facilitators of change, educators and learners, and policymakers. The authors also emphasize the need for student

affairs practitioners to foster collaboration with other members of academic community and to involve students in setting institutional technology policy.

Just as Ausiello and Wells suggest new roles for student affairs educators, so do Susan R. Komives and Rodney J. Petersen in chapter 6; and the role they suggest is that of the futurist. Komives and Petersen support their call for this new role by explaining how futurists use the principles of continuity and analogy as analytical tools for conceptualizing possible futures using current trends and demographic characteristics. Unlike some prognosticators who have predicted the demise of higher education as students' needs change and distance learning opportunities become more ubiquitous and transparent, Komives and Petersen believe that technology will offer numerous opportunities for student affairs practitioners to reconceptualize their work and to enhance the student learning experience.

Following the structure of the *New Directions* series, chapter 7 (the book's final chapter) by John R. Seabreeze offers information on additional resources that address the use of technology in the student affairs field. Yet, in keeping with the focus on technology, Seabreeze does not present an annotated list of books and articles on the topic, but rather a list of websites focusing on the topics of student affairs service delivery, information dissemination, surveys and research, student learning, and general student affairs topics.

While each chapter in this book presents a different perspective on the application of technology in student affairs work, a number of common themes emerge. Foremost among these themes is that students and many new student affair practitioners are bringing highly refined technological skills to campus, and midlevel and senior student affairs administrators will be forced to refine their own knowledge and skills to remain current and respond to the challenges and opportunities presented by the newest members of the academy. A second theme deals with the always paradoxical nature of implementing new technology. New technological innovations (and computers and their applications) are frequently presented as ways to save time, money, and personnel resources. But, as more than one of the monograph's authors (e.g., Moneta) is quick to point out, "For student affairs managers, attending to the costs of technology may yet prove to be the

most difficult part of adjusting to the technological era” (p. 11). New legal and ethical issues presented by the increased use of computerized technology by students, faculty, and student affairs educators is another common theme. A number of chapter authors address the important issues of free speech on the Internet; the nature of academic honesty (Is computerized group work cheating or constructing joint meaning, and who is to decide?); intellectual property rights; and the challenge of creating a sense of community when students learn at a distance far-removed from the physical campus or choose to cocoon in their residence hall rooms and only interact with educators and peers electronically. Finally, all of the authors are quick to point out that student affairs educators are uniquely positioned to lead the university community in developing institutional policies and practices that shape student learning. As Komives and Petersen noted:

Student affairs can become the dashboard of the institution. By using technology to tap student attitudes, track trends in student needs, and signal issues that need resolution, student affairs can establish the flow of information that is essential for enabling all divisions of the university to understand students. (p. 94)

No book, particularly an edited book that draws on the skills and insights of a number of different authors, is without its flaws. This book is no exception; it is uniformly well written and carefully edited. Some stylistic idiosyncrasies (e.g., Engstrom tends to use the pronoun “we” in referring to the structure of her chapter, leading one to wonder if the chapter was originally a shared work) and the occasional worpo (as opposed to typo) distract the reader. Fortunately these are kept to a minimum. Of a more serious nature is the failure of some of the chapters to focus on the books’ implied topic—using technology to support student learning. At least three of the chapters (those by Hanson, Petersen and Hodges, and Ausiello and Wells) focus on administrative issues. Whether this demonstrates the author’s failure to focus on the core issue of student learning or whether it is indicative of the editors choice of title is unclear.

One of the common themes that emerges from the various chapters is the belief that the Internet will foster a more learner-centered environment—an environment where end users will determine the goals and processes that will most readily accommodate individual service

and learning needs. This egalitarian and pluralistic ethos has been a hallmark of the Internet since its inception. Too often, however, the authors focus their attention on the role the senior student affairs officer plays in directing student affairs policy. As learning technologies expand and as more people use technology to access and shape information, the role of the senior student affairs officer as a technology manager will certainly decrease.

The rapidly changing technological landscape presents a particular problem for Seabreeze. The short half-life of many websites makes the development of a set of resources like those offered by Seabreeze problematic. Seabreeze might have served the reader better by developing a set of criteria that the web surfer could employ to evaluate the usefulness of available web-based information sources. These criteria might include the currency of the information, the uniqueness of the information (too often websites do little to extend the limits of information on a particular topic, and instead they merely package information found in other media like books in a “sexier” format), the credibility of the information, and the ease of use of the site.

Finally, I cannot help but note the slight sense of vertigo I experienced as I read this book. I found myself frequently bemused at the concept of reading a book about technology. I kept asking myself, “Why am I using a 15th-century technology to learn about 21st-century technology?” I am convinced that the next version of this book will be made available electronically with hypertext “hot” links to the various web-based interventions and learning opportunities presented to the reader. Yet, until that time we will have to hold this book in our hands and make do with the valuable insights offered by its editors and authors.

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