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How Much Content? Are We Asking The Wrong Question?

Mary L. Beaudry, Director
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How much content is enough? That is the most agonizing course planning question dogging today's college professors. Because in the past the amount of content was considered an indicator of course credibility and because knowledge is expanding in every field, we continue to believe we must squeeze more and more material into our courses. But in today's climate of accountability, this is the wrong question.

Course credibility discussions are centering now on what students have learned, not on what a course covers. This means that content quantity is being replaced by the quality of student learning as a respected indicator of course credibility.

The bottom line for credibility critics today is not how much the course covers, but how students are different after they have taken a course. In other words, what do students know and what are they able to do after the course that they did not know

and were not able to do beforehand? Whether we like it or not, the focus is on usable knowledge. Moreover, to evaluate the quality of student learning, assessment fever is sweeping across every campus in the land.

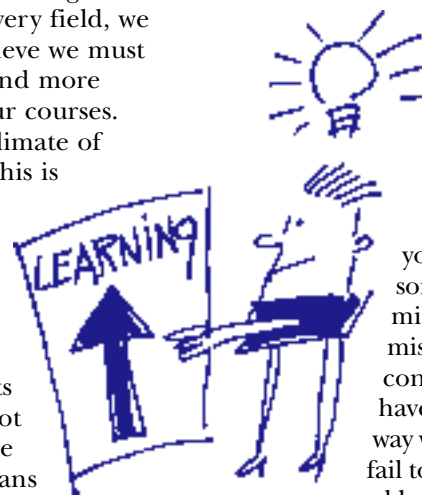
Fortunately, we now know a good deal about the learning process. Research tells us that the key to acquiring usable knowledge is

organization. Because of this, the content question has changed from "How much content is enough?" to "How should my course content be organized?"

Consider this. Have you ever noticed that some students remember minute details but seem to miss the most important concepts in a course? I have, and I believe that the way we organize content or fail to organize it affects what and how much students learn.

If we structure course content so that students can focus on a few important concepts, we help them to form useful mental frameworks upon which to build more complete conceptions later. But when students fail to perceive the larger elements of content, they may grasp only interesting details.

Research shows that the short term memory, where the learning process begins, can hold only a few



items at a time. This means that large amounts of disorganized content are difficult for students to process. If we organize course content in ways that reduce the number of discrete items to be learned, the quality of learning is likely to improve.

Chunking

One important organizing strategy called chunking combines numerous bits of material into a few large entities. By grouping items to be learned into large chunks under an umbrella concept, we can facilitate the learning process.

It is important to choose for umbrella concepts those that provide a structure to help students understand a particular academic field. Not a new idea but more fully understood now for its usefulness in promoting learning, chunking can take various forms. Textbooks and other publications can be a quick source of possible ideas for chunking strategies.

For example, Lawrence Cremin chunked his definitive and voluminous study of American education into three easily identified historical periods: Colonial, National, and Metropolitan. These descriptive chronological chunks have self-explanatory names that can help students to learn when things happened and to understand why American education today is unfolding as it is.

The chunking of content helps students to develop structured knowledge that can become the foundation for future learning in a

field. Structured knowledge can be retrieved and transferred for use in new applications in much the same way that material systematically stored in a file cabinet can be located more easily than scattered material. Unstructured or disorganized knowledge, on the other hand, is difficult to retrieve and may

be lost even before it can be worked into students' long-term memory. Structured knowledge helps learners to build in new information as they encounter it. In today's information-rich society requiring lifelong learning, structuring knowledge is increasingly important.



Figure 1

Communicating Content Organization

There are several ways to communicate the organization of content in a particular course to students. The most familiar is the outline. Some professors include an outline indicating major and minor divisions and subdivisions as part of the syllabus. Provided that the major components are not too numerous, a well organized course outline can help students to learn. Since an outline is verbal and usually linear in its organization, adding a visual organizing tool may be useful to students.

Since as much as seventy-five percent of what is learned comes through the sense of sight, visual representations of course content may be more helpful than outlines alone in promoting student learning. One way to take advantage of the power of visual learning

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May

Editor's Note:

The editor's note in the last issue of the *Forum* tried to sketch a rough parallel between "conversation" and "picturing" and the processes of teaching and numbering. If "counting" and "numbering" (as Lee Shulman had used the ideas to represent the deep roots of scholarship) seemed static, explaining via words and pictures formed the necessary complement, the mode needed to pass on whatever facts and ideas seemed "nailed down." This issue of the *Forum* picks up where the last left off. Its several articles seek to leave faculty with a few ideas to ponder over the summer, ideas to consider applying to the courses being planned for next fall.

Only the rare picture is really worth a thousand words, but a picture can go a long way in clarifying ideas. **Mary Beaudry's** article on course graphics makes a case for the value of a well-constructed diagram in helping students understand and integrate concepts. A good diagram functions like a map. It presents knowledge whole (or seems to) and lets students discover as their eye directs and revisit as their curiosity and need demand.

Thomas A. Marino, Matthew Eager, and Taryn Draxler offer a combined view, combined in a number of ways. First, while Marino is faculty, Eager and Draxler are students. Together they present a teaching and learning conversation in progress, the faculty member's idea, how it went over, and what he plans to do in response to what the students thought. It's also a very modern conversation and a very modern and practical use of new technology for pedagogical gain. Students view and listen to the straight out lecture material online, at their convenience—a situation rather like having a map available. Then face-to-face time becomes richer because it can be used for more give and take rather than simply a lot of "giving" on the professor's part.

Donna Qualters of MIT has used a structured set of guidelines called "Dialogue" to create a safe social space for faculty to probe deeply and honestly into their lives as teachers. Excerpts from these conversations show the value of these meetings.

Qualters' conversations are face-to-face, but much of our communication these days flows through e-mail. E-mail offers a tremendous blessing and has revived letter-writing and more frequent communication among all those with access to it who do not proudly count themselves among the neo-Luddite population. But even for enthusiasts, e-mail presents challenges. Like automobiles and the telephone, it's a mixed blessing. Do faculty have a role to play (beyond their own personal challenges in coping with e-mail) in helping students and the campus in general learn how to cope with the digital missive?

Ron Cramer's job has him pondering these questions every day, even as he works to keep the e-mail flowing and the rest of the new technologies up and running for faculty.

Finally, **Linc. Fisch** offers another practical AD REM column that ties together aspects of the new pedagogies and some age-old teaching problems. Let's say you've prepared wonderful case studies and put them on the Web, but when you arrive to teach your class, the students sit mute as posts. What do you do? Linc. has some ideas.

Speaking, finally, of ideas, let me remind readers that the *Forum* wants to hear yours. Manuscripts on teaching and learning topics are always welcome. Send yours to the *Forum* via e-mail at jrh@itis.com or via "snail mail" to James Rhem, 213 Potter Street, Madison, WI 53715.

May we all have a good, good summer.

— James Rhem

is to develop a course graphic. A course graphic can be used as a supplement to (or perhaps a substitute for) an outline to communicate content organization directly to students.

A course graphic is a simplified representation of course content. A good course graphic does not include too much. It identifies major components of the course and their relationship to other important elements. A course graphic introduces students to the instructor's organization of the subject matter.

To illustrate, the instructor for a graduate course, *The History of American Education*, developed the course graphic seen on page 2.

At the center of the graphic is Cremin's interactive perspective on history. Running through all three periods (like spokes on a wheel) are four recurring issues/themes in American education. These themes connect Cremin's perspective with current conditions, etc., shown at the outer edge of the graphic. This graphic shows students that these four recurring themes have roots in the past and that they continue to affect current thinking about American education. Using a graphic of this type, the professor can add or remove a number of themes (spokes) according to course content.

The syllabus is a good place to introduce a course graphic. Helping students to see larger elements of course content in relation to each other at the outset is a good idea. Without some sort of organizer to separate details from important concepts, students can experience content in a new course like an avalanche of undifferentiated pieces of information. By organizing content visually, instructors can prevent the kind of discouragement students feel when they are overwhelmed by too much content at the start of a course. Thus, a course graphic not only facilitates the learning process but can have a motivational effect as well.

Some professors use a course graphic to promote active learning; that is, they use it to engage students with course material in some problem-solving way. They invite students to question the course graphic, adapt it, explain it, expand one portion of it, etc. These kinds of content manipulations and related conversations help students to integrate new and prior knowledge and sort through misconceptions and gaps they may have had.

Conclusion

While initially impressive, content-heavy courses lacking conceptual organization may add little to students' usable knowledge. For this reason, they lack credibility by today's assessment-based standards. Helping students to perceive content in an organized way is an important aspect of effective teaching. By carefully structuring the subject matter of their courses, professors can help students to retain more usable knowledge. With organized knowledge structures in place, students are better able to learn large amounts of content in a course, to retrieve it, and to continue learning in that field. ■■■

Additional examples of course graphics and the syllabi they support may be found at www.uml.edu/centers/FTC/lct.html under III., in the larger discussion of "Learner-Centered Teaching."

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INNOVATIONS

Learning Online: A View From Both Sides

*Thomas A. Marino, Ph.D.,
Matthew Eager, Taryn Draxler
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The Faculty Viewpoint:

I had wondered: What was an online course? Or what could it be? And this question led me to consider using an online format to teach a course I had taught to medical students for over 20 years. The embryology course was a traditional, lecture-centered course given to 180 students during their first year of medical school. It consisted of 28 lectures and three or four multiple-choice examinations, and students' grades were based solely on the examinations. The lectures in the course presented the normal development of the human, and then, if there was time, case studies were presented that illustrated how different types of congenital abnormalities that were seen clinically occurred.

The problem with the course was that students did not come prepared for the lecture and had trouble learning the vocabulary. Without the vocabulary they were never able to understand the developmental processes that were going on. Another downside was that the clinical case studies were not understood. So while the students appreciated the clinical relevance, they did not understand the underlying embryological foundations of what was going wrong developmentally. Finally, the course was nothing more than my

playing the "sage on the stage" role, with the students, being the great educational bulimics they have been trained to be, regurgitating the information back on the multiple choice exams.

The way I attempted to change this was to put my lectures online. Using PowerPoint and Real Media presenter I was able to put my lectures online for the students to listen to at their convenience. (For an example, visit this Web address: <http://isc.temple.edu/marino/Resp/Resp99.html>. The online lectures presented the didactic material only. Accompanying the lectures were handouts and online PowerPoint slide shows. Having made the traditional lecture material available online, I then used the three hours of "lecture time" that had been devoted to such presentations in the past for face-to-face discussions of cases that were based on the particular congenital abnormality being studied that week. For example,



we looked at a case from the University of Iowa's Virtual Children's Hospital —<http://www.vh.org/Providers/Simulations/VirtualPedsPatients/Case08/Case08.html>. The students were supposed to come to these problem-solving sessions and figure out what went wrong. If the topic was the development of the face, then one of the cases presented in the

workshop might be a child with a cleft palate.

To make the discussion more manageable I broke the class into four groups and I met with each group separately for one hour. Therefore, for the students, the actual amount of "contact" time remained the same (two hours to listen to the online lectures and one hour of problem solving case studies). For me the three hours that I lectured were replaced with the four one hour small group discussion sessions.

After the workshops, the students were to take an online exam. This assessment was graded automatically and the students received immediate feedback. If the student did not do well then there was another opportunity to take a second online exam. The highest grade was used toward passing the course. All students had to have a passing average on these assessments to pass the course. They also had to pass a final exam. A student could fail the course by having a failing grade average on the online exams and a failing grade on the final. If the student passed one of these components but not the other they would receive a grade of Condition.

My rationale was that to make it a safe classroom where learning was done with as little anxiety as possible, the day-to-day tasks should be done because the student wanted to learn. With little risk in performing these tasks, the students could focus on learning and if they did, then they would master the material. The ultimate proof of that would come on the final.

The Student Viewpoint:

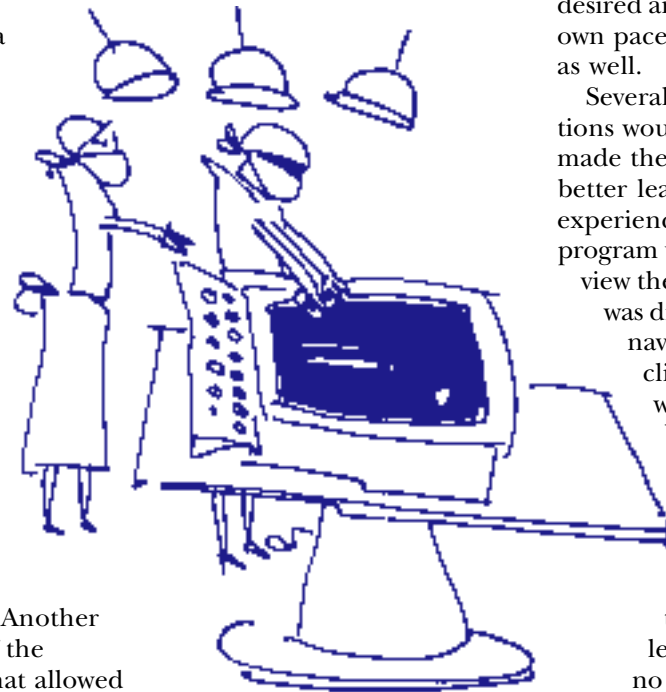
Matt: I found that having a course primarily online was a nice change. Granted the course in this format is still being refined, so the usual technical difficulties existed. But I found that being able to work on the material on my own time with some structure given by online quizzes and discussion

workshop meetings was a nice alternative to a lecture and lab type class. I enjoyed the fact that this course wasn't adding to the stress of my first semester of medical school.

As with all courses, the format of this course has some negative aspects. Probably the most important drawback to having an online course is poor information retention. Since my schedule was busy with gross anatomy, histology, and behavioral science, I did not take the time to really incorporate all the information from the embryology online lectures and notes. Instead I found myself listening to the lectures to understand the material in the notes, but I would spend a minimal amount of time learning the

information for a quiz or discussion workshop. I think the quizzes should have been more difficult to insure the material was truly learned. Another aspect of the course that allowed me to get by with this method

of study was the workshops. Even though the discussion topics were usually interesting, I had a difficult time relating my not-so-solid knowledge to the discussion. I think the course would have been better if preparation for the workshops was more focused. For example, a problem set or a self-quiz to be worked on before the workshop and then gone over in the workshop could have been a better use of that time.



Overall, I am glad to see a course like embryology being offered in an online format. I think a majority of the technical problems could be fixed by giving each student the lectures on a CD. I believe this course format has strong potential. The course in general needs to be formatted to develop a student's understanding of the material and to give incentive to spend time learning it. Once achieved, I think this would provide a course that is less stressful, more convenient and still promotes quality learning.

Taryn: Being a married student, with a considerable commute every day, being able to view the lectures at any time, whether at school or at home was highly prized. Being able to view each

lecture as often as I desired and at my own pace helped as well.

Several modifications would have made the course a better learning experience. The program used to view the lectures was difficult to navigate. A click on the wrong button, and you were at the beginning of the lecture with no way of returning to

where you had been moments ago. Downloading the lectures to view off-line helped somewhat with this problem. Viewing the lectures online proved problematic for users with Internet providers that log users off when there appears to be no activity.

More frequent workshops, some focusing more on the integration of embryology with the gross anatomy, would also have been helpful. The method of administer-

ing quizzes online and not having them count towards a final grade could be changed to making the grades count for a small portion of the grade and giving them during the first five to ten minutes of the workshops. This would force students to stay current with the material, which is good when such massive volumes of material are inundating us. The format allowed serious study of embryology to be put off until the week of the final exam.

Back to the Faculty:

What became very apparent was the need for more structure for this course online. While the lecture times provided one type of structure for the traditional course, the exams provided another. With the freedom of online learning the student could study at his or her own pace and unless the students were very disciplined, they could easily fall behind. An independent and self-directed learner was fine, but those with the best intentions who could not schedule themselves, often found a need for more imposed structure. That is why when I teach the course this year there will be tasks to complete on scheduled days before the workshop. And with online courseware I can monitor students' completion of these tasks. In one task, students will be asked before the workshop what they did not understand and required to respond online prior to the workshop so that I can address these topics in the workshop. Two other questions will require the students to have understood at least some basic material. The freedom of online exams will also be reduced. Exams will need to be taken during more restricted times. The second exam will still be available, but a waiting period will intervene so that a student can spend more time with the material before the second exam.

In summary, I did not realize that for online courses, students require more structure and tasks

embedded into the course. Structure and required work insure that they keep on task. The directed goal of much of the higher education these students have had is focused on exam deadlines. The introduction of another way of learning means that guidance needs to be provided early on so that students can adequately change their approach to learning.



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LEARNING DIARY

Creating Faculty Community

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"If colleges and universities are to be environments in which [a liberating] education takes place, they must design structures that overcome the isolation of faculty. They must build communities that encourage faculty members to relate to one another not only as specialists but also as educators."

(Gamson, et al., 1984, 84-85)

As we enter 2000, have we progressed in making teaching a public enterprise? Faculty continue mired in feelings of isolation. The individual reasons may be different, but the collective results are the same—silence, silence about the classroom. No one denies the importance of teaching; indeed, the best faculty

remain students of the educational process throughout their careers. Yet while we champion the value of groups and learning communities, most faculty learn about teaching and learning in isolation from their peers. What if, instead, we created an interconnectedness that allowed for growth and individual development within a community setting?

What would happen if we put faculty in a room together and, under guidelines designed to encourage discussion, allowed them to talk? Using a technique called "Dialogue" (Isaac, 1992, 1993), I decided to try it in the private four-year college and public medical school where I worked as a faculty developer.

Some Background

"Dialogue" is a carefully constructed and monitored process whereby individuals with shared interests come together to talk in a non-threatening, non-judgmental and structured format designed to

- help establish a common language,
- probe their practice assumptions, and
- examine the practice assumptions of colleagues.

It is a metacognitive approach through which one learns about one's learning. Dialogue helps participants pay attention to why they are thinking the way they are thinking, and helps them uncover factors—often buried deep—that influence feelings, attitudes, and teaching practice.

The Story Of Dialogue

Beginning a Dialogue is always difficult. The very uncertainty of what is going to occur over the next two hours makes participants uneasy. The climate has to be set to allow participants to feel comfortable about stating their feelings and their assumptions. It must be a climate in which they will be able to react to, and question, their colleagues, colleagues they will have to talk to, report to, and interact with after the Dialogue is over. A facilitator's

first task, my first task, in using this approach was to review the guidelines of Dialogue (Isaacs, 1993):

Guidelines

Generative listening—listening carefully to others, but also listening to your own listening, how you are feeling about what you hear.

Suspension of assumptions—identifying those assumptions that are spoken, but viewing them from all sides and trying to understand why someone holds an assumption; getting ‘inside’ the assumption.

Spirit of inquiry—being open to new ideas and thoughts; being willing to hear someone’s point of view and trying to ascertain why they believe what they believe.

Respect—for the individuals, but also for the ideas expressed in the course of a Dialogue; confrontation or dismissal of ideas is not allowed.

Observe the observer—monitor your own thoughts, feelings, reactions to ideas and assumptions; try to step outside yourself and watch *how* and *why* you react the way you do.

It’s important to post these guidelines in the rooms where the conversations will be held, to refer to them frequently, and for the facilitator to model them as frequently as possible. This technique provides some of the reassurance members need to begin to feel at ease sharing their thoughts and feelings on sensitive topics.

Next, the facilitator sets a topic to begin the Dialogue. The first time I tried to start a discussion no one said anything, and it was really slow. So I adapted the “think-pair-share” technique from active learning. I asked faculty to write something down, turn to whoever was next to them (they were all seated at one large table) and discuss what they’d written. Then, we opened the question to the group as a whole. One of the purposes of Dialogue is to encour-

age reflection and to slow down the thinking. By thinking about a question and writing down their thoughts before they addressed the question, they modeled the behavior that would characterize the entire process of Dialogue.

What Happened: A Confession

As time went on what sounded good in theory began to work well in practice. A new level and depth of trust began to develop. The most dramatic example was Tom.

Tom: Maybe there are some of us like me who should never teach... (long pause) It may be no matter how hard I try, I may not be an effective teacher of a class. (pause) The upshot of these meetings is the challenge for me to stretch the final admission, to be able to accept this, that I really am a very limited teacher. No matter what I try to do I will not be able to go beyond that



Illustrations: Michael David Brown

limit. I need to know what that limit is and try to work within that, to do the best I can within that. I can’t be any smarter than I am, I can’t be any dumber than I am, you know there’s limits.

Cynthia (quietly): It would be nice for all of us to know that. I’d like to know what my limits are.

Tom: And for them to be acknowledged too, be prized even. To say this is something you do well. You may not be able to do these other kinds of things. That kind of imagination that says “look, I visited your class and you do something very well.” And it

might occur that nobody’s really helped me, nobody’s helped me because of other people’s model of teaching. They ride roughshod over it, just ride roughshod. (silence)

The sorrow and magnitude of Tom’s admission left everyone speechless, but something positive resulted from this exchange. Members of Tom’s group began to do informal peer review. For the first time Tom opened his classroom door and it didn’t get slammed in his face.

Common Weakness— Common Strength?

Participants also felt comfortable sharing weaknesses with colleagues. The Dialogues were offered to anyone in the institutions and participants ranged from an assistant vice-chancellor to an assistant professor, from 30-year practitioners to first year novices, from groups of 9 to groups of 19.

Marc: (dept. chair)

There’s an assumption that I’d like to throw out to the group and see if anyone else agrees. Most people who are good teachers had trouble at one point learning. They aren’t the people who intuitively grasp things and move on. They’re the one’s who had to struggle at some point, and they have a sense of what process is.

Elizabet (laughing):(assist. prof) Thank you!

Saul (laughing):(assoc. dean) Ah, you resonate with that!

Megan: (tenured full professor) You’re speaking to the person who flunked her first biology exam, and flunked neuroanatomy when she took it the first time. And both times, part of that was the challenge of trying to figure out what was this about.

Common Understanding

The Dialogues also helped establish common meaning and understanding.

Claire was talking about her freshman science class.

Claire: My attitude has always been that I'm trying to help people become responsible for their learning and I'm willing to help, but I can't learn it for them. I'm operating under the assumption that these are adults, they're 18 years old!!

Jen: I hear you saying that age equals adulthood...

Michelle: But what if they never learned, what if they don't know how to learn, or how to ask the right question?

Claire: I will work with them, go over material, study groups. I'm a resource but I can't get inside their brains, and I'll tell them that.

Lorraine: I agree, I think I hear that the first year is a transition, and you have to help them get to that point. But it's awfully hard for me to make the assumption that they come in like this as first semester students.

This exchange had two important results. It didn't make Claire defensive; Michelle, Jen, and Lorraine were simply asking her to think about her assumption and sharing how they felt. Furthermore, it helped establish common meaning. As Lorraine pointed out, when you looked at Claire's response she really did think of the first year as a transition. Three weeks later, unsolicited, Claire returned with a totally revised syllabus in which she provided explicit transition steps.

Common Metaphors

Dialogue also allowed participants to share the metaphors that frame our teaching that the literature tells us are so important in developing teachers (Palmer, 1990, Brookfield, 1987). During the course of our semester, we talked about our teaching *as acting*—"I find it real interesting about what you said of being true to yourself, you're playing a role"; *as explosives*—"I thought of myself

as designing time bombs and I would like to see them explode in the minds of students"; and *as cooking*—"I can't cook by recipe, I'm always changing it. I think I do a very similar thing in teaching. I find my way as I go which is difficult for my students." Each of these insights allowed us to learn more about ourselves and our assumptions, and in the case of the cooking metaphor, what this means for students.

But all was not doom and gloom. One of the hallmarks of our dialogues was laughter. There were some genuinely funny moments, but often humor was the "uh huh" laughter



that recognizes ourselves in a situation someone else is discussing. We laughed when Robin reminded us "that's right, never yawn in the middle of your own lectures." But the most prevalent was "black humor," those instances where humor replaced stronger emotions such as anger or frustration. We laughed when talking about the difficulty of our work and someone said "there don't seem to be too many medals going around," and we laughed when talking about grading and someone said "instead of pass/fail maybe it could be live or die!" The laughter cut across power and reporting lines, across gender and disciplines.

Did participants enjoy the Dialogue? Overwhelmingly, yes. Megan was to write:

Megan: This was one of the few times in the last five years of hectic curricular/education/teaching

that I've taken the opportunity to "step back" and consider the essence of what we are doing. I felt like an "academic" to undertake this with colleagues [and it] was one of the best personal experiences I've had in a long time.

Some results surprised participants, "There are a few people who drive me crazy professionally, but they had fascinating ideas about teaching that I found valuable." This last statement illuminated the power of these structured conversations in bringing people together who wouldn't normally come together because of differences in personality or philosophy. Now they were listening to each other in a new way, and sharing valuable ideas.

Two different faculties, 28 different individuals, yet for the first time we got to know each other in a deeper way, we got to really talk to the colleague next door. Shouldn't we all be entering into the dialogue? |||

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ESSAY

E-mail Dependency

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Not too long ago one of our servers hiccuped and our department was without e-mail for a short period of time. As soon as it happened there was an immediate rush to the server room to see if our network administrator was already on the case. Five or six of us just stood around this one person, peering over his shoulder, as if our mere presence would provide the support needed to get the server back online. It's a funny scene, but the reason most of us continued to lurk was because we felt, and in many ways were, handicapped without e-mail. "Should I go home?" one wisecracker asked.

For those who have it, e-mail is a necessity. In addition to its ability to help us stay productive, it satisfies our need to feel involved. It gives us access and provides us with a sense of connection to the world. Indeed, many of us now have several different e-mail accounts, some for work, some for personal business. In a relatively short time many of us have developed an unsettling dependence on this ability to talk to one another electronically.

If you've already become e-mail dependent, at this point you're thinking "No kidding." And if you haven't, you're probably waving a copy of the recent Stanford University study, suggesting that, via e-mail, we've invented yet another way to remain "a lonely crowd."

I'm concerned about this idea of dependency. It may not be as crippling as a drug dependency, but it's not as benign as being dependent on electric lights either.

The Case for Dependency

E-mail is a routine for most of us. It's the first thing we check when we come to work and the last thing we shut down when we leave. Not surprisingly, it's just the same for students. As a computer lab manager, I notice that the primary concern when they sit down at one of the workstations is to get that e-mail open and see what's happening in their world. Quite often, the e-mail application stays open in the background while the student works on a paper or browses other parts of the Web. This practice makes it easy to cast off the one task to check the electronic line for messages. We call this "fishing for e-mail."

This behavior isn't extraordinary given the influences promoting the use of this technology. Each student receives an e-mail account when they enroll at the University. It's a requirement. Today's graduate needs to be computer literate to function in the workplace. In fact, some schools are making this literacy a core part of their curriculum.

From the University's perspective, e-mail is a great administrative tool for making announcements to the student body, streamlining much of the bureaucracy, and for opening doors to the opportunities provided by distance learning.

Faculty endorse e-mail as well, for many of the same reasons and because of its potential for creating educational forums for student voices and ideas.

Finally, there are people like me: "pushers" of a harmless sort (I hope) who midwife the campus

through a constant rebirth into the world of cyberspace. Instructional and Information Technology specialists (ITs), like me, work to make the technology accessible, easy and seamless so everyone—administrators, faculty and students—can do the managing, teaching and learning they need to do without having the technology "get in the way."

Self Control and Teaching Each Other

Now this is where the alarm goes off in my head: "dependency." If we've developed this undeniable need to use e-mail and we're relying on it to help us achieve our educational goals, how can we adequately address its limitations? We want e-mail to remain invisible and inconsequential, but is it? Is it merely a reformation of paper, envelopes and stamps or is it the "demon rum" of the Information Age?

If it's the latter, can we use it without accepting some responsibility for teaching students (and faculty for that matter) how to use it responsibly? Perhaps we should (sometimes at least) think of it as liquid nitrogen or prussic acid—useful, even necessary, but requiring careful handling.

Developing a personal and professional awareness of the effects of e-mail in higher education has not been a priority. *Who* should be giving thought to these best practices and how should they be implemented? Surely someone should.

While ample training materials and policy papers exist to show users how to log on, send and reply to messages, and even on how to construct a "socially" appropriate message, most *administrators and IT staff* concern themselves more with ensuring the physical stability of the network rather than with offering sound techniques for managing mail.



The *faculty*, juggling enough work with research and teaching already, do not consider themselves in a position to instruct students on developing appropriate electronic discourse practices. That leaves the *students*—the group most responsible for the bulk of sending and receiving—to come up with some ideas. However, since appropriate management strategies only apply in communications with their professors and in course-related e-mail lists (a small percentage of their total e-mail), they are certainly less stressed out over all that mail. And so there's no good answer to "*who?*" Currently it's "every man for himself" and "To each, his (or her) own."

Perhaps that's the way it should be. Manners evolve out of a community and everybody has to learn to manage their time for themselves. But it's in everybody's best interest to be concerned about developing and implementing some management strategies to cut the fat out of the infoglut.

Here are some general ideas on how to go about it.

Administrative Level

If the campus utilizes specific applications (software) for electronic mail, then IT support groups should create a host of training sessions, online presentations, web-based and hardcopy materials that can be used to reach and educate the entire user community on how to use them. The effort may well have to start with something as simple as surveying the intended audience to find out what the campus needs to know. (There's a lot of independent learning going on about computers, and nothing turns off an academic audience faster than being forced to endure elementary instruction when they're ready for intermediate or advanced coaching.)

Keeping large e-mail volume in mind, these instructional materials should show users the function of each feature in an e-mail applica-

tion. Many people don't take advantage of the simple tools that can help them organize their mail, such as creating folders, sorting, filtering, and archiving messages.

The contemporary conventions of e-mail need to be shared with the faculty and staff. Some of these conventions are social and others technical, but both interact all the time. What is an "emoticon"? Why do some foreign characters come out looking like garbage? What does a response in ALL CAPS mean? What do "flaming" and "spamming" mean? Misinterpreting a message always leads to a request for clarification or a discussion heading in the wrong

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direction, and this means more mail (which means more "junk," more frustration, more wasted time).

Last—because they're in a position to see the big picture, which individual users often cannot see—IT staff should develop a "*best practices list*" or "*effective management strategies*" from which faculty members can create their own e-mail policies to bring into the classroom and share with the students. Naturally, policies will vary depending upon the instructor and the discipline.

Faculty and Staff Level

Even if the campus endorses a certain e-mail application, faculty and staff should look into the

applications that best suit their needs. They may want to forward mail to an office package that has a calendar, the ability to schedule appointments, a task manager and an address book. Of course, they should make sure they can still do all the things with e-mail that they were able to with the campus application, such as sorting, filtering and archiving.

Everyone needs to make good and conscious decisions when constructing and sending e-mail. Generally, one should provide more details in a message going out to many recipients. We should always anticipate questions that might arise from such a message and provide the answers. Also, let's not buy into this idea that it is just SO easy to copy someone, or attach a certain document. Ask the question, "*Do they really need to see this?*"

If the campus hasn't provided some strategies, faculty and staff should also develop classroom practices for students to follow when communicating with the instructor. They should take some time on the first day to explain these practices and why it is important for students to follow them. Also, they should explain these procedures to the teaching assistants as well, so they know and can help students understand the policies. When instructors engage in a critical dialogue with the students about the technology and why it is being used, it emphasizes the importance of respecting the practices.

In addition to drop-in office hours, instructors might establish some *electronic office hours* (usually twice as long as drop-in) where they tell students that they will read and respond only to e-mail related to the course. They should stress that they will be available only in this format at this time. No phone calls and no additional drop-in traffic. They might respond only to messages with a time-stamp that falls within those hours. This gives them opportunity to establish some good

management techniques, because with lots of mail they can read the messages, note similar questions, synthesize an answer and respond to all. Writing fewer e-mail messages gives them the time to answer in detail if they choose, or get additional work done. Finally, instructors shouldn't be afraid to tell a student that their e-mail was abstract or unclear, or that their question could easily be answered by reading the chapter. This challenges the student (not a bad thing) to come up with better questions and also discourages the whole idea that it is easier to send an e-mail than it is to investigate the answer.

Finally, faculty and staff should try to *appreciate the network activity* of the campus by contacting the campus networking support group. On our campus, online activity peaks over the lunch hour, which is why we tell faculty members to expect some slow response if they are going online in their classroom at that time. Knowing the highs and lows of daily network activity helps one comprehend the infoglut problem and provide better times for holding electronic office hours.

Student Level

As information and management practices are passed down to them from campus administration, faculty and staff, students should begin to appreciate the importance of managing their e-mail correctly and incorporate these behaviors into their class projects and other academic/personal e-mail communications. For instance, it would be nice if students saved personal e-mail for the late evening period, but I'd be happy if they didn't tie up multiple machines in the computer lab just to keep a mailbox open.

Clearly, our e-mail interactions and management strategies raise more issues than those that arise in how we use it on any given day. There is more research to be done in the fields of discourse analysis, cognitive science, cultural studies

and communication theory that can shed light on the subtle practices and outcomes of utilizing electronic mail. If technology were neutral, it wouldn't be problematic, but this is simply not the case. E-mail is a transformative communications technology, and we had better pay attention to all aspects of how we are using it and the many levels of change it is making in our institutions of learning and our daily interactions. |||

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THE WEB

Sadly, the policing function enters into teaching because so many other things besides learning are at stake in becoming credentialed. Thus plagiarism remains an issue faculty must concern themselves with from time to time. The *Forum* has published two articles aimed at assisting faculty detect plagiarism drawn from Internet resources. These articles appear in V8N5 and V7N4 (copies: Oryx Press 800-279-6799).

The February issue of Illinois State University's excellent newsletter *The CATalyst* was devoted to issues of academic integrity. An article "Can the Computer Identify Plagiarism?" by Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe acquainted me with still more resources available to faculty.

"Currently, there are six products available that are intended to help instructors detect plagiarism and/or locate original source texts:

EVE: Essay Verification Engine
(<http://www.canexua.com/eve/>)

Plagiarism.org
(<http://www.plagiarism.org>)

IntegriGuard
(<http://www.integriguard.com>)

Glatt Plagiarism Screening Program
(<http://www.plagiarism.com>)

WordCHECK KeyWORD Software (<http://www.wordchecksystems.com>)

MOSS: Measure Of Software Similarity
(<http://www.cs.berkeley.edu/aiken/moss.html>)"

Source: Hinchliffe, Lisa Janicke. 2000. "Can the Computer Identify Plagiarism?" *The CATalyst*. February, pp. 5-6. Illinois State University, Center for the Advancement of Teaching.

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Dynamic Cases

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College teachers are increasingly turning to cases in order to initiate discussions on problems and issues. Typically, students read a case before class, perhaps considering a few questions to guide their thinking. When the class meets, they engage the issues through discussion, seeking understanding and resolution. Cases work particularly well in approaching affective goals, such as helping students examine values, consider new behaviors, and develop interpersonal skills.

It's an effective instructional mode—IF students do the reading, IF they give more than cursory thought to the questions, and IF they are willing to enter into the discussion. If these conditions are not met, a teacher sometimes has to struggle to generate the energy on which productive study of a case often relies.

I've developed several strategies for writing and presenting cases and responding to them interactively, strategies that virtually assure that case discussions become dynamic entities resulting in didactic gain.

Once I identify outcome goals and the issues pertaining thereto, I try to write a case that realistically portrays a relatively common

situation to which students can relate. A case likely will engage them if it is open-ended, incomplete, composed with dialogue, and characterized by visual and emotional components. Brevity and a final scene that triggers response round out the set of basic criteria I use.

Presenting the case (or a critical portion thereof) as a staged reading by volunteers from the group heightens attention and engagement of other group members. The readers speak from a specially prepared, highlighted case-script; viewers may follow the action on their own copies of the case.

Programming brief initial discussions in subgroups, often with assigned focal questions, encourages broad participation. Returning to a full-group discussion helps bring ideas together.

I've found the next option to be one of the best strategies for making study of a case a dynamic experience. After a group's general discussion, the readers begin a reprise of the case, with one critical modification: a viewer may interrupt the presentation at any time with a question or suggestion to one of the readers. The reader may respond in any appropriate way, although better results seem to obtain when remaining in character insofar as possible, defending behavior rather than modifying the action to accommodate the challenge.

A viewer may also halt the action to make an observation to the group or—in the ultimate interruption—to take the place of a reader and pursue alternate behaviors. I cite one caveat: allow ample time. Viewers usually throw themselves into this activity vigorously and become frustrated if time curtails their participation.

I still help guide the discussion with questions and other discreet interventions, such as suggesting returning to the script and moving on when the value of a particular interruption/discussion seems to be diminishing.

And I try to bring relative closure to the session by asking participants to write brief statements on the most useful concepts or ideas they gained or what they will do differently as a result of the session. Then I randomly distribute the statements and they are read aloud in a "hearing-every-voice" exercise that is more meaningful to students than any summary I might contribute.

Sometimes I compile these responses and return them to participants later to refresh their memories of the session and to help extend its benefits beyond just that class or workshop.

The "interactive case" and associated strategies add spark to the classroom. More importantly, they really work to combat discussion lethargy and enhance learning outcomes. |||

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