REFLECTIONS ON SCREENAGERS, FACULTY DEVELOPMENT AND NET-SUPPORTED LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a strategy for a faculty development program with respect to net-supported learning. Many universities and colleges are struggling with meeting the demands of a rapidly changing world. Reflections in this paper are based on experiences from the Norwegian University of Life Sciences. Attention has been given to the intelligent use of technology as a means of meeting pressing challenges. What does this mean? I ask a series of questions, the answers of which form the basis for a faculty development program. What qualities and skills should our graduates have? What consequences does this have for the way we approach teaching and learning? And what role does technology play? In short, we must focus on faculty training courses and the ensuing development cycles of trial, error, refinement and sharing. Guiding principles for these activities should be:

1. **It is about learning.**
2. **It is about easy access.**
3. **It is about emphasizing collaboration.**
4. **It is about support.**

Keywords: **Faculty development; net-supported learning; learning environments.**

THE CONTEXT

In a flyer announcing a recent seminar in Oslo dealing with the "New Media Age" was a quote under the heading of "Homo Zappiens", which read:

> ***"The skills screenagers develop while scanning computer screens, zapping the TV channels, crisscross reading texts, and thus rapidly processing huge amounts of information, will guarantee the survival of our civilization in the 21st century."***

This quote was attributed to Wim Veen at the University of Oslo and can serve as an image of the world we are trying to come to terms with as educators. Screenagers, zapping, skills, computers, crisscross, huge amounts of information, rapidly processing, and survival – are all words or phrases that seem to exemplify the pulse of a vibrant, young, urban society, and, as Veen infers, the skills of the screenagers give us hope for survival in this chaotic world. At the same time, it is not difficult to picture distressed parents and educators shaking their heads wondering what this world is coming to. Why can't these screenagers for once stop zapping and scanning and read a book or climb a tree like we did? We are witness to the clash of generations in a nutshell.

At the core of our new society is the ever-growing mountain of available information and knowledge. "Available" is a key word as knowledge is no longer largely the domain of experts but is open and readily available to the masses through the Internet. The speed in which this new knowledge is being produced and made available also gives a direct indication of the opposite, namely the speed in which knowledge becomes old (Druten, 2000). For businesses, institutions, professionals and students alike, it has become a necessity to develop strategies to cope with this phenomenon. And not surprisingly, words such as *skills, processing* and *survival* begin to take on new meaning and slowly migrate to the forefront of our vocabulary.

Survival has become a mutual concern at all levels of society and can be seen as an intertwined and shared phenomenon. If institutions are to survive, they must create an organizational environment that is sensitive to the changing demands and structures in the world around them. To achieve this, they are, in turn, dependent on a workforce that can respond and thrive on rapid change. Employees must, then, acquire the skills necessary to operate in a rapidly changing, complex world in order to be employable over time. Universities' primary task is to provide well-prepared graduates to the workforce. If graduates are not able to cope with the demands of the job market, they won't be employed and this, of course, will reflect badly on the universities. In this regard, we can begin to see the connection between the skills of Veen's screenagers and the 'survival of our civilization'.

For faculty, the ever-increasing abundance and variety of knowledge presents a series of dilemmas. Faculty has a tradition for a form of lifelong learning through their continual research. However, this is by no means a guarantee for their ability to keep pace with developments in their own field, much less communicate these developments to their students. Students, in Homo Zappien tradition, are increasingly adept at handling a great variety of information sources. Teachers are no longer the single source of knowledge for students or "the most viable master-architect" of the students learning trajectory (Druten, 2000). Similarly, the instructional model is showing some serious limitations. Saunders (2000, p. 4) relates this succinctly through a statement by a disgruntled colleague:

> ***"What is the use, even if I did discover that the lecture was not effective, what can I do when I have so much content to deliver in so short a time? As it is, with the explosion of research in my field [biology], I can only cover a small portion of what is known about my field in fifteen sessions. Both the explosion of information and the limited "shelf-life" of what we know, make it a real challenge for us to stay current."***

Faculty is, thus, being pressured not only with respect to the content of what they are teaching but also to the way they are teaching. The very identity of educators is being challenged. The need for, what Mitchell and Sackney (2000) refer to as 'the reconstruction of the professional narrative', is becoming increasingly clear. When what we know has a limited shelf life, of perhaps just a few years, it is time to alter our focus.

What we can *do* is becoming relatively more important than what we *know*. The ability to 'rapidly process huge amounts of information' (select, critically evaluate and absorb), as our screenager friend, is of more value than the facts and figures previously acquired.

Duderstadt (1999, p. 7) fabulates on "the new faculty":

> ***"It could well be that faculty members of the twenty-first century college or university will find it necessary to set aside their roles as teachers and instead become designers of learning experiences, processes, and environments. Tomorrow's faculty may have to discard the present style of solitary learning experiences, in which students tend to learn primarily on their own through reading, writing, and problem solving. Instead, they may be asked to develop collective learning experiences, in which students work together and learn together, with the faculty member becoming more of a consultant or a coach than a teacher. Faculty members will be less concerned with identifying and then transmitting intellectual content and more focused on inspiring, motivating, and managing an active learning process by students."***

THE FACULTY DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE

Clearly, in a reflection of this type, there is a danger of over simplifying the challenge facing universities today. On the other hand, we do seem to have a tendency to lose ourselves in immediate concerns and fail to see the larger picture, the picture of the "new faculty" meeting "screenagers of the Homo Zappien Age". To circumvent a lengthy discussion, I propose the following propositions based on previous discussion to help frame the university challenge as I see it:

- **All universities are genuinely committed to ensuring that their graduates are best equipped to face the demands of society.**
- **Our rapidly changing society demands a clear focus on the learning outcomes of university programs. What are the long-term cognitive needs of our graduates?**
- **Recent research (over the past several decades) into how we learn points clearly to learning as a social construct.**
- **To develop and maintain an active learning environment for students, universities must develop, support and maintain an active learning environment for faculty.**
- **The appropriate use of technology can be a powerful tool for adapting the learning experience to one that better meets the requirements of the new age.**

Within this framework, I suggest that points two, three, four and five follow from point one. To ensure our graduates are best equipped to successfully master the ordeals of a rapidly changing society, we must focus to a greater degree on learning outcomes rather than subject matter content.

To do this successfully, universities must be willing to embrace advancements in pedagogic research into how we learn and construct knowledge.

And finally, we cannot expect faculty to embrace advancements in pedagogy and technology without an environment that actively promotes and rewards the art and science of teaching. At this point, we can begin to see the contours a potential faculty development program.

The program would emphasize the re-examination of learning outcomes and promote an understanding of and the active experimentation with new forms for learning, with a particular focus on exploring the possibilities and effects of carefully integrating new technologies. How then can we go about creating a faculty development program of this type? Barone (2001), Bates (2000), Buckley (2002), and Laurillard (2002) put forth persuasive arguments for "learning-centered" technology as a key factor in bringing about this transition. Here, it is critical that faculty development programs support faculty in becoming "reflective practitioners with respect to their teaching". (Laurillard, 2002, p. 20) Programs must allow faculty to explore and experience learning-centered teaching styles and the use of technology that make significant impacts on student learning. Frayer (1999), Diaz (2001) and Buckley (2002) suggest basic principles or strategies to ensure this type of aproach, which I have compiled into four main points:

It's About Learning
The program should emphasize good teaching, pedagogical innovation and student learning, not technology. Course design should be generated from learning goals and not from the capabilities of the technology.

Easy Access
Entry into the world of technology-assisted world of learning should have the lowest possible threshold. Focus should be on application and not construction; however faculty should be encouraged to author small doable projects that allow them to explore and experience learning-cantered principles.

Emphasize Collaboration
Transformation of practice must be seen as a community process of shared adventure and shared risk in order to form a critical mass of energy and innovation. Faculty should be encouraged to learn about the successful use of educational technology by their peers. Course design, development, and delivery should be seen as a team effort involving the talents of many people (web-designers, software specialists and others) according to the needs of the particular project.

Support is Critical
Faculty development programs must incorporate training "house calls" where training is brought to the teacher. This would add more personalized training, reduce ever-present frustrations and help emphasize development cycles of authoring, use refinements and dissemination.

For an administrator charged with developing online programs, these points resonate well. Clearly, a rich picture of how it "should be" is a good point of departure. To these points can be added reflections from the frontlines, from the daily struggle to make ends meet:

1. **it's about learning. In the grand scheme of things, it is about learning. In a pressurized work situation with immediate needs, it can well be about "quick and dirty solutions". Motivations for participating in a development course vary tremendously and do not always harmonize with the saintly intensions of the course. In my experience, as many participants are interested in technology solutions to defined problems (i.e. "I just lost my secretary due to budget cuts." or "How do I put my lecture notes on the Web so my students can find them?") as are interested in building radically new (and better) learning environments for their students.**

2. **We would be wise to remember the old educational rule of meeting students where they are, mentally speaking, and go from there. Development is an evolutionary process. It *is* about learning, but we may have to take a few side trips to get there.**

2. **Easy access. Easy access pertains to the ease at which faculty are able to take into use the technology. In our case, as a small university with limited markets, the technology in focus is a learning management system (LMS) that can be used to support classroom courses. The basic idea of a LMS needs little explanation and can easily catch the interests of faculty. Critics will have it that we more often than not implement LMSs for all the wrong reasons, i.e. to quickly offload lecture notes and make announcements. This is OK. Although, I certainly agree with Carmean and Haefner (2002) that integrating best practices for deeper learning into the LMS environment allow for a synthesis of appropriate, engaging, and student-centered learning experiences, this will not happen over night. Faculty and students alike must first be drawn into the LMS for whatever reason. The step by step exploration of LMS tools and principles for deeper learning will come in "doable" projects, led by the passions of key faculty members. LMSs are, in themselves, generally easily accessible. Access to the pedagogic potentials of LMSs comes over time.**

3. **Emphasize collaboration. In a traditional educational setting, teaching and learning have often been intensely individualistic. If we have a choice, we work alone. Collaboration as a prescribed form for learning and knowledge construction has had little time to develop deep roots on university ground. A reoccurring argument is that in a very hectic work day, collaborative learning is time consuming and inefficient. The uneasiness felt by faculty can be expected to influence their willingness to incorporated collaborative learning methods in their own teaching. Collaborative learning assignments in faculty training, therefore, must be designed with care. Good collaborative experiences are needed. If we think in terms of "learning conversations" (Brown and Isaacs, 1996) and look at the activity generated by faculty training courses, collaboration is and has been important. Faculty, across departments, is sharing experiences - and the risks of trying something new. A focused effort to build and re-enforce this network of conversations by, for example, promoting faculty led workshops would be a big step toward forming a learning organization.**

4. **Support is critical. One of the concerns many faculty members have before starting a training course is the degree of support they can expect after completion of the course. No doubt these concerns come from an acute awareness that most of us operate with limited time windows to get things done. "Just in time support" is, therefore, a necessity. Most of the questions we field are technical in nature. However, they often give rise to more exploratory questions of pedagogical nature.Clearly, there is also a need for trusted sparing partners that are well versed in the pedagogical possibilities of the technology (LMS), and have an overview over the experiences others have had in related situations. Within this supportive dialog, lies the catalyst for what Buckley (2002) terms as development cycles of authoring, use refining and dissemination, also an important element in a learning organization.**

To make good on our strategies, we must think in terms of building an enabling environment over time. Long-term change is a mental process that does not happen by administrative decree but rather through an evolutionary process. Creating an exciting learning environment for students requires creating an exciting and enabling learning environment for faculty. Within such an environment, we can expect a genuine and creative approach to transformation and the use of technology. In this regard, one of the basic requirements is motivation. A desire to give teaching and learning increased attention will necessitate a realignment of teaching and research as commonly practiced. Faculty cannot be expected to bring the same reflective practice to their teaching as they bring to their research, if corresponding incentives (i.e. salary and promotion) for innovative teaching are not in place. The core value of universities', research-based teaching, must take on added meaning to embrace learning as well as content. In the shorter term, we must focus on faculty training courses and the ensuing development cycles of trial, error, refinement and sharing. Guiding principles for these activities should be:

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6. **It is about easy access.**
7. **It is about emphasizing collaboration.**
8. **It is about support.**
9.

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In this regard, Mr. Moulton is involved in projects, which aim to:

- **develop common blended courses with other universities outside of Norway, where similar classes from each cooperating university meet on the web to discussion and debate relevant issues,**
- **develop digital storytelling as a tool to improve collaboration, and**
- **develop the use of Web-based case studies as a means to focus international teaching collaboration and to help students see connections in interdisciplinary subject areas.**

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