Teaching by Example:
A Case for Peer Workshops about Pedagogy and Technology
by Colleen Reilly

Many institutions and their information technology (IT) professionals expend significant time and resources encouraging faculty members to integrate targeted technologies into their pedagogies. To further some technology initiatives, IT professionals should consider working with department chairs and others to identify faculty members who can serve as technology liaisons to their home departments; these liaisons can encourage the integration of technology through workshops and other methods that target the pedagogical concerns of their specific fields. Because they understand the disciplinary norms and can speak to their colleagues about the concrete educational needs that technologies can help them meet, such technologically savvy instructors (hereafter referred to simply as faculty peers) may interest their colleagues in using technology. In return, IT can introduce the faculty peers, especially those who are new and untenured, to the range of technologies and resources supported on campus. Cultivating mutually beneficial relationships between IT and specific faculty peers can enhance the profiles of the latter on campus, while simultaneously demonstrating the usefulness of the technologies that the institution supports.

In this article, I explain why faculty peers can be particularly effective at leading technology workshops, how they can efficiently develop workshop materials, and what incentives may motivate their service.

Teaching Colleagues through Shared Discourse

As disciplinary insiders in their home departments, faculty peers have several advantages over technology trainers from other divisions or campus offices: They can identify the pedagogical advantages of using certain technologies to accomplish educational goals in their subject area; they can articulate these advantages in the discourse common to their field; and they can make technology instruction more efficient by selecting the most appropriate, application-oriented, and mission-critical techniques and tools to present to their colleagues (Diaz 2001). No faculty peer will convince colleagues who revile or fear technologies to start using them in the classroom; however, by highlighting technology applications that address specific skills and goals in the discipline, a faculty peer may persuade some who are interested yet hesitant to try new things. At an institution that supports courseware like Blackboard or WebCT, for example, a faculty peer in composition studies could explain how discussion lists promote collaboration and community-building by providing a space for students to work out writing problems and obtain feedback from their classmates.

Fostering an interest in technology-enhanced instruction can benefit faculty peers as well, particularly if they are the only department members who use technologies for teaching. While faculty peers can compensate for a dearth of like-minded colleagues by attending conferences, participating in online discussion groups, reading journals, and seeking out technologically savvy teachers in other departments, constructing a support group in their home departments can be invaluable. Having colleagues with whom to share ideas, strategies, frustrations, and information can play a key role in facilitating growth and developing new approaches to shared instructional tasks and problems. Colleagues are uniquely familiar with the particular instructional and institutional contexts—including available resources, departmental and university politics, student profiles, and subject-matter concerns—and they can be the best allies in approaching technological resource issues. Thus, sharing expertise with colleagues can help faculty peers form productive communities in their departments.

Accurately Representing the Work Involved in Implementing Technologies

Faculty peers are uniquely qualified to estimate the time needed to successfully integrate technologies and course goals. Unlike IT professionals, who must positively represent institutionally sponsored technologies, faculty peers can openly evaluate particular software or tools. Colleagues who do not regularly use computer technologies in the classroom may not appreciate the added time it takes to implement them, and they may perceive that technologies always make things easier. Those who regularly work with technologies, however, know that the learning curve can be steep.

While leading workshops, faculty peers should not overemphasize the effort required to use technology effectively in the classroom, as this may only scare colleagues or make the task seem undoable. Instead, faculty peers should present a realistic view of the requisite time investment and confirm that planning and implementation become easier with practice. In the course of a workshop on technology and pedagogy, faculty peers can estimate how long it takes to learn specific technology applications, explain the preparation involved in teaching with them, and stress the need to develop backup lessons in case the technologies malfunction or are ineffective (Morrison and Brown 2002). More importantly, faculty peers can provide specific examples of student learning and accomplishments that demonstrate why the additional planning and preparation are worthwhile.

While using workshops to cultivate support and excitement for institutionally supported technologies, faculty peers can simultaneously publicize their research interests and the tools they use in the classroom, thereby engendering greater understanding when they present what might be a somewhat unique case for tenure in their departments. (See Selfe et al. [n.d.] for an exploration of tenure considerations for composition instructors who use technology.) Unlike those of their colleagues, the tenure cases of faculty peers may include time-consuming work that does not fit cleanly into the categories of teaching, research, and service central to most tenure evaluations. Technology use in the classroom involves a lot of invisible work, including learning new software, integrating new tools and programs into courses, informally training part-time faculty, and responding to the technical problems of students and colleagues. In their presentations to colleagues, faculty peers can make this invisible work visible and demonstrate how it is integral to teaching or even research.

Incorporating Peer Workshops into Routine Academic Tasks

Faculty peers may be reluctant to conduct workshops due to time constraints and an inability to take on new projects. However, by adapting presentations that they have developed for other venues, such as professional conferences, faculty peers can minimize preparation time and even use the workshops as a rehearsal for future presentations. Additionally, when teaching with technologies, faculty peers generally develop training materials for their students; they can use many of the same tutorials and handouts for peer workshops.

Faculty peers can also incorporate mini-workshops into the routine business of their departments; in so doing, they can teach colleagues in a more informal setting, with little extra effort. Observations of more experienced colleagues, often a requirement for untenured faculty members, provide one opportunity to demonstrate the efficacy of particular technologies. Prior to the observation, the faculty members usually meet to discuss the goals for the class. At this meeting the faculty peer can introduce his or her colleagues to technologies that the students use and even prepare the colleagues to participate. During the class session, the colleagues will see firsthand how students respond to the technologies and how the tools facilitate learning in the discipline. Such contextual information may help the colleagues envision how technology use could benefit their own teaching and, in the process, motivate them to learn more.

This is a particularly useful approach with technologies like MOOs (multiuser domain object-oriented spaces, which are Web-based, synchronous environments that contain multiple rooms where users can interact with each other and with objects like chalkboards or voice recorders). Cultivating an understanding of and appreciation for less common technologies may be very important for faculty peers, particularly if their research agendas are intricately tied to the use of these tools. Department members who have learned about

these technologies will better comprehend references to them in annual reports, reappointment files, and tenure documents.

Developing Creative Incentives for Faculty Peers

According to two surveys of faculty members at large public universities, lack of time is one of the greatest obstacles to using or experimenting with technologies (Chizmar and Williams 2001; Wilson 2003). While faculty members may be motivated by release time or stipends, funds for such initiatives are often sparse due to fiscal constraints. As a result, IT professionals may have to develop creative ways to encourage faculty members to act as faculty peers and provide workshops for interested colleagues.

One way to enlist peers is to create a committee or even a discussion list that would involve faculty members, IT professionals, and relevant administrators. Faculty members who participated in this committee or list would help to shape the technology initiatives that the institution supports as well as the policies that govern their use. These instructors could tell IT professionals how they actually use technologies in the classroom, revealing what might be surprising or unanticipated applications. For instance, unbeknownst to those in IT, instructors in the English department may teach their students to design Web sites or even create onscreen video tutorials. Increased dialog may result in better support from IT professionals, which in turn may motivate faculty members to become faculty peers.

The campus teaching resource center can also help attract faculty peers by giving them grants or stipends to present workshops to broad audiences of colleagues on campus. Working in concert with IT professionals, the center's staff could direct faculty peers to internal and external resources that provide funding for technology-enhanced teaching or research (Carnegie 2002). IT professionals and center representatives could also develop campus-wide conferences or showcases where technologically savvy faculty members could demonstrate their expertise, network with like-minded colleagues in other departments, and inspire colleagues who do not use technologies in their teaching. Such gatherings would help faculty peers make their technological work visible to colleagues and to the administration; in turn, this visibility might lead to official recognition and credit, both of which are significant motivators for continued technological exploration (Wilson 2003).

Conclusion

Too often technology training is seen as the sole province of IT professionals. While their technical knowledge is undeniably broad, faculty members who use technologies may actually have a better grasp of the best applications in their own disciplines. These two groups would do well to jointly develop a program of peer workshops that highlight the benefits of using institutionally supported technologies and outline clear incentives for doing so. The outgrowth of such cooperation would be improved communication between IT centers and academic departments, a more focused and efficient effort to increase campus technology use, and enhanced educational opportunities for students, who would benefit from wider use of the information and communication technologies that they may encounter in the workplace and other organizational settings.

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