As I go around the country talking about the Red Balloon Project, I become increasingly convinced that two things need to be at the heart of our work: a focus on learning outcomes, and a focus on course redesign. In this note, I want to focus on course redesign.

Carol Twigg has demonstrated the power of course redesign in the NCAT work over the past ten years or so. The results of the first group of 30 institutions were striking. Twenty of the 30 courses had increases in student learning outcomes (the other 10 showed no significant difference), an average of 40% in cost reduction, and increases in student satisfaction and retention. In her work, Carol has identified 6 different models of course redesign. Clearly most of her work has been with large enrollment classes so redesign in other settings may not yield such dramatic results. And there are probably many other models of course redesign beyond the 6 types that Carol identifies.

I'm probably most intrigued by the blended model that has been done so well by our partners, the University of Central Florida. The blended model moves a portion of the coursework from face-to-face to the web. A recent meta-analysis by the U.S. Department of Education found that online instruction is marginally better than face-to-face but that blended courses yield the best results. That's not surprising when you think about it. Learning, after all, is a social activity most of the time. I think the need for human contact is enormous. Faculty in face-to-face settings get to respond to confusion or errors, encourage and motivate, and put a human face on the enterprise. Yet web-enabled portions of a course, when designed well, will allow exploration and individualization that is often not found in a classroom.

What's intriguing to me is if you take the concept of blended one step further. Let's say you build a blended learning course with 50% of the time face-to-face, and 50% web-enabled. Once you remove a portion of the course from the hands-on control of the faculty member, what's to prevent several faculty, at the same institution or anywhere in the world, from working together to build a much more powerful learning environment for the online portion, and then sharing the result with the other collaborators? That does several things, it seems to me. First, it would harness much greater human talent than one faculty member could provide. It might create a much more robust, engaging collection of materials and activities. Furthermore, when a faculty member no longer has to do all of the work of designing and collecting materials, they might be freed up to spend more time with students who need assistance. They might also have time to collaborate with other conducting research on how students learn most effectively, which materials are the best at motivating or engaging students, etc. They could participate in scholarly work about teaching and learning, in collaboration with others. They might develop new rubrics for assessing learning outcomes.

I think the idea of blended course has the possibility of transforming higher education as we
know it. That’s probably why the Gates Foundation initiated the Next Generation Learning Challenges Project. We’re currently in the final proposal development process (having survived the first cuts from 600 to 50 proposals), working on blended learning with 9 individual institutions and three statewide projects involving multiple institutions (Minnesota 2 institutions; Alabama 3 institutions; and Missouri, 6 institutions). One of the core challenges in blended courses is how to account for and make accountable faculty time. I know many faculty members who would see the freed up time from the course as an opportunity to collaborate with others. But I also know people who would see the reduction in class meeting time to simply reduce their workload. The other key to making blended courses work is a good assessment of learning outcomes. Without measuring rigorously and being confident of the learning outcomes, blended learning could be simply a way to reduce both faculty and student time, with no appreciable advantage in outcomes. That would be a tragedy for all of us.

WordPress

WordPress.com | Thanks for flying with WordPress!
Manage Subscriptions | Unsubscribe | Publish text, photos, music, and videos by email using our Post by Email feature.

Trouble clicking? Copy and paste this URL into your browser:
http://subscribe.wordpress.com