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News

Lost Arts of Teaching

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AUSTIN, TEX. -- Anthony Pitucco, chair of physics at Pima Community College, apologized to his audience here on Tuesday at the annual meeting of the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development. He had asked, he said, for "a more advanced room" at the convention center, but there were no rooms available with the technology he wanted: a chalkboard, chalk and eraser. He asked for a whiteboard and markers. Nothing was possible. Forced to make do with "lesser technology," he had to use PowerPoint, which, for various reasons he elaborated on, he considers inferior to chalk and a board.

Pitucco -- along with his Pima colleague and fellow presenter, Stewart Barr, chair of philosophy -- aren't Luddites. They can produce a PowerPoint when they have to. But they argued in an unusual session at this gathering of community college educators that the push to use technology in the classroom has diminished the roles of teaching and education. They said they feel that many sessions for faculty members about the use of technology are the equivalent of "Tupperware parties," focused on convenience and not education.

The NISOD meeting features numerous sessions about technology, and the exhibit hall is full of companies anxious to explain how to use clickers in new ways and how various technologies can help faculty members do their jobs better. In fact, several sessions focused not on debating the value of technology, but on how to persuade dubious faculty members to embrace technological advances. Easily the best-named session of the conference was "We Can't Give Enemas Online -- Strategies for Moving Nursing Faculty to Online Programming."

But the presentation by the Pima professors was defiantly against the grain, and audience members appeared to welcome the change, nodding and chuckling at the critique that was offered. Audience members weren't Luddites, either. When they were asked in the presentation to cite examples of technologies that improved learning, they cited a number. One faculty member mentioned that plagiarism detection software (combined with instruction) had significantly reduced plagiarism at his institution. Another praised MyMathLab (a Pearson product) for speeding students through remedial math. Attendees in career-oriented fields mentioned how simulation technology helps teach community college students to mix drinks (in hospitality programs) and to perform some medical procedures (in nursing programs).

The concern about technology (in its entirety, rather than one tool or another) was summed up in a series of statistics reviewed by both professors showing that increasing numbers of college students are not prepared for work at the college level. At that point, the presenters asked: If technology is helping us teach better, why are we seeing so much evidence that students aren't learning as well as we would like? Current college students have had more exposure to technology in high school and college than previous generations did, but are they better off for it?

Pitucco stressed that he was not arguing that technology is the cause of educational failings. But he said that -- given that technology costs money and takes time to learn -- shouldn't more questions be asked about whether the entire emphasis on technology has helped enough to justify its continued use?

"There is a science and an art to teaching," he said. And if technology is part of the science, it's time to focus anew on the art. Audience members traded stories about colleagues back home who -- on a day that technology in their classrooms wasn't working to allow for PowerPoints or other tools -- canceled class because they didn't know what to do.

Others talked about how seemingly forward-thinking ideas, like the "hybrid" course that mixes in-person and online instruction, can backfire. One faculty member spoke about how, at her campus, students sign up for the courses with no idea what they really are –

sometimes unaware that they still must attend class and others not understanding how to work online. "It's been a real disaster," she said.

There was no real manifesto issued at the session, but there were repeated calls to take back the classroom.

Barr talked about his revelation last year that he could ban students from using laptops or cell phones during class. He said he immediately saw the quality of discussion in class go up. Faculty members may think, as he did originally, that since they would have used laptops for note-taking (if they had had them as students), that's how they would be used today -- and not realize all the Facebook action and messaging and surfing that's really going on.

Telling students that cell phones must be turned off, he said, requires firmness on the professor's part. He demonstrated the looks he sees on some students as they are constantly glancing down on their muted but decidedly not off cells, anxious about any texts they may have missed. Barr said he isn't heartless on the matter and that he has been known to tell some students "go outside and get your fix. You are in too much pain" from not being able to use the cell. But they must leave to do so.

And the professors said faculty members also need to be more questioning about whether PowerPoints are really the best way to communicate with students. Pitucco said that he believes that they may work well in some cases, but said that "when you are lecturing, you are unfolding ideas, and on the screen you have an immediate snapshot."

He said he finds that the act of writing on a board more accurately conveys the path he is taking an idea.

Barr said that he thinks the real problem is that professors are over-relying on their PowerPoints, and are losing the art of improvisation. A good faculty member, he said, must be like a good comedian – "knowing the audience, responding to the audience" and either extending one line of thought or regrouping when something hasn't worked.

Faculty members who base their classes on PowerPoint, he said, seem to lose that flexibility, which he said was crucial to reaching students. "Just because your machine tells you to go, you go."

— **Scott Jaschik**

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