THRIVING ON COMPLEXITY?

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After many years, technology finally seems to be on the threshold of becoming a standard teaching method on many college campuses. Surveys indicate various instructional technologies are used by many, though less than a majority, of college faculty. Perhaps more important, many college administrators seem to have become enthusiastic supporters, who are encouraging the use of technology in the classroom. This may seem like good news for a committee that is dedicated to exactly this goal, but it represents a new set of challenges.

There are several indications that much work remains to be done. A national survey recently reported that 67% of faculty feel stressed by keeping up with technology, more than feel stress due to teaching loads or demands to do research and publish. Some faculty who have chosen not to use technology feel threatened, and it appears that some faculty are adopting presentation software or other technology because they are afraid that if they don't they will look out of date. In some cases, individuals feel so frustrated by the changes that they have become self-proclaimed Luddites, opposing all instructional technology.

Even the professors who are adopting teaching seem to be feeling some discomfort. One faculty member who responded to the survey mentioned previously said, "I just don't have the time. I don't have the time to use everything they come up with." This is not an unusual sentiment. Within a decade, college teaching has changed from a profession where change was slow or nonexistent into a hectic race, where technologies that were implemented last year have already begun to seem passe. One might well say, "It will be great, if only we can survive."

The first few faculty who used technology in their classes were an unusual group. These early adopters found the technology to be exciting. They recognized the possibility that sometimes the technology wouldn't work but were willing to accept that risk. Sometimes there was an almost evangelical belief that technology was not just a new teaching tool, but a catalyst that could dramatically change the educational process. Now, new technology users are more likely to expect technology to be both dependable and efficient. This new attitude is making the job more difficult for technical support staff.

Campus technology has become crucial within a very short time. Five years ago, an announcement that e-mail would not be available on a campus for two weeks would probably have been viewed as an inconvenience to a small number of individuals; today it would be seen as a disaster by many. Most college faculty have become dependent on technology to do their daily work. How many faculty who use technology have a backup plan in case the computer fails to work? Some college administrators are talking about a 7/24 campus, that is providing services to the students seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day.

The term 7/24 is a clue to where colleges are going. It originated in the electric power industry and represented a commitment to provide essential services without interruption. Like electricity, gas, and water, campus technology is becoming a utility. More and more college personnel expect technology to always be conveniently available. Even though few campuses make this commitment explicitly, it is being implicitly accepted as a basis for operation. Many campuses are just beginning to understand what this commitment means.

These changes in the view of technology represent new challenges for the CCCE. There is still a need for the committee to take a leadership role in the development of instructional technology. In addition, there is still much to be learned about the educational use of "older" technologies, like electronic mail and presentation software. Finally, the committee must be ready to help colleagues who have been slow to change when they are ready to explore new methods. This committee must find ways to cope with a broader spectrum of faculty interests than ever before in an environment where technology is increasingly taken for granted. The good news is that there is still plenty of work for this committee; the bad news is that the job has become much more complex.

Continuing adventure:

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The results of using the techniques, interactive PowerPoint lectures, I've previously described, are promising. I've had a second class in a year in