READINGS OF INTEREST

University Survival Strategy: Becoming "More Brick" Than Ever Before?

There is a dichotomy in higher education infrastructures concerning instructional environments. There are "click" classes (and even universities) where students enroll and spend time in virtual learning environments (e.g., online, interactive video, correspondence courses delivered via the Internet), and there are "brick" classes where students gather in the same physical location and interact face-to-face with each other and with the instructor(s).

Each environment offers its own opportunities and challenges. In a highly technological culture where most people have a computer and access to the Internet (76% with computer access, 72% with Internet access according to the 2011 U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey), some people advocate for the click environment as the way to bring equal access and learning to everyone at a lower cost than the legacy higher education model ("brick").

On the other hand, face-to-face communication affords the opportunity to do some things that are more difficult (sometimes impossible) within the click environment. Because this is the case, Levine and Dean (2012) suggest that brick universities need to embrace their brickness, to become paragons in accomplishing the specific things uniquely possible in face-to-face environments.

To bring this home to UCO, a Transformative Leaning institution, we are uniquely positioned to take advantage of our "brickness" because of the numerous opportunities faculty can leverage within a face-to-face environment to teach transformatively.

Here's how Levine and Dean (2012) make the point about residential institutions leveraging their uniqueness as a means of competing against the less expensive click model of higher education (which has fewer costs due to the relative lack of buildings, campuses, and other kinds of overhead): "Institutions choosing to be brick will need to be more brick than ever before if they are to attract students given the wealth of cheaper alternatives available" (Levine and Dean, as quoted by Lederman, 2012).

However, there is the apples-to-apples comparison issue obscuring some of Levine and Dean's rationale as stated above. One must be precise about *what kind of online education* is offered for comparison. MOOCs? A pure delivery model of education rarely automatically results in transformation — that's one of the reasons lecture is *NOT* on George Kuh's list of high-impact practices. By the same token, if click classes are purely delivery-of-information mechanisms, then click classes are rarely transformational. Transformative Learning activities and environments must be intentionally built into course design and instructional strategy in any class, but due to the nature of the learning environment, online course designers and instructors must be especially mindful of providing TL-friendly learning opportunities.

So what are ways UCO can leverage its brickness? One is to help students prepare for change, which means students must know how to think critically, how to observe and analyze current conditions and extrapolate future conditions, how to learn continuously. Levine and Dean say this will be necessary because "students will need to deal with the fast-changing nature of knowledge and technology in their careers and lives" (as quoted in Lederman, 2012).

Can this be done in the click environment? Certainly, but there are advantages when doing it in the brick environment. One advantage is body language, tone of voice, and expression recognition, all of which go beyond merely asking, "Does everyone understand?" When you can see learners' expressions of confusion, even though they're nodding their heads, you can spot the need for clarification.

(Truth be told, many brick instructors take non-response to inquiries about whether anyone still needs clarification as an accurate indication that students know the material. "Asking, 'Does anyone have any questions?' does not work, and it's a classic rookie mistake," says Amanda Ripley in What Makes a Great Teacher? [2010]).

Another native advantage in brick environments over many click environments is instantaneous, real-time feedback from *all* learners. Such formative feedback within a synchronous learning environment provides instructors the opportunity to help *all* learners *at the point of confusion.* Compare this with an environment in which you don't know which students are confused until they check in at various times with demonstrations of their understanding (or not). Poorly designed courses and/or poor teaching strategies mean brick classes can also suffer from this drawback, but at least face-to-face teaching usually does not automatically include barriers to getting synchronous, real-time feedback.

Herein lies one of the greatest ways for face-to-face instructors to provide a value-add in a residential education: helping students at the point of confusion.

To leverage this natural advantage in learning environments, however, requires frequent formative feedback. Instructors must check student understanding often via authentic assessment. Real-time results of such feedback provide faculty with the prescription for which students need what help within what timeframe in order to prevent misunderstanding and/or a blockage in the ability to move forward conceptually. Being able to *see* this in the classroom on students' faces is a huge benefit for teachers, but we must check frequently for understanding in order to take advantage of this hugely important aspect of face-to-face learning.

According to Levine and Dean (2012), more college students today (67%) say the chief value of a college education is increased earning power (only 44% of students said this in 1976). In a purely salary-focused calculus, if a content-delivery-only education gets you the same earning power as a residential education, then students as consumers will vote with their feet for the cheaper degree. This is why residential institutions are urged to embrace their brickness and highlight every possible advantage afforded in such

classrooms as reasons a brick degree is worth the cost.

That's precisely what we're all about at UCO. Transformative Learning is a value-add above and beyond what's generally possible in most kinds of delivery-model education. Even when considering only earning power, employer surveys tell us that transformative skills and knowledge trump disciplinary skills and knowledge in terms of new hire success (e.g., the Leadership IQ Survey, 2006, which showed the top four of five reasons new hires fails is because of TL-related shortcomings, not because of discipline knowledge failings, which is Number Five on the list).

Embrace our brickness. Teach transformatively.

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