

Student Centered Learning or Funding Centered Learning? A Case Study of a British Institution's Restructuring with Technology

by Christina Dokter

This paper is about faculty change and organizational transformation within student-centered learning environments. The research examines a trend in higher education in England by studying a college that implemented educational technology as part of their change strategy for student-centered learning. This college integrated technology, all learning support staff, and library resources into one location, per department, and created five Integrated Learning Centres. Unlike learning centers found in the United States, classes have been integrated into these Centres, across the college. However, this transformation has resulted in drastic work-style change for faculty who hold feelings of ambivalence toward this model. While they see the model as benefiting students, they also see it as a vehicle of undermining their teaching, their job security, and subject-matter expertise.

Introduction

Higher education institutions around the world are trying to create curriculum that is learning and student-centered. In preparation for the Knowledge Age, calls for a paradigm shift (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Bateson, 1996) from teaching to learning targets a new era of student-centered and self-directed learning in colleges. Fervently resting in the ideas of learner-centered approaches and innovations in technology, O'Banion (1997) proposed the idea of a "learning college." Under this model, the instructor is *not* the center of teaching, but the student must become the center of learning with technology as a means to facilitate such learning. Educational technologists and philosophers promote technology as a means to carry out student centered learning (Bates, 2000; Jonassen, Peck, & Wilson, 1999; O'Banion, 1997).

As faculty serve as the vital element of college functions, faculty development has become a key component of educational technology implementation and organizational change. It is in this background that from the 1990s to the present, faculty development and their adoption of technology inundate much of the literature about technology implementation. In this area, while most studies have dealt with faculty adoption of technology, this study shows that faculty work-life change impinges on their performance. In the end, the teacher's role in delivering quality student-centered learning becomes an issue.

The Research Problem

Therefore, literature is replete with difficulties of faculty development and calls for ways to help faculty adopt technology. Literature calls for systems approaches to technology integration, rather than piece-meal approaches. The entire institution must restructure to create learning centered environments. However, such restructuring has proven difficult in educational institutions because they have been mired in traditional environments for hundreds of years. So, when an institution claims to have restructured for student-centered learning, research needs to show the response of faculty to such a model.

Context of the Study

This study examines Ward-Smith College (pseudonym), a college in Great Britain, which claims to have transformed into a learning college. The college has been chosen as a site for this study because all of the above barriers seem to have been addressed in their change model. With technology, learning, and information support staff integrated into one Integrated Learning Centre (ILC), per division, faculty indirectly receive ongoing, “just-in-time” professional development along with curriculum integration with technology.

Moreover, ample support in the ILCs creates an environment of a “one-stop-shop” for student-centered learning. Unlike the traditional one learning-center model, this college created a center for each of the five major divisions in the college. The goal of the college is to provide flexibility in meeting the differing needs of each subject areas.

Ward-Smith College is a large, general further education (FE) college in England that also houses higher education (HE) programs. "Student-centered learning" and "efficient use of resources" seem to be the buzz words around the College. Technology use seems to be a response to the government's mandate to expand college entry and increase the numbers of students who traditionally do not progress through higher education. However, in a world where there's shortage of funds and shortage of teachers, meeting the demands of increasing numbers of students seems to be an onerous task.

As a solution, this college integrated the previously independent services of the Learning Resources Service with instructional support staff, special education support staff, and library and technology so that a more collaborative level of support could be created around students' needs. To meet the goal of efficient resource use, they divided each center into subject clusters and located them within the buildings where each department is housed. So, support staff such as reading and writing specialists, special needs counselors, and librarians, as well as curriculum experts would be at one central place in each building, in the ILC, where the resources for that department would also be housed.

This research is a case study to examine the ILC model itself, and to scrutinize it from the perspectives of faculty. The study suspects that while such support for faculty may mitigate anxiety toward technology, the role of teacher-as-facilitator, as a pedagogical construct, may still be troubling for faculty. Thus, this study expected to find faculty tensions toward working in the ILCs. Therefore, the research questions are:

- What actions did the faculty take in response to the Integrated Learning Centers?
- What beliefs do the faculty hold about the Integrated Learning Centers?
- What are the tensions evident in their responses to the model?

Theoretical Framework

In this study, theories and models about faculty members' behaviors toward technology were framed within literature about faculty beliefs, actions and intentions (Pratt & Associates, 1998). These beliefs, actions and intentions depend on faculty's beliefs and commitments toward the learners, the content, ideals and the context of teaching. The results of Pratt & Associate's study show five perspectives underlying faculty's sense of commitment: 1) The transmission perspective. 2) The apprenticeship perspective 3) The developmental perspective 4) The social reform perspective 5) The nurturing perspective.

This study further noted that faculty work lives are changing (Baldwin, 1998) when technology is implemented in an institution. Therefore the barriers to faculty work life may include: hierarchy issues and role change, political in-fighting over ideologies about learning,

and other power struggles within the culture of change (Kerr, 1996). Thus, the work environment of faculty seems central when studying how technology is changing an organization. Therefore, in relation to organizational change theory and technology, the social construction and shaping of technology (Bijker, et. al., 1987; Williams and Edge, 1996) theory was used as a lens to look at the environmental context. This framework allows the researcher to not only examine teacher beliefs about pedagogy, but their perceptions about the environment as well.

Research Design

This is a dissertation research based on a qualitative case study method. First, the study began by asking ILC administrators about the implementation of the ILCs, their goals and mission statements, and how they approached transformation of the college into a learning college. An online survey was conducted to determine the level of college ILC usage, types of ILC usage, and demographics of faculty. From this survey, email addresses were obtained to solicit interviewees from a list of faculty. Fourteen faculty with various degrees of ILC usage participated in semi-structured interviews that lasted approximately one hour each. Then the key administrators were interviewed one more time as a follow up and clarification. The study also included analysis of existing institutional documents, such as the college website, government documents and administrative planning sheets. Several observation sessions in each of the ILCs were used to examine the daily life and activities within the ILCs. Faculty teaching was part of this observation. Informal interviews of some 40 students were conducted during the observation sessions.

Summary of the Findings

The study findings show that students are empowered to learn in the ILCs and enjoy learning in this environment. Most faculty engage in student-centered, resource-based learning and hold a developmental perspective (Pratt & Associates, 1998). Most faculty assign problem-solving and project-based work to students to work in the ILCs. They feel that the ILCs benefit student learning, primarily because students enjoy working with technology and can focus better in the ILCs than in a regular, traditional classroom environment. The faculty also feel that learning by researching is a valuable tool that will transfer into the workplace. Institutional survey data show that student retention rates have risen and informal interviews suggest students enjoy learning in the ILCs.

However, the faculty also feel that their work has drastically changed and that the ILCs have dis-empowered them. As the faculty teach more and more in the ILCs, their teaching time, per class, is cut more and more. They are also given additional duties in administration and planning; faculty feel that they are overworked and underpaid. In fact, the recent funding cuts have forced many layoffs of faculty. Therefore faculty beliefs also include feelings of ambiguity which stem from the psycho-social and political climate of the college.

Conclusion

At Ward-Smith, the idea of being student-centered seems to resonate among administrators and management. Like a business, the ILCs seem to be driven by the need to serve the client or the student. In fact, many of the ILCs' theoretical underpinnings seem to parallel a post-Fordist model of educational administration (Bates, 2000, p. 387). Rather than an emphasis on bureaucracy, the ILCs offer flexibility; rather than being teacher-centered, the ILCs are client

or student-centered; rather than the traditional model of teaching the entire class at one time, the ILCs offer a more individualized focus. All of the following characteristics that describe post-Fordism are present in the ILC model: 1) Heavy dependence on information technologies; 2) workers directly networked to clients (i.e. teachers to students via electronic communication); 3) decentralized, creative workers, working in teams; 4) steering core of workers; 5) strong leadership; 6) ability to respond to rapid development and change; 7) and global operations. Moreover, as in a post-Fordist model, there is a flattening of hierarchy in which support staff also take on the role of teachers.

The presence of these elements of post-Fordism makes the ILCs an innovative model of technology and learning integration. The ILC represents a deluxe model of learning centers because Ward-Smith created an ultimate student-centered experience of bringing all student services into one place. Moreover, it created a system of management that is both centralized and decentralized along a matrix organizational principle. Both the management of the organization and the way students learn is flexible and adaptable to change. Through many fiscal constraints, the ILCs have grown and thrived. Most importantly, through the ILCs the management was able to justify losses in other spheres of the college, mainly the loss of faculty jobs. Only recently, have the ILCs lost some of its own staff to budget cuts. The ILCs at Ward-Smith fit the needs of the 21st century in producing flexible learning environments that emphasize the learning needs suited to the marketplace.

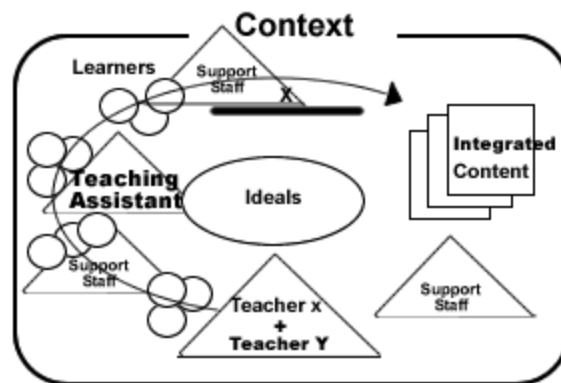
However, as we follow such a model, which seems to mirror the world of business, it also follows the Neo-liberal tendencies to manage the college for cost-cutting and efficiency. What the ILC represents is the concept of “doing more with less.” In the process, the steering core has shifted from the faculty to the administration. The implication for such change seems to mean the debasement of the teaching profession. Therein lies the dilemma of this new model. While restructuring has created a new model for student-centered learning, budget cuts create situations where students still learn in the ILCs, but under the tutelage of support staff, not faculty. What results is not only dis-empowerment of faculty’s subject-matter expertise, but de-legitimization of content.

Such results point to the need to examine the role of the teacher within the ILCs. Some researchers say that when technology is used as information banks, as is the case in the ILCs, the teacher no longer is the primary subject-matter expert (Gillespie, 1998; Koehler, 1998; Whitesel, 1998). They also play a less hierarchical role in relation to the student as they are co-learners with the students.

According to other literature, the role of the teacher in student-centered environments is more than sideline-sitting. The teacher engineers the cognitive and social environment so that students can learn together effectively (Witfelt, 2000). The teacher is also responsible for updating information and technology to make learning current and authentic. According to Witfelt (2000), the teachers need to possess important competencies such as supervising, supporting students, advising as subject-matter expert, encouraging, arbitrating group discussions, evaluating and providing feedback, and motivating students to keep on track. The Development Perspective requires the teacher’s expert knowledge in order to link students back to content.

However, the stark reality still remains. Faculty consume a large portion of the cost of a college, and they remain a prime target for cost-cutting. How then, should student-centered model thrive and provide quality learning? Perhaps the answer lies in a more challenging option of further restructuring by integrating curriculum across departments. Truly integrating

curriculum would involve faculty teaming up across departments and sharing teaching duties. This will provide enough teachers per class, while still maintaining cuts in teaching time. Integration of curriculum suits the Knowledge Age in which students must understand the contexts in which learning can transfer. Teaching writing and math within a business context would be a good example. So, for example, a marketing teacher could teach a class for an hour, and then a math teacher will teach the same class the next hour. Since the curriculum would be integrated, the students will benefit from real-life learning, as well as the benefit of having knowledgeable teachers (please see diagram below). Such a model would require funding structures that are not based on department allocations, but per class allocation.



The ideal student-centered teaching in the ILCs
 1) cross disciplinary collaboration
 2) TA chosen from students who completed course
 3) students learn in groups

(Adapted from Pratt & Associates, 1998, p. 46.)

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