Transformative Assessment Systems

During the go-go, hi-tech ’90s, most colleges and universities believed they were headed down at least one technological road to education Nirvana: classrooms got retooled, distance-learning technologies got put into place, and libraries got hard wired to go to the student rather than the other way around. But like much of the hype and hoopla that dazzled and blinded the dot com generation, the technology that promised to revolutionize education quickly devolved into a waste of hard-drive space. Promises got broken. Money got wasted. Utopia became unrealized. And always the question, What went wrong?

Two sessions at the NLII annual meeting in San Diego examined the infrastructure ordeals of the past decade and offered encouraging strategies and action plans so that institutions could do their own retooling—and, most important, continue moving toward the objectives that fueled their ambitions in the first place. Taking a student-centered perspective was highlighted in the session titled Implications of Web-Based Learning for Student Evaluation of University Teaching. Charles Dziuban, director of the research initiative for teaching effectiveness at the University of Florida joined the university’s vice president, Steven Sorg, to tackle this often contentious issue. Acknowledging that student evaluations are always controversial—especially when tenure, promotion, and merit pay are tied to them—Dziuban and Sorg presented UCF’s impressive method for gathering and analyzing student evaluations fairly. The university used three years of data and more than 450,000 evaluations to critique individual professors and programs within the UCF system. Dziuban and Sorg presented the statistical model used for their research and the evaluation form, which was used for both online and face-to-face instruction.

In the session titled Transformative Assessment Systems, Stephen C. Ehrmann, president of the Flashlight Program (www.tltgroup.org/programs/flashlight.html), joined Joan K. Lippincott of the Coalition for Networked Information (www.cni.org) to describe the Transformative Assessment Project—a joint project of the NLII, CNI, and the TLT Group—and to showcase transformative assessment methods that actually work. Parlaying his considerable experience in the area of institutional and academic assessment into clear and concise strategies, Ehrmann is still positive about the possibilities. Forty years of applying technology to education have yielded excellent methods for teaching technology; they’ve also opened up education to a much wider audience. Unfortunately, enhancing a university with new technology is like upgrading a computer: when will the shiny new toys become obsolete? With technology as the focus, such enhancements will almost always fail, Ehrmann said.

“For a variety of reasons, institutions and programs tend to focus just on the new technology itself,” said Ehrmann. “That’s bad.” While universities are usually enamored with new technology, they’re not entirely blind to the transient nature of new innovations in a constantly changing marketplace. With little chance of outmaneuvering built-in obsolescence, entire educational agendas are sometimes built around flashy computer programs that won’t outlast the life span of the average television sitcom. Add to the scenario a plethora of frustrating computer bugs and the unmanageable growth of branching software that can be added to indefinitely without institutional controls, and most new technology initiatives are forced to focus on technology rather than strategy.

A more effective approach, said Ehrmann, is the well-conceived, long-term plan that uses technology as a tool rather than an object of institutional worship and ultimately frustration: set long-range goals; choose technology that can be used incrementally and be easily updated; and use easy-to-access-and-manipulate teaching materials. Those initial steps, coupled with a system for tracking progress and a solid institutional coalition, will lead to success, said Ehrmann.

In an effort to create an environment for building the body of practical knowledge about transformative assessment systems, the Coalition for Networked Information, the NLII, and the TLT/Flashlight Program established the Transformative Assessment Project. The project leverages existing resources—such as the American Association for Higher Education’s Assessment Forum—and focuses on building new knowledge and understanding about assessment for information technology professionals. Composed of three modules—an in-person focus session (scheduled for March 15, 2002, in Denver, Colorado, and cosponsored by the University of Colorado, Boulder), an online workshop, and an associated online learning community—the project, as Lippincott described it, aims to address teaching, learning, and technology and to link institutional transformation and goals. “Institutions know that they need to think beyond paper-and-pencil surveys when they think about assessment,” said Lippincott. “In this way, we
hope to help them understand the practical applications of basic assessment concepts and at the same time to work together as a learning community to create new knowledge about transformative assessment.”

In addition, a Transformative Assessment branch of the READY system (www.educause.edu/ready/) is under development. For more information about the Transformative Assessment Project, see www.educause.edu/nlii/keythemes/transformative.asp.