Evolving with Technology: The Changing Role of the Curriculum Lab at

The University of West Alabama

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Living in the age of the instant, the prevalence of information available through electronic resources has grown exponentially. Simply searching a keyword in a browser window can yield thousands and perhaps millions of results in a fraction of a second. With that kind of technological boost, today's university student can be inundated with information. Even pages of a book are available on a small handheld device capable of storing thousands of tomes. How then does a University library compete with such a plethora of information? More specifically, how does a curriculum lab compete with that level of information availability? Quite simply, the curriculum lab becomes another tool. The University library is available with print media and electronic journals to assist students with searches as well as teaching students how to navigate through all those available sources in order to distinguish a credible source from a Wikipedia entry. The curriculum lab goes a step further by offering credible sources in a hands-on environment in which students can learn to develop skills and use educational sources in order to most effectively teach their future students. Because of the availability of electronic resources coupled with the need to effectively evaluate those resources and The University's mission to provide opportunities for quality education, the curriculum lab becomes an integral part of The University's mission.

To fully understand how technology affects students, how students learn must be examined. The Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education of the National Research Council's *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*, describes the conclusions of research on the subject of how students learn. The report describes three

components of a healthy learning environment. One component is learner-centered. In this component, careful attention is paid to the knowledge, skills, attitudes and belief that learners bring to the educational setting" (133). This includes paying attention to the misconceptions that the learners bring as well and creating tasks that help the students see that various ideas might need to change. A second component is knowledge-centered. This component "...take[s] seriously the need to help students become knowledgeable by learning in ways that lead to understanding and subsequent transfer…" , "…focus on the kinds of information and activities that help students develop an understanding of disciplines…", and help "students become metacognitive by expecting new information to make sense and asking for clarification when it doesn't…" (136-7). The third component is assessment-centered. This component "provide[s] opportunities for feedback and revision and that what is assessed must be congruent with one's learning goals." (139-40). This "assessment and feedback must focus on understanding, and not only on memory for procedures or facts…" (140). It also includes measurements of preconceptions. All of this implies, as stated in the introductory chapter, that "attention must be given to what is taught (information, subject matter), why it is taught (understanding), and what competence or mastery looks like" (24). As a consequence, a teacher needs to be able to articulate the learning goals of a course and its subsections, and how the material, the method of presentation, and the assessment, interacting together, all lead toward those goals. With the proliferation of online materials, the curriculum lab takes into account the availability of information electronically and through a symbiotic relationship with online programs at UWA, creates a method of providing tactile approaches for the practical application of content learned online.

There is no doubt that technological advances have had a profound effect on education, universities and curriculum labs. According to Castells[1], teaching and learning in institutions of higher education worldwide is being transformed by technology. Further, Roberts[2] states that while online learning may be still in a developing phase, its technologies are integral to the restructuring of both the art and science of teaching and the organization of learning. That is evident at The University of West Alabama (UWA) where the online program has seen exponential growth from 13 students at its beginning in 2006 to over 2,500 students enrolled today. That is 192 times its original enrollment in four years. This growth can cause some concerns. Henan and Bretag[3] point out that teaching staff in universities are caught between two opposing lines of strategy. On one hand lies the promise of an economical approach to learning with students receiving information en masse from a professor. The students could be stationed worldwide. The savings to The University is seen in less classroom space needed to accommodate the students. Too, the students are free from rigorous class schedules and can conveniently complete coursework around their work and home schedules. The other side is that online technology administered and managed by an information technology unit carries the risk that "learning experience takes a back seat to the management functions[4]." Students are not as engaged in the curriculum as they would be with a more tactile learning environment such as one offered in the curriculum lab. The curriculum lab offers the practical application of the materials disseminated through online or traditional learning environments.

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[1] Castells, M. Giroux, H., Freire, P.,Willis, P. & Macedo, D. (1999). *Critical Education in the New Information Age*, London: Rowman & Littlefield.

[2] Roberts, G. (2004). The new covert curriculum: A critical actor-network approach to learning technology policy, *Proceedings of the fourth international conference on networked learning*, Lancaster University and The University of Sheffield, pp. 637–644.

[3] Hannon, J., & Bretag, T. (2010). Negotiating Contested Discourses of Learning Technologies in Higher Education. *Educational Technology & Society*, *13* (1), 106–120.

[4] Siemens, G. (2006). Learning or management system? A review of learning. *Management System Reviews*, University of Manitoba, e*learnspace.* Retrieved February 21, 2008, from http://www.elearnspace.org/Articles/index.htm.

UWA's mission statement itself is a testament to the symbiosis between online technology and traditional learning of which the curriculum lab could be a greater contributing factor. The mission statement explains,

> The University of West Alabama is a state-supported, coeducational institution of higher learning governed by a Board of Trustees appointed by the Governor. As a regional institution, The University's foremost commitment is to meeting the educational needs of the State and particularly of the West Alabama area. Valuing a diverse student enrollment, though, it also welcomes students from throughout the United States and from other countries.

This opening statement emphasizes the accessibility of UWA to a wide range of students. With this diverse student body, UWA must also provide a diverse learning environment including a greater range of available resources for hands-on learning in the curriculum lab. The mission statement further explains the governing purpose of The University,

> The primary purpose of The University is to provide opportunities for quality education for students to pursue a quality education through associate, baccalaureate, and master's degrees in liberal arts, natural sciences and mathematics, preprofessional programs, nursing, technology, business, and education. Importance is placed on providing opportunities within the curricula for the development of enhanced skills in critical thinking, communication, leadership, and computer literacy. The University also seeks to provide students opportunities for growth beyond the classroom through a wide range of extracurricular activities, programs, and services and through the maintenance of an environment of cultural and intellectual diversity. Through the total educational experience that it provides and through its encouragement of the free exchange of ideas among faculty, administration, and students, The University attempts to assist its students in developing the important qualities of independent thinking and respect for the ideas of others and in building firm foundations of personal integrity and character in order to realize their quests for a philosophy of life and for self-fulfillment.

The curriculum Lab serves as the ideal location for "providing opportunities within the curricula for the development of enhanced skills in critical thinking, communication, leadership, and computer literacy." Through the textbooks and other teacher education materials available in the curriculum lab, students are afforded the opportunity to apply classroom knowledge by developing classroom curricula in an idyllic environment with all the materials needed for

effective instruction. The mission statement concludes with its goal for students and the

community,

> At The University of West Alabama, the emphasis is upon the traditional learner, but the institution is also committed to furthering the concept of lifelong learning and to serving the non-traditional student. It considers among its clientele are high schools, businesses and industries, governmental agencies, and professional workers. In serving these diverse publics, the institution employs not only traditional means of delivery, but it also seeks to expand its use of innovative technologies, including distance learning, and to networking with other educational institutions and agencies in order to more comprehensively address the needs of its region.

The curriculum lab is the bridge between the "traditional learner" and the community. It takes

the students from classroom instruction to practical application before sending them out into the

community to teach future generations. With well-educated and well-rounded students, UWA

enhances the community it serves with students capable of becoming contributing and competent

professionals, and the curriculum lab serves as the training grounds.

As UWA moves toward a new horizon with both traditional learning and technology-

based learning, the curriculum lab must be maintained and enhanced as an integral tool to

providing a well-balanced education. It is the laboratory in which students apply skills learned in

the classroom to real world scenarios in order to show their strengths and develop their

weaknesses. By investing in ways to enhance the curriculum lab, The University is investing in

itself. There is no better testament to the effectiveness of an institution of higher education than

the product it places in the community. Students capable of thriving in their chosen fields

demonstrate that The University has a quality product. With the curriculum lab as a testing

ground, The University continually improves its product with technological advances as a

complimentary component instead of a competing one.

References

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