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SMART CLASSROOMS, CLASSROOM ACTION RESEARCH and ELECTRONIC PORTFOLIOS

The Articulation of a Modern Liberal Education

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In a recent issue of **Liberal Education**, Rick Vaz places information technology at the core of modern liberal education when he argues that *“computer literacy is an empowering and liberating skill for undergraduates, useful in virtually every discipline and profession”* (Vaz, 2004) In this respect Vaz is locating at the core of the liberal education agenda the fact that it is now widely recognized by most teachers (at whatever level of instruction) that “technology” affects the way we learn and teach. Thus, **“smart classrooms”** (of whatever form) are no longer an added luxury in cotemporary liberal educational institutions or a generous contribution from corporate sponsors; they are the foundation on which modern pedagogy is evolving. This view is echoed by Steve Ehrmann in another contribution to **Liberal Education** in which he argues that a key element in enhancing learning is the ability of students and faculty to think with the technology rather than thinking about it. Ehrmann argues that *“Learning involves a transition from novice to expert, and technology can in some cases enable relative novices to ask meaningful questions of their own, facilitating more active and inquiry-based learning and allowing students to navigate their way through new spaces and ideas.”* (Ehrmann, 2004)

Nevertheless, Vaz also argues that *“computers and the Internet in higher education are not always used wisely, do not always enhance learning, and indeed do not always work reliably. At their best, though, they hold the promise of positive and transformative change for learning and teaching, change that can give our students richer experiences, broader perspectives, and wider audiences for their work.”* (Vaz, 2004) This reflects a view shared by many in liberal education especially as we are exploring a variety of learner-centered environments and a variety of instructional strategies that will and can support the active engagement of students. This, of course, derives from the fact that we are now cognizant that faculty-centered instruction in the oral tradition has seriously been challenged by both students and faculty and found wanting. Instead, more and more faculty in a great variety of liberal educational institutions seek to identify ways in which their teaching will contribute to critical thinking and active learning.

In this context information technology and especially a variety of forms of smart classrooms constitute a key element that facilitates our search for appropriate instructional strategies. Vaz, however, reminds us again that *“just as quantitative literacy is distinct from mathematics, computer literacy is distinct from technology studies. Technology best serves liberal education when it is neither teacher nor subject, but a useful tool for student and faculty work. Faculty, often less comfortable with some aspects of technology than are their students, need both support and creative models for its use, and institutions must determine ways of managing technology so that it is reliable and accessible.”* (Vaz, 2004)

It is in the above context that **Classroom Action Research** (presented by Dr Aziza Ellozy in the previous issue of **New Chalk Talk**), gains significant importance as the means by which faculty can identify the appropriate instructional strategy that will blend information technology with modern pedagogy and thus enhance active learning. As Gwynn Mettetal notes *“CAR is a way for instructors to discover what works best in their own classroom situation, thus allowing informed decisions about teaching.”* (Mettetal, 2003) Learning and Teaching Centers such as **CLT** can of course assist in this

process, but what is critical about **CAR** is that it “occupies a midpoint on a continuum ranging from teacher reflection at one end to traditional educational research at the other. It is more data-based and systematic than reflection, but less formal and controlled than traditional educational research.” (Mettetal, 2003)

It is, of course, beyond the scope of this short essay to identify and discuss appropriate instructional strategies that combine information technology with modern pedagogy. Nevertheless, a generic strategy that does that, is suggested by Stephen Ehrmann and may deserve noting since it relates specifically to a liberal educational environment and reflects the interests of faculty, students, institutions and potential employers. Ehrmann argues that **electronic portfolios** constitute a key element in modern liberal education as they provide the means by which students can move beyond computer literacy as a goal in itself and instead make use of information technology as a methodology for critical and reflective thinking in relationship to learning goals and objectives. (Ehrmann, 2004)

In this respect, Ehrmann’s suggestion articulates well with the fact that learning is now recognized by most educational experts as a lifelong process, no matter what we do, both in work and at leisure. By recording all the different things we have done, currently do and expect or plan to do in the future we are:

- reflecting on who we are and what is unique and special about us,
- identifying areas where we want or need to learn more either by building on existing strengths or addressing current or predictable weaknesses.

Most of the time we respond intuitively to demands on our time using appropriate skills and knowledge: we do not need to consult a record of everything we have done to know whether or not we can achieve a particular task. However, it can be very difficult to know that we will be able to achieve tasks which are poorly defined, appear to require skills or knowledge we do not yet have, are a long way off, or indeed are so immediate we cannot see where to start. An electronic record can be used to match experience, skills and understanding to these sorts of difficult tasks. It can also be employed to develop new goals to help meet changing demands in the context of objectives set in education, work and in leisure.

An electronic record will also enable students to evaluate the effectiveness of any training and development they undergo to meet their goals. If the outcomes do not meet the goals they have set they have a record of what still needs to be done. Thus, when electronic portfolios are used by students it also enables faculty to seek ways of enhancing the curriculum taught and reflect on the instructional strategies adopted (CAR). They provide an ideal opportunity where classroom action research and information technology can articulate in order to enhance the goals and objectives of a modern liberal education and move beyond the limited goal of just achieving computer literacy. In this respect smart classrooms, classroom action research and electronic portfolios become indispensable tools for a modern liberal education.

Sources:

- Ehrmann, Stephen (2004) *Beyond Computer Literacy*, **Liberal Education**, Volume 90, Number 4.
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- Vaz, Rick (2004) *The Promise of Computer Literacy*, **Liberal Education**, Volume 90, Number 4.

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