

Editorial

Innovation and Change

To get the bad customs of a country changed and new ones, though better, introduced, it is necessary first ... to convince them that their interests will be promoted by the proposed changes; and this is not the work of a day.

Benjamin Franklin (1781), quoted in Rogers (1983, 1)

I reflected on Rogers's well-known work on the adoption of innovations after seeing a marketing statement for a rather unremarkable distance education program that trumpeted it as "an innovative program." Because what is innovative depends on one's previous experience, I accept that what I consider unimaginative and conventional could be regarded as innovative to someone who had hardly ventured outside a classroom. Therefore I will forgive the people who composed that particular advertisement—though I wish people who "market" academic programs showed a bit more academic skepticism and less Madison Avenue hyperbole! However, having been stimulated to think about innovation, I was taken back yet again to think about the most basic challenge facing those of us who want to see wider adoption of good quality distance education. This is the challenge of bringing about a change of institutional culture at all levels of education, beginning with the attitudes of the individual teacher and then the collective faculty, administration, and policymakers.

Rogers himself laid out some rules that might guide "change agents" faced with this kind of problem (Rogers 1983, 211). A new idea is more likely to be adopted, he said, when it

- is relatively simple and easy to understand;
- can be tested and tried prior to commitment;
- is perceived to have an advantage over its predecessor; and
- is compatible with the needs and value system of potential adopters.

The closer one examines these guidelines, the greater the enormity of the challenge becomes apparent. As long as one thinks of distance education as merely laying on Internet access, recruiting some online students and allocating a class of these to one of the faculty, there is no big impact on the teaching system—and the marketers can call it innovative! But lay out

some of the key characteristics of a quality distance education system, and the likelihood of their being adopted looks much less hopeful. I think most readers of this journal will recognize what I am talking about when I say these characteristics include

1. division of labor between content specialists, instructors, and technologists;
2. use of wide range of media to capitalize on the strengths of each;
3. substantial investment in program design and production;
4. frequent monitoring of student and instructor performance, with administrative intervention to correct malfunctions in course design or instruction when triggered by monitoring data;
5. both preliminary and continuing training in distance education for all members of the teaching institution; and
6. institutional specialization in “niche markets,” with programs delivered at scale to recoup investments.

This list of desirable characteristics for a distance education program asks for significant change in the attitudes toward teaching on the part of that group of persons who have the greatest power, collectively, to prevent innovation (i.e., the faculty). To return to Rogers’s criteria, most teachers and professors *do not understand* these qualities and without the kind of major investments that can only be taken at a level beyond their influence they *cannot test* them. Many of *their advantages are not obvious* nor are the ways in which they actually promote the best traditional educational values. For some who oppose new ways of organizing the human resources of teaching, there may appear to be an incompatibility with their “needs and values”—though it must be admitted that quite often their personal security is the “need and value” threatened. In the cause of defending the “teacher–learner relationship,” faculty (and administrators) might, for example, hold down the number of students who can take a course to a number comparable to a conventional class. To protect supposed “quality,” they may limit the employment of adjunct faculty. This is a particularly arbitrary and self-serving position that I see taken too carelessly. Several highly qualified part-time faculty, each a specialist in a subdiscipline, could be hired for the cost of one new full-time assistant professor, yet in this technological age of working at home, networking, and “distributed learning” the typical dean feels more comfortable placing a fresh postdoctoral candidate on the payroll—even for teaching online—and putting that person in an office on campus.

Since that's the way faculty have always been appointed, it is understandable, but it fails to take the opportunity offered by technology of improving the quality of distance teaching or giving better value for money to students. Once appointed, locked into a work pattern and schedule based on practices in the conventional classroom, only a minimum of release time (if any) is available for the professor to design the distance learning course. The defensiveness against innovation goes on beyond the role of faculty. Introduce new technology? Certainly technology is welcomed—provided it is the technology that sits on the desktop of the resident professor. Instead of hiring a professor, employ an audio and a video producer to increase the productivity of existing academic staff? And an editor? A decent studio? Send a team to do location shots? Pay for extensive research by a photo-librarian? We are now beginning to press on the budget, and thus to test the limits of the faculty's tolerance and the administrator's comfort. How about closing down an academic department or just a few courses, and diverting funds to build up another with a multimillion dollar multimedia program developed by a team of faculty and consultants located worldwide and taught worldwide by a cadre of part-time adjunct faculty? Ah, now we contemplate serious innovation in the form of structural changes in the organization and thus we go too far! So, we settle for a marginal adjustment of the status quo—a handful of campus-bound professors, each teaching a small number of students online, in small programs that are unable to take advantage of economies of scale and so are unable to benefit from state-of-the-art knowledge regarding quality distance teaching. Yet if administrative and policy leadership could be found, with enough vision to grasp the nettle of changing the allocation of its human as well as financial resources, that would lead to real innovation. I have no doubt nervous faculty would discover the resulting quality distance education methods were not at all inconsistent with their values or even their self-interests. But the minority of faculty who are ready for this kind of change, the people Rogers labels “innovators” to distinguish them from early and late “adopters” (and the “laggards”), these people cannot do it on their own. Policy change is needed and that has to come from the institution's management. Only institutional and political leadership can, in Franklin's words, “convince them that their interests will be promoted by the proposed changes”; it is, clearly “not the work of a day.”

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Reference

Rogers, E. 1983. *Diffusion of innovations*, 3rd ed. New York: Free Press.

Announcing Appointment of Darcy Hardy as Interviews Editor

The interviews feature of *The American Journal of Distance Education* has been one of the most appreciated parts of our journal since its foundation. Identifying persons for interview and arranging the interviews has been one of my responsibilities over the years. For some time I have felt the journal needs a fresh perspective on this feature and I have now invited Dr. Darcy Hardy of the University of Texas system to join our editorial team as Interviews Editor. I am delighted that Darcy has agreed to accept this challenge and am pleased to announce that we will publish the first of her commissioned interviews in *AJDE 19, 2*.