

## Book Review:

### ***Learning Matters: The Transformation of U.S. Higher Education***

**Kim C. Huett, University of West Georgia**

---

*Learning Matters: The Transformation of U.S. Higher Education* tells the story of pedagogical change in U.S. higher education. The authors explain how access, diversity, and new curricular needs have spurred innovation in scattered pockets of higher education since World War II. The primary shift has been from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning.

From the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the present, the United States has “transformed from a wilderness to a powerful nation” (Leeds-Hurwitz & Hoff, 2012, p. 8), with dramatic changes in the higher education student body and the subject matter they study. Yet pedagogies of teaching often stay the same, with traditional emphases on lectures, discussions, and exams remaining prevalent, especially among faculty who believe what was good enough for them when they were students ought to suffice for today’s students.

In the current U.S. higher education context, most students are “*not* male, *not* between the ages 18 and 22, *not* right out of high school, *not* from the upper middle class, *not* unmarried and soon may *not* be White” (Leeds-Hurwitz & Hoff, 2012, p. 9.). Nor, argue the authors, should today’s learners be viewed as deficient. Rather, their unique backgrounds and cultures bring new strengths to the postsecondary classroom. Failures to build on these strengths and to respond to the needs of today’s learners are partly to blame for low rates of retention and completion.

Pedagogical architectures must change to allow students to participate more fully in their own learning processes. *Learning Matters* presents a range of opportunities and examples for higher education stakeholders to effect impactful change. In their conclusion, the authors call for the comprehensive embrace of the effective pedagogies (e.g., student-centered, technology-rich, collaborative, interdisciplinary, open-ended, etc.) identified in the book.

In the diffuse governance structure of higher education, where each institution operates in a kind of “organized anarchy,” change processes can be difficult to manage. Throughout *Learning Matters*, Leeds-Hurwitz and Hoff note the inability of reformers to effectively communicate about promising pedagogical practices in the U.S. higher education context.

*Learning Matters* confirms the continued importance of instructional designers in effecting positive change in U.S. higher education. In order to bring about such change, the instructional design (ID) community must be prepared to tap into its rich, decades-grown theoretical and empirical knowledge bases. The ID community, which has sometimes struggled to clearly identify itself, its aims and its methods (Wagner, 2011), must find a way to communicate the value it has to offer.

Higher education is faced with enormous learning challenges, and in this environment, “almost every decision and step [taken] ... in one way or another involves and affects pedagogical choices” (Leeds-Hurwitz & Hoff, 2012, p. 99). Diverse learners require diverse, responsive learning designs. Higher education systems are looking at ways to use technology to improve efficiencies, cut costs for students, expand learning opportunities, and cater to new audiences. Who better to lead, in this unprecedented time of upheaval, than instructional designers?

Instructional designers, like many in education, often tend to focus on narrow, specific problems of practice (as in, *this module, these objectives, this prototype, that deadline*, etc.). This book reinforces the notion that in addition to knowledge and skill related to design processes and models, professionals in all design fields need to possess understanding of the larger world (Bichelmeyer, Boling, & Gibbons, 2006, p. 42). Such understanding forms the lens that motivates, inspires, and grounds our design work. Expanding awareness of the larger, dynamic educational context is of paramount importance to ID professionals.

In addition, improved understanding of the context in which we design allows us to not only design in the existing environment, but also to potentially effect change in it. Pedagogical change in higher education is “convoluted, tentative, experimental, and inherently uncertain” (Leeds-Hurwitz & Hoff, 2012, p. 10). Deeper understanding of the context we work in helps us to better communicate with our colleagues, departments, and institutions.

For decades, instructional design research has been exploring innovative, open-ended, student-directed learning arrangements. We are sitting on a goldmine of ID / pedagogical / technological resources that can directly shape the future of higher education, and higher ed seems truly ready to listen to what we have to offer. It's our job now to figure out how to lead and to better communicate our collective knowledge and wisdom. *Learning Matters* can be read as a call for instructional designers in higher education to play their part in determining the new pedagogical architecture.

*Learning Matters* contains 11 chapters and 4 appendices spanning 309 pages.

### References

- Bichelmeyer, B., Boling, E., & Gibbons, A. S. (2006). Instructional design and technology models: Their impact on research and teaching in instructional design and technology. In M. Orey, V. J. McClendon, & R. M. Branch (Eds.), *Educational media and technology yearbook* (pp. 33–49). Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.
- Leeds-Hurwitz, W., & Hoff, P.S. (2012). *Learning matters: The transformation of U.S. higher education*. Paris: Éditions des Archives Contemporaines.
- Wagner, E. (2011). Essay: In search of the secret handshakes of ID. *The Journal of Applied Instructional Design*, 1(1), 33-37.