**January 13, 2017**

**Bucking “Conventional Wisdom”**

I read an interesting piece this week that was subtitled, *“Teaching a Course All Wrong Yet Making It Work.”* <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2017/01/10/teaching-course-all-wrong-yet-making-it-work-essay#.WHUVWaG6Eno.gmail>   The author speaks to the way he presents a course on the American Presidency, and violates all the conventional rules regarding both the order of presentation of the content and the manner of presentation – he mostly lectures.  That goes against all the favored research about adults and experiential/participatory learning.  I was particularly struck by one paragraph.  The author talks about the ways he encourages students to speak up and give their own views, but says:

*That said, usually it’s me talking -- partly because I seem to be good at it, and partly because I know a lot about the American presidency and they don’t. That’s why I always liked well-crafted lectures when I was a student and still treasure my class notes. If I found in the course evaluations that what specialists in pedagogy say about this generation is true -- namely, that they can’t stand being asked to pay attention for more than a few minutes -- then I’d changed my style. That hasn’t happened yet, even in my 75-minute classes. Maybe our assumptions about them are wrong. After all, the same generation that scrolls through Facebook also binge-watches entire 13-episode seasons of House of Cards.*

I suppose that resonated with me for two reasons.  Like this author, as a student I LOVED classes that were lecture-based – where I could listen and learn from an expert – and I still have MY class notes from classes taken 40+ years ago. I have always believed that most folks teach to their own learning styles.  My classes (when I was teaching at OSU) and my presentations to DSS folks over the years have almost always been lecture-based.  My teaching evaluations were always terrific, and I must be doing something right because you folks keep asking me back.  The research says lecture-based is a poor way to present to these audiences, but my experience says something different.

This article echoed some of what I had read about a month ago in a piece called, *“Surprises in the Data.”*  <https://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/call-action-marketing-and-communications-higher-education/surprises-data#.WFA8y0NM6x4.gmail> .  Written by an expert in marketing higher education institutions, the article details findings from research into the way young people explore potential college opportunities online through the institution’s website.  There were lots of surprises from that research.  We all know (conventional wisdom) that teens love video, right?  But the study showed that when it comes to exploring a college website, they would prefer text and headlines, followed by photographs and other attributes, then (fifth on the list) videos.  Another surprise was that teens rarely click through from social media posts to websites, or vice versa.  Conventional wisdom tells us that we should always have links back and forth to make it easy for folks to access all our information.  Even more surprising was that slightly more of the kids said they preferred campus maps over virtual tours – even though conventional wisdom says that this tech savvy generation prefers to do even mundane tasks through technology.

It seems that “conventional wisdom” doesn’t always provide an accurate view of reality.  In the first case, conventional wisdom tells us to expect something will happen that, in fact, doesn’t always happen that way.  In the second example, conventional wisdom would lead one to act in one way when another course of action might be better for some.  I got to wondering whether there is “conventional wisdom” about disability services in higher education that would suffer the same fate(s), and I came up with two examples (I’m sure there are more!).

These days, conventional wisdom suggests that students in higher education are digital natives and so tied to their technology that it is not only appropriate to migrate our activities to technology-based alternatives, but that students demand it.  But do they really?  CERTAINLY there are some who want/need/will respond best to technology-based procedures.  But the latest statistics indicate that the average age of a community college student is 29 (which means half the CC students are older than that!).  I guarantee you that not all of those folks have technology embedded in their DNA, and not all are comfortable doing everything online.  What if they really would be more comfortable picking up the telephone, or talking to the administrative assistant, to schedule a room for adaptive testing?  Then, too, as someone once quipped at an AHEAD meeting, “Students with disabilities are not always masters at vicarious learning.”  The fact that there are students with disabilities in the population of traditionally- aged students in college doesn’t automatically assure that they are as tech savvy as their peers (they MAY be, but then, again…). That doesn’t mean we SHOULDN’T move things to technology-based solutions.  It just means that there shouldn’t be ONLY technology-based ways of getting things done.

Conventional wisdom among the social justice advocates suggests that students with disabilities should not be hampered in their integration to campus life by being too closely tied to the DSS office.  These folks work very hard to make sure that students with disabilities are free of “interference” from them as much as possible.  Sometimes, though, I wonder if that is too bad.  In years past, regular visits to the DSS office weren’t always seen as a reason for indignation by students with disabilities.  In fact, for many, “sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name, and they’re always glad you came.” *(Quick… name the TV show!)*  For years, students with disabilities found a safe haven in the DSS office.  The fact that we wish they didn’t *need* a safe haven doesn’t mean that SOME might not still want it!

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So whom will you believe?  The “conventional wisdom” wasn’t plucked at random, from the cosmos. It is based on observations and, in some cases, research over time.  But it doesn’t hold in every case.  Maybe THAT is the lesson to be learned.

The Greenpeace movement has a slogan that seems appropriate here (although, perhaps not in the way they intend it) -- *think globally, act locally*.  Give heed to conventional wisdom, but test it out in your individual circumstances.

Janie

*Never accept ultimatums, conventional wisdom, or absolutes.*

*All generalizations are false, including this one!*

**(And, special for today…)**

*It may be Friday the thirteenth, but it is STILL Friday, and a reason to dance.  Thirteen is just a number.*

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