To break a two-decade deadlock on revising its core curriculum, Boston College sought help from an unlikely source for academic inspiration: the minds that brought the world the Swiffer.

The popular mop/broom was created by a Boston-based company called Continuum, a specialist in design thinking, a method that applies interdisciplinary approaches to solving problems. Design thinking often seeks not just to devise new gadgets or products but also to reshape the processes that people use in their work.

In recent years, design thinking has become hot in higher education. It is the subject of courses at Stanford and Wake Forest Universities and the University of Kentucky, among other places, and is used to streamline university operations and improve marketing materials and websites.

Harnessing design thinking to change a curriculum, however, is new territory and one fraught with challenges. Founded during the Civil War and carrying on a centuries-old Jesuit tradition, Boston College was not the obvious choice to make such an unconventional move.

"My initial reaction was, 'I need to be convinced here,'" says David Quigley, the provost. But he also had seen how inertia took hold during previous attempts to revise the core, which hadn’t changed since 1991. Those conversations played out "according to an almost preordained script," he says, in which fiefdoms were preserved and turf was protected.

By 2012 the college had reached a crossroads. After spending
months talking with colleagues across the campus, Mary T. Crane, director of the college’s Institute for the Liberal Arts, told a meeting of deans what she had heard: Many professors wanted the core revised; nobody wanted to be the one to do it. After the meeting, she received a note from Andrew C. Boynton, dean of the Carroll School of Management. What did she think of hiring a consultant in design thinking to help?

Like many faculty members, Ms. Crane was skeptical of anything having to do with consultants. She wasn’t sure how an outside group could help professors, who are the experts on curriculum.

But she’d heard stories about how difficult curriculum revisions could be, and she knew how colleges had used design-thinking processes in other areas, like facilities and marketing. What’s more, at the time, a leadership crisis was roiling the University of Virginia, and Ms. Crane kept hearing how colleges were too hidebound and needed to be more entrepreneurial. The choice was often framed as two extremes: cling to tradition or hurtle toward the unknown.

"Design-thinking consulting," she says, "seemed like a third way."

**Empathetic Outsiders**

It’s a way that has seldom, if ever, led design thinkers to the heart of a university.

"This was probably the closest we’d ever gotten to the crown jewels of any institution," says Anthony T. Pannozzo, Continuum’s senior vice president for experience and service design.

Even after Continuum landed the job, its consultants knew they needed to sell the faculty on their role. Some professors objected to what they assumed was a costly and unnecessary expense. (Boston College won’t say how much it paid the company, beyond saying it was "a sizable investment"; Continuum says it charged far less than high-end management-consulting firms do.)

Other faculty members saw the consultancy’s presence as another
example of the corporatization of academe. One professor was blunt, seizing on the Swiffer. "You can design a mop," the professor told the consultants at one meeting, according to several attendees. "You can’t design me."

Continuum’s staff members struck a deferential tone, casting themselves as interested, empathetic outsiders, says Mr. Pannozzo, who led the project team. Aside from designers, its members included fine artists, M.B.A.’s, engineers, and history graduates. They saw their job as supporting the professors, who would do the actual work of making recommendations. "We made it clear up front that we’re not experts in education," he says. "They are."

To get the process moving, Continuum relied on a simple but deceptively effective tool: conversations. The consultants didn’t start by asking obvious things, like what the professors wanted to change about the curriculum. Instead, says Mr. Pannozzo, they tried to get to know their subjects as people. Where did they live? What were their families like? What would a perfect Saturday be for them? Why? "It shifts their mind from thinking about the curriculum to thinking about what they care about," he says. "You have to understand people as people first."

The questions, Mr. Pannozzo says, encourage interviewees to articulate the kinds of experiences they truly value. Design-thinking consultants often explain that people are bound to experience *something* as a result of interactions with the consultants’ clients, whether it’s because of a product, a call to customer service, or a college class. The key is to identify the experience those clients want people to have, and then figure out how to make it happen.
Design-thinking consultants led town-hall meetings and workshops, like this one, at Boston College.

From there, the consultants got closer to the heart of the matter. They asked students what brought them to Boston College and faculty what courses they were proudest to teach.

Along the way, the consultants gave updates at town-hall meetings, where a member of Continuum’s staff took notes on the feedback the company was receiving, posting it online for all to see in real time. The process enabled the professors to watch the process unfold, articulate what they wanted students to get from their experience, and start building a curriculum to achieve those ends.

Continuum helped break the logjam, even if the result is not a radical departure. The faculty chose to retain the framework of Boston College’s 42-credit core; courses that already fulfill requirements will continue to be offered.

Faculty members devised two new sets of courses for the core that will begin in September. The subjects and syllabi are being developed by professors working together, not with Continuum.
Some will be team-taught, six-credit courses with labs for about 80 students, examining topics like the global implications of climate change, the social context of violence, and genocide. Others will be paired interdisciplinary seminars on a common topic, seen from different points of view: engagement, empathy, and ethics, studied from theological and musical perspectives; the natural and human-made worlds, seen from philosophical and literary viewpoints; the body and illness, taught by a nursing professor and an English professor.

Kathy Dunn, an associate professor of biology, and Scott T. Cummings, an associate professor of theater, will teach a pair of connected seminars on infectious diseases. The biology course will cover epidemics. The theater seminar will explore illness as metaphor.

Ms. Dunn had taught science courses for nonmajors and felt that they didn’t quite hit the right level of rigor or impart enough content. For her, the new course is an opportunity to do it better, while also pushing her out of her comfort zone. She and Mr. Cummings are still working through the details of their courses, but they say the effort to refresh the core brought them together to try something different.

**Sparking Conversations**

In all, faculty members acknowledge that team-taught, thematic, and interdisciplinary courses aren’t a new innovation. The important thing for many professors, though, was not the final product. It was the process that arose. Professors from different departments were able to talk about the curriculum, exchange ideas about teaching, and come up with new courses.

"It is an experiment and it might fail, but it’s worth trying because the very process of trying is putting people into conversation," says Julian E. Bourg, an associate professor of history, who was initially skeptical. "That’s very, very healthy."

How sustained those conversations will be is another matter. Boston College has no faculty senate or regular mechanism for
shared governance. Mr. Bourg wonders how the faculty will be able to evaluate the new courses, see how well they work, and revise them. For now, a core-renewal committee will manage that job.

Outside of Boston College, it’s unclear whether design thinking will influence curriculum changes elsewhere. IDEO, an international design-thinking firm, has worked with colleges to revamp career-services centers and offer internships, but the prospect of becoming entangled with a process that is as slow-moving, decentralized, and bound by precedent as curricular revision gives reason for pause, says Sandy Speicher, managing director of the firm’s education studio.

Other design-thinking consultants, however, are bullish on the opportunities, especially as colleges seek to differentiate themselves in a competitive market.

For now, companies and universities are likely to be watching whether the design-thinking process at Boston College will lead to long-term change after so many years.

Mr. Boynton, the business-school dean who suggested using a design-thinking company, is aware of all the challenges to sustaining change.

As a scholar of innovation, he knows that an organization’s ability to innovate ultimately doesn’t depend on brain power.

"It’s not the stock of knowledge," he says. "It’s the flow of ideas."

Correction (4/8/2015, 4:29 p.m.): This article originally said the company IDEO was in San Francisco. While it has an office there, it also has offices around the world. The article has been updated to reflect that.

Dan Berrett writes about teaching, learning, the curriculum, and educational quality. Follow him on Twitter @danberrett, or write to him at dan.berrett@chronicle.com.
mike3077 · 5 months ago

It's always better to hire someone to help you develop the response to your challenges than to find someone to tell you what to do. So this is a heartening story. There are groups doing design work with colleges and universities that understand the sector. One is Education Design Lab in Washington DC...and they are a nonprofit.

wclibrary · 5 months ago

Swiffer.

Faculty gets the institution it deserves.

TheJonesest · 5 months ago

A great read on design thinking and education was recently featured in Jacobin Magazine. Highly recommended. https://www.jacobinmag.com/201...

Alice Kolakowska · 5 months ago

Ridiculous. Ludicrous. Unheard. The Deadwood College of Boston, where ideas remain fast asleep in calcified brains. Oh God, why did you have to create the world in just seven days? Our academic world would have been a better place if you have stayed on the job one more day...

Socratease2 · Alice Kolakowska · 5 months ago

"Deadwood College of Boston?" Did something bad happen to you there? Maybe you stayed in Boston too long and forgot how to pronounce your "R's" correctly? That would be traumatic.

Alice Kolakowska · Socratease2 · 5 months ago

Don't you sense the end of the world as we know it coming on hearing the news that academic intellectuals call on a broom factory to carry their academic mission? Shame.

Socratease2 · Alice Kolakowska · 5 months ago

Well, in fact, I do have that sense but the current trend towards "efficient and accountable education" is kind of low on my list of psychological doom triggers. I understand your concern, though it might be a little extreme to call the consulting firm's contribution simply receiving advice from a "broom company." But the association is not a great one, I give you that. From what I recall, doesn't seem like much changed based on their analysis and report. Seems like we are in a period of "innovation fever" and media (that's you CHE) are sure to report on each new over-hyped solution to whatever ails higher education. Innovation and change based on goal of improving student success and learning outcomes is great, but not if change is pursued merely because you
are afraid of being left behind in the new knowledge economy. That is the kind of thinking - mostly driven by a frothy combination of fear and greed - that drives Pepsi to spend billions of dollars every year on advertising and hype just so it won't lose ground to Coke. And consumers get to pay inflated prices to subsidize the consumer hype or college education as case may be.

Ludvik Herrera  
It is good to hear people questioning systems or solutions. The problem is not that these 'solutions' or 'new boss in town' are exactly that, these are not solutions, but simply methodologies that empower or serve as a tool when used properly. Technology is not a solution. Tablets and mobile devices are not solutions. Design Thinking (DT), Project Based Learning (PBL), Design Focused Learning (DFL), Engineering Design Process (EDP), STEM and STEAM, Common CORE are not the solution, but one of many systems, methodologies or processes that, when applied and implemented by people who understand the facilitation of such, empower and create engaging experiences for students to instill curiosity and bring critical and divergent thinking together to their skillset. If you are a teacher, professor and/or instructor that delivers engaging classes, you are observing one of these methods already. If you’re not, design thinking can help you obtain the goal you seek and to guide your cynicism to embrace your failures and improve your way of teaching and engaging students.

sandia  
Let’s see - the consultants "made it clear up front that we’re not experts in education..." and said the professors would do the actual work. What exactly is the consultants’ contributions?

Once upon a time, universities had extension services where expert faculty were hired out as consultants to communities and business. When did we switch from paying experts to share knowledge to paying novices to urge experts to do more work? Honestly, this seems like another layer of costs with no real value added.

Ludvik Herrera  
They are consulting to bring solutions through the process design thinking which is the process creative and design agencies bring top brand development, new products such as... whatever you use today, and to build services from Amazon online and delivery services to Starbucks or having a comment system in this post so we can share ideas. These creative agencies, just like Steve Jobs, Richard Branson, and others, are not experts in the field of education and did not know or assumed what the solution was, but instead observed a methodology that empowers you to build a robust solution in any field with the help of many other individuals to create a solution you probably never thought before.

digithead99163  
Fine, you gave examples of success stories, but how many solutions have they come up with that didn’t pan out? How many companies failed using this technique? How many
products did not catch on? How does this technique compare against other creative methods?

We can’t adequately judge performance if all we’re shown are success stories. Moreover, testimonials and anecdotes are the worst kinds of evidence which is what is being trotted out here.

Until I get reliable and replicable evidence, I’ll remain skeptical.

Ludvik Herrera • digitbead9163 • 5 months ago

There is not only d.school, but the design firm behind it named IDEO. Also, the Hasso-Plattner Institute. Beyond that, almost all design schools in the top 100 world wide universities, and the top 25 universities in the US observe this proven methodology. Ask for any examples at any of these. We embrace failure, and that’s how we learn. I mentioned several other creative methods, but most of other creative methods used by designers, artists and engineers follow in similar manner these steps and approach of design thinking. If you use any of the educational methods such as EDP, PBL, DFL, etc. the way they’re intended and not just as check marks in a process, you’ll find the solutions you’re seeking. Building critical and divergent thinking in students, where deductive, inductive and abductive reasoning are outcomes of this type of education.

On another note regarding assessment of this process, and opening the door for reciprocal questioning of evaluation. How can education be judge if not through the testimonials and anecdotes. A qualitative and quantitative evaluation or assessment is applied through many schools in a weekly basis, yet in a broad sense, students forget or discard their knowledge shortly after tests have been applied.

thinkhmm • sandia • 5 months ago

From the article, it sounds like the consultants were able to get the faculty talking to each other about the topics that really matter, which broke a 20-year deadlock. The faculty moved from defending their respective castles to cooperating. I’d call that a worthwhile investment.

Jane Robbins • 5 months ago

The picture looks like a day in my capstone course in Innovation, soon going away due to budget issues. Design thinking is really just another term for critical and creative thinking, and the judgment, empathy, multiple perspective taking/cross-functional, research, integration and iteration, experimentation and critique, use of evidence, and other elements underlying a rigorous but flexible approach to unstructured problem solving. It’s process-oriented and applies to any discipline, field, or system, which then becomes a vehicle for teaching that transferable process in that substantive/functional context.

helenec • 5 months ago

Back in the day (70s and 80s) design thinking was embedded into our coursework in Industrial and Systems Engineering at Georgia Tech. How silly of me to think that industrial engineers, as well as other intelligent systems thinkers, would have to become "design thinkers" in order to be taken seriously in higher education.
Design thinking is fundamentally different in content that what universities call 'systems thinking.' That's not to say that there are not exceptions, but fundamentally design thinking depends on empathetic interaction, whereas the standard definition of systems thinking is more understanding and predicting consequences. True systems thinking does incorporate empathetic connection, but that simply is beyond the purview of most academics. Raised to be non-empathetic, it's like talking to people who live at sea level on the Equator about snow. Blank looks all around.

I was a businessman most of my career. In my experience, whenever consultants were brought in, they usually came to conclusions that supported what management intended to do anyway but were too cowardly to do by themselves. The consultants, usually at a very high price, gave a stamp of approval to what the suits wanted to do and provided an umbrella to shield management form the flack the changes caused. Sometimes, the change was indeed necessary, but too often it was just another way for senior management to grease their BFF's. I hope that was not the case here.

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This comment was deleted.

Nice...I'll have to remember that one.

True, but sometimes the powers-that-be will listen to the conclusion of a third party when they seem to have gone deaf to their staff. A consultant can be the missing cog that helps different groups in the same institution re-engage.

This is gimmicky, but not new. (Okay, getting a mop company to weigh in on education--that might be new.) For those of us who actually want to see this sort of thing under the purview of the faculty and instructors who will have to live with the changes, there are academic societies whose members ARE experts in education and who have been thinking about education design for years. These societies belong to a growing constellation of conferences, journals, books, etc. that are doing what they call "the scholarship of teaching and learning" or "SoTL". For example:

http://www.issotl.com/issotl15...
http://www.stlhe.ca/

My question: why outsource to mop-makers when we've already got professors--practitioners of the classroom--in the university sector who are working on this? Seems like the way to get faculty buy-in is to inspire involvement in SoTL and incentivize research and publications on teaching with annual awards and P&T standards. Let Swiffer clean up after the awards reception.

Is as much of a gimmick than PhD. individuals who like to call...
themselves "doctors" or flaunt their diplomas but have not built companies or organizations, created products or services. A certification or nomenclature by Carnegie is as much of a gimmick, just a pretty badge. Whether the organization that provided the Design Thinking consultation has any knowledge or understanding of such process, it does not merit your offensive commentary of letting the 'Swifter clean up after the awards reception,' you then open the door to the saying 'those who can't, teach.' My intent is to welcome discussion and commentary, but I would expect decorum and discerning respect from a person with a bachelor's degree and certainly from someone with a doctorate degree.

Let me begin with an apology and my kind regards: I see that you've worked with IDEO in some capacity in the past, and IDEO's work is excellent.

My beef is not so much with design thinking as such--we employ plenty of it in the SoTL conversation--my issue is with the idea that what's happening at Stanford is somehow new or chic, and also with the portrayal of it as something that wasn't previously happening. That's just not true. In fact, SoTL thinking is gaining more recognition, but it's taken--as you note--some time to make people aware of it and to help already thinly-spread academics find the time to prioritize critical reflection on their course designs and the ways they implement them. Some meeting between Swiffer and Stanford isn't really newsworthy if what makes it interesting is that it's an instance of applying design thinking to the way courses work; that's old news.

Another thing I'm pointing out is WHO is leading the initiative. When a big-money consultant firm like the folks who helped... see more
scenarios, having conversations, conducting interviews, camera studies, all of this takes time and true immersion. For what you have said, you've been unfortunate to not find the right or qualified team to help you with instructional design, nor someone that has immersed themselves into your challenges. Your skepticism, ironically reflects mine along with others, where we have encountered people who hold Ph.D's with the lack for instilling curiosity to create the learning spark that students need. Thus we come face-to-face, both perhaps a bit cynical, where you question the methodologies that I apply as unimportant and lacking evidence, and me on the other side with evidence of unsatisfied students, and employers who claim employment candidates do not have the knowledge they require. I encourage you to allow yourself a few hours of research, and read Design Thinking for Educators at http://www.designthinkingforeducators[dot]com, you might find the evidence you seek in this publication.

This reads like another useless attempt by higher education to ape the Tech Sector---what do you say when a campus of supposed highly educated Ph.Ds seem unable or unwilling to use their education and scholarship to THINK AND ACT? And the results of this New Design thinking seems very poor indeed. There is, however, a larger failure here that needs addressing---which is the ways in which the present generation of tenured professors and scholars and college leaders have made a mess of higher education by their lack of disciplined thinking and by their own lack of high academic standards---Yes, the curriculum and so much of higher education needs changing---it has needed changing for a long time and those who have been charged with making those changes have failed time and time again. Maybe what needs changing is how higher education is structured and that those who have led it in the past---tenured faculty and college administrators need to be flushed out because clearly they are not up to the job. Those who are tenured and those who are the leaders of higher education have yet to take any responsibility for their FAILURE. AND ALL THE REST ABOUT DESIGN THINKING IS JUST A DISTRACTION.

IS THERE ANYONE LEFT IN HIGHER EDUCATION WHO IS ABLE TO ENGAGE IN AN HONEST INTELLECTUAL CRITIQUE----SO FAR THE ANSWER SEEMS TO BE NO.

I agree that the education system has accumulated enough signs of bloating dysfunction, that is prime for disruption. Most times in these situations you have to look at the problem from the outside to gain deep knowledge of what is the real challenge. In this case most scholars, faculty, staff and students, are in the inside and have not a clear lens of what can be done.

The most positive idea mentioned by the article is team teaching. However, most deans will not supply the extra budget, unless the course is large. In small seminars, where this might prove most scintillating, it turns out least possible to happen. My fifth grade teachers team-taught the entire fifth grade in a room divided only by retractable walls. That was in 1968, so I don't think it's 2023 anymore.
either Swiffer nor BC came up with the idea. The greatest insight offered by Berrett consists in saying what we all know already: faculty are in fact entrenched in making sure each of their courses survives intact in any curricular "innovation." We professors tend to be horrible at thinking selflessly in groups; thus, we languish as a breed, despite individual brilliance in many classrooms. In my experience in curricular design (in the humanities, not science), I've found that a minimum of binding core courses, balanced by a larger number of fixed-title, variable content courses (splitting the difference between the expertise/interest of the instructor with agreed-upon concepts and other desiderata), has worked the best. Menus are the worst—simply a way of pretending to give students choices while actually just making sure everybody's pet course stays on the list. They are an "enrollment protection mechanism" (heretofore known as an EPM, so that I can patent it for my next...