



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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ON THE VALUE OF REINVENTING THE WHEEL

When I first joined the League for Innovation in 1975, one of my first tasks was to become acquainted with the member colleges. During that first year, I visited 35 campuses, spending one or two days on each, meeting staff members, touring facilities, and holding sessions with those interested in the League. After my visit to four or five campuses, I began assuming a role as a carrier and catalyst for innovative ideas. I realized that I was stocking up on the cutting edge notions from each of the campuses I visited, and I thought I could be of great service to other campuses by sharing those ideas and helping to develop networks among staff members who were dealing with similar topics and issues.

During my visits to the next five or ten colleges, I attempted to share ideas I had discovered on other campuses and encourage communication among interested parties. When reviewing a new idea on one campus, I was often quick to respond, "You will be pleased to know that staff members at x-community college are also developing a similar program, and they are trying some approaches in which I know you will be interested." The response to my enthusiasm for connecting ideas was more often than not met with passivity and, in some few cases, scorn. When I examined what was happening, I came to realize that the great educational truism, "We do not believe in reinventing the wheel," was not universally ascribed to by my colleagues.

In higher education generally and in community colleges particularly, great allegiance is paid to the concept of not reinventing the wheel. It is one of the more basic truisms associated with the culture of education. I have never heard anyone in our field openly disagree with the basic concept. And yet in my experience, I find many people disagreeing with the basic concept in their actual behavior. There is probably something innately human about wanting to make one's own wheel. "This is my wheel; it is unlike any other wheel in the universe; I am proud of my wheel."

The dynamics of this sentiment are powerful indeed and probably underscore the oft-repeated behavior of reinventing the wheel on our campuses. There apparently are values associated with the process of reinventing the wheel, some of which are expressed as follows:

1. *I take ownership of the wheels I reinvent.* Adapting someone else's wheel to my situation may cost less in time, energy, and funds, and the final product may be better designed; but it is still someone else's wheel. The wheel I have shaped for my college, for my classroom, is my wheel; and I own it. It reflects my own idiosyncrasies, my own needs, my own style. It also reflects my special understanding of the way my college works and of what my own students need. It is a tailor-made wheel for the special circumstances in which I live and work. And because I care enough to fashion this wheel for my environment, there is a chance that it is a better wheel than any I can adapt. In any case, it is my wheel and therefore an extension of me, a part of me that I give to my college, to my students. The kind of commitment I have to my own wheel probably adds a great deal to making me a better staff member, making me a better teacher.

2. *The process of reinventing the wheel is a process that makes me feel creative and good about myself.* I know that other wheels exist. I know there are pages of software for the courses I teach and the programs I manage. I know that other community college practitioners have designed documents, approaches, and methodologies that would probably work fairly well for my campus or for my students.

But I do not want to see myself simply as an adaptor of other people's materials. I am a creative and innovative teacher and administrator, and I want to mess around with my own stuff. I want to challenge my own intelligence; I want to explore my own creativity; I want to design innovations that come out of me. My ideas are just as good as anyone else's; and if I don't have a chance to exercise them, I will be reduced to a copycat.

Teaching and administering are creative processes, and that is why I am attracted to the profession. This is



a profession that encourages me to be creative and even allows me opportunities to be so. If that takes the form of reinventing the wheel, then that is the way I am creative.

3. *When I reinvent wheels, I learn from my own mistakes.* When I try to adapt the wheels of others to my college or to my classroom, it is easy to blame them for the difficulties I experience. It is easy to criticize the way they have designed the wheel, the language they have used, and the effectiveness with which it gets the job done.

When I reinvent my own wheel, I have to take responsibility for it, and it gives me a chance to correct my own mistakes. If the wheel is not quite right, then I take responsibility for whittling it down or aligning it differently. Since it is a product of my creativity, and since I take full ownership of it, it is well known to me and not so threatening. And since it is not threatening, I am freer to learn the mistakes I have made in designing and developing it.

4. *I take great pride in my reinvented wheel.* In fact, I am not sure there ever was a wheel like the one I have made. I do not even think in the language of "reinvention." For me, my wheel is a first invention; I am proud that I have made it.

As I said, I know that others have invented wheels similar to mine; but mine is the only one I have ever invented, and it is the only one of its kind for me. I need to take pride in my work, and I need to help students and my colleagues take pride in the work they do. Making my "original" wheel gives me great pride and encourages me to develop that pride in others.

And so, I have come to realize that there is value in reinventing the wheel. There is something in human nature that makes the process of reinventing the wheel a very personal and important one. One could do worse than to be a reinventor of wheels.

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