

Ideas influencing modern trends in California Community Colleges

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I have been teaching Career and Technical Education (CTE) subjects through the Riverside Community College District (formerly named Riverside City College District) since 1972. I am currently the Lead Faculty for Electronics, Electrician Trades, Supply Chain Automation, Green Technology, Industrial Automation, and Photonics at Norco College (NC). I possess some experiential knowledge of the history of education from my years of teaching, plus some additional insights as a student of education. In this paper, I will expand on some of the topics found in our textbook, *Foundation of Education* by Ornstein, et al (2017).

Mini-certificates were a hot issue in 2010, and our college wanted as many as possible. In 2016, I was told to get rid of them, in favor of full, state-approved certificates. Now, in 2018, I have been told that our administration wants mini-certificates again. Budgets also seem to ebb and flow in much the same way as other school policies. For my department, budgets fluctuate rather wildly between feast and famine, and more often toward the latter than the former. “Today’s educators must deal with budget fluctuations, equity and adequacy in school financing, accountability, and various plans to restructure the system on financial support” (p. 223). State funding also means greater State control of the California Community Colleges (CCCs), which did not help our access to funding, either as a department, or as a college.

We seem to have come full-circle with respect to feeling our country is falling behind in science, math and other subjects.

“The National Defense Education Act of 1958, targeted science, mathematics, modern languages, and guidance (often considered a way to steer youth into the three former fields and into college). The scientific community, university scholars, and curriculum specialists were called upon to reconstruct subject-matter content, especially on the high school level, while government and philanthropic foundations provided the funds” (p. 385).

The new push for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) has added technology and engineering to that earlier complement of vitally needed capabilities that are lacking today. The State of California, as well as federal pressures are now bolstering STEM programs to fill current and future needs

of industry, government, and the military. NC has received multiple millions of dollars in grants to support STEM programs. Additionally, CTE programs in CCCs have receive \$250M in Strong Workforce Development (SWD) grant funds to increase school-to-work programs. NC has an intense program where students can earn an Accelerated Certificate to Employment (ACE) opportunity that earns students a two-year certificate in just seven months. Our success has become a model for all CCCs in California, as well as the nation.

Another thing I have noticed is that every year new acronyms are generated to go along with some “new” system, touted as the latest and greatest way of improving educational effectiveness. It is as though someone who just successfully completed their doctoral dissertation tries to implement it in education, in a top-down approach to school management and instruction. Most of those efforts seem to dissipate after a year or two, but some have remained with us—such as the requirement for regular assessment of Student Learning Objectives. “Both teacher and learner can evaluate the amount or degree of learning because the objective establishes the task the students will perform to demonstrate their learning” (p. 382).

In the decades since World War II, industry started the Total Quality Management (TQM) movement, Quality Assurance (QA), and eventually the ISO-9000 push to carefully define procedures and measure the value and efficiency of their practices. This was meant as a move toward continuous improvement and increased productivity. Later, higher-education accrediting organizations caught wind of it, and decided to hold educators accountable, based on educator-generated Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) and Program Learning Objectives (PLOs). Up to that point, SLOs and PLOs were just high and lofty sounding phrases, meant to fill space on the course outline of record. However now, we are required to measure and report on 100% of the SLOs, in every course, each semester, as well as on the PLOs on a regular basis, to maintain our college accreditation in good standing. “Objectives are the tools that make goals and standards operational in classroom instruction” (p. 381). While I appreciate the value of evidence-based assessment data, this additional work has led many instructors to game-the-system

rather than to comply with it--to skew standards, to appear more effective than they really are. Standards for college accreditation seem to be getting tighter all the time. This push for greater accountability has taken much of the joy out of teaching by mandating more assessments and reporting. I cannot help but think that this may have taken some of the joy out of learning for our students as well.

When I performed my last annual program review at NC, I was astonished to notice that the sole metric that determined how much of the budget pie my department would receive was how often, and how extensively, my department had performed SLO and PLO assessment, reporting, and appropriately related curriculum improvements. Having worked part-time as an adjunct instructor at San Bernardino Valley College (SBVC), I was also surprised at how easy such assessments were there, as compared to NC. SBVC apparently took a minimalist view of compliance with accreditation standards, whereas NC really became deeply invested in an involved process of assessment in-reporting, data-basing, aggregation/disaggregation by category, and filtering of that data for out-reporting relative to each department, discipline, program and course. “Although states are responsible for education, traditionally, much of this responsibility has fallen to local school districts” (p. 223); “... and the states’ portion of education funding has increased steadily; ...” (p. 226). As time goes on, evidence-based research results are becoming increasingly important with respect to funding.

At NC, we have had plenty of money flowing in, from over \$20M to our college over the last decade, from both Federal and State grants. Yet, much of this has been categorically funded, and can only be used for certain items. It is difficult to plan annually, without a clear idea of what each next year will allow in terms of budget monies, and categories of allowed spending, especially after each grant has run its course. It is like trying to sew together a patchwork quilt, using remnants that randomly become available. And, we know that grant funds eventually end. For this reason, NC has named me as the Principal Investigator on a new National Science Foundation grant for Photonics Education, with an eye toward becoming a National Photonics Center. Through this National Center, we could provide technology transfers to local Inland Empire companies, for the development of commercial products

based on government patents. These technology transfers would allow NC to capture recurring royalties, and help us to stabilize our budget, amid the wide State funding variations that historically have plagued us in California.

“Coupled with rising costs and enrollments, the loss of state revenue placed many local school districts in a bleak fiscal situation” (p. 236). Over the years, I witnessed costs of enrollment raised from \$9 to \$48 per unit. In 2017, these costs rolled back to \$13 per unit. I have seen people with 4-year degrees, or higher, virtually barred from attending CCCs, unless they paid outrageously high out-of-state student fees; and, a few years later, those people could apply at the lower fee rate again. Graduates from CCCs used to transfer directly to our University of California (UC) or California State University (CSU) systems. Now, those graduates are given the incentives to take more coursework at the CCC to save time and money, compared to the more expensive 4-year universities, where additional courses and units would otherwise be required. I have also seen our UC and CSU systems blocking enrollments for multiple terms as those universities became more impacted by excessive enrollments in popular majors. That is why I could not go back to get my M.S. in Engineering.

I witnessed vocational education renamed to occupational education, and then to CTE. With each renaming, we were told that the old name had gone bad, and that we needed to rebrand ourselves. CTE has attempted to shed the stigma of low-class students and programs by rebranding itself under more respectable descriptions over the past several decades. Two factors have coalesced to make CTE more respectable now: (1) So many Baby-Boomers (BBs) have been retiring, that those vocational jobs created a huge vacuum for the knowledge and skills that the retiring BBs took out of the workforce; and, (2) the jobs of today are generally not as physically demanding and dirty as in previous generations. “CTE has been touted as a way to address this need for skilled workers” (pp. 422-423). Now, those workers may dress up and carry laptops to do their work, rather than wearing coveralls, carrying grease guns and heavy tools that used to require tremendous upper body strength. That means that women can now thrive in many of those vocational careers that once required men with great strength and stamina to perform.

Many of the jobs of today are going unfilled because employers cannot find enough skilled workers to perform those jobs. That is driving up wages. And, many of those trades require high level knowledge of electro-mechanical systems used in computerized automation systems and robotics. As a result, these technical occupations have lost their vocational stigma. “CTE is no longer characterized by low-level courses that were associated with its predecessor, vocational education” (p. 423). And, while it may be difficult to find instant employment with a degree such as history or philosophy, our CTE graduates are being snapped up right away. We have 100% employment of our graduates, over the past three years, since the ACE program started. Because of their high skill-levels, many of them have become managers or supervisors inside of just a year or two. Having quickly received several promotions to fill the positions above them, they bring newly trained graduates to fill those resulting vacancies that they left behind.

Because of: (1) the success of Amazon.com, free shipping, and almost instant gratification to consumers; and, (2) because labor costs in America are becoming more favorable as compared to other formerly depressed third world countries, reshoring of many American industries and increased hiring is occurring. “California has significantly increased funding for promoting CTE programs that encourage partnerships among school districts, colleges, and businesses to increase the number of students receiving industry credentials and certificates” (p. 424). Also, due to President Trump’s decreased corporate taxation, more of those off-shore monies are coming back to the American continent, because taxation is less onerous. In keeping up with the industrial on-shoring trend, the Kiplinger Report, and many other sources are predicting higher levels of automation to further reduce labor costs, increase reliability and productivity, to make American companies even more competitive in the World-Wide marketplace. This requires workers who can deal with high technology automation, mechatronics, and robotics. To feed this chain of higher technological demands on workers, CCCs are ramping up programs, facilities, and systems to meet these needs. “CTE is an education strategy that provides young people with academic, technical, and employability skills, as well as knowledge to pursue postsecondary training, higher

education, or enter a career field prepared for ongoing learning” (p. 423). “Starving Students” is not just the name of a moving company, it also describes most of our CCC students, as they try their best to stay in school toward certifications or degrees, amid all the hassles of low-income life. Part of the SWD grant funds are used in support of students—career counselling, mental health services, tutoring, supplemental instruction, fee-waivers, bus passes, loaner books, and many more. While many of these things are available to low income students, now the threshold for receiving them has been reduced, to allow more to benefit.

Unlike many European and Asian countries, where there may only be one opportunity to go on to higher education, in America, there are multiple pathways to re-enter education. High School Graduate Equivalency Degrees (GEDs) are obtainable by high school drop-outs. Those who fail at a CCC, UC or CSU institution can always try again, and hopefully succeed, at that school, or perhaps another one.

Trade school-like scaffold are available in CTE programs at the CCC. High schools approach CCCs to set up pathways to college through articulation agreements that incentivize taking high school courses that feed into college programs while giving credit for courses taken in high school. On the other end, courses taken in CCC can matriculate to the UC or CSU systems. We even have interdisciplinary coursework where students can learn technologies from many complementary disciplines by entering more general CTE programs. “Community colleges tend to be highly responsive in providing training for technological change, especially those related to the communications and electronic data revolutions, as well as the general educational needs of the people in their localities” (p. 144).

A lot of students in colleges and universities are funded by parents who push their sons and daughters into programs those children would not have otherwise chosen for themselves. This is often disastrous in its effects on the students. And, there are some students who have no idea what they want to do when they grow up. So, they are constantly changing majors to get a taste of everything that is available in higher education. However, the CCC has recently changed the rules about how many times students can repeat a course, before they are barred from taking it again—three times. A new push at NC

is the “Completion Initiative”, the intention of which is to get students through our CCC in the most efficient way possible, while encouraging students to complete what they started, and move forward.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a fantastic benefit to those who need the playing field leveled for them. Having had students with a variety of disabilities in my classes, I understand the need to assist them whenever possible. Also, those disabled students are mainstreamed now into regular courses to avoid “labelling” them as disabled, and different. The Education for ALL Handicapped Children Act was passed in 1975. It is “mandated that children with handicaps must have access to a full public education in the least restrictive educational environment” (p. 367). Such unfunded Federal mandates, while wonderfully intended, have severely restricted what I can do in my courses, and have made my teaching-life more difficult, due to a lack of budget for me to accommodate the new list of needs. The laws are so strictly interpreted at my college that I am prevented from showing any uncaptioned videos to my students, even when nobody in the class is identified as being disabled and needing reasonable accommodation. I have been told that this is because someone may be hearing impaired, and has not self-identified him/herself to our Disabled Students, Programs, and Services (DSPS) Office. “Educators face many difficulties in identifying students who require special-education services” (p. 369). I wonder how much we handicap our non-disabled students by not showing these high-quality videos. They are technically wonderful and include animations with cut-away views of functioning systems, in ways I could never explain on a whiteboard. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then videos are worth millions of words. The ADA rules would seem less extreme if it were not for the fact that for a single deaf student in each of my current courses, there are four people sent to help level the playing field—to reasonably accommodate each of those students. And, in my full courses, where I am not allowed to add students to a class unless there are vacant seats available, one deaf student requires 4 additional chairs—one for each of these: a transcriber, a captioner, and two American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters, taking turns translating my words into ASL gestures. That has the effect of denying four students seats in a nearly full class that could otherwise accept them. And, we are not

allowed to bring other chairs into a classroom for which they were not intended. As far as the non-captioned videos go, I do not see why these ASL interpreters could not simply interpret what is said on the video and sign it to the deaf student(s), just the same way they would do when I am lecturing. I have tried to get my old technology videos closed captioned, but that takes three weeks per video, and each cost hundreds of dollars that I do not have in my budget. In all, I have 60 videos, which would take half a year at best, to caption and would cost thousands of dollars I cannot afford. But, I will follow the rules, as inefficient as that is. I do understand the spirit of the ADA laws, even if I do not agree with how they are implemented. Schools do not want to be sued for ADA non-compliance, which they would most likely lose; and, would be terribly expensive. So, my CCC overcompensates to avoid litigation, while I and my normal hearing students suffer.

I only teach courses using English; and, anyone who takes my NC courses has already been tested to be proficient in English. If I have English Language Learners (ELLs) in my courses, I try to speak more slowly, and face them when I speak, so they can more easily understand me. When I have ELLs in my courses, I often copy my PowerPoint slides to provide alternate resources to help the ELLs to understand and retain the information. “It is estimated that 4.4 million students in the United States are enrolled in programs for ELLs. Collectively, more than four hundred different home languages are spoken by ELL students in America’s schools” (p. 420). I love to teach anyone with a thirst for knowledge. And, my ELLs often exhibit the greatest thirst for knowledge, compared to any of my other students.

The past tells me that history repeats itself unless we are diligent to learn from it. Our administrators could benefit from a history of education course, and save much effort and many resources, if they were not so naive as to think each “new” idea was original, innovative, and therefore likely to be effective. Herein, I used our textbook to jog my memory and correlate my experiences with many topics in the book. These opinions are strictly my own, and not sanctioned by my college, so please do not sue.

Reference

Ornstein, Allan C., et al, (2017). *Foundation of Education* 13th edition. Canada: Cengage Learning.