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RE:FRAMING

Winning Isn't Everything. Check the Periphery.

By DENISE CARUSO

COLLABORATION can be a powerful driver of innovation when it is done thoughtfully. But thoughtfulness can be hard to achieve in a traditional corporate or academic setting, where getting the best of others — whether by winning a sale or an argument — tends to be rewarded.

Tradition being what it is, even organizations that pine for new ideas struggle with how to change their cultures to support them. The Interactive Telecommunications Program at New York University provides a longstanding example of why they should keep trying.

"Competition is not valued here," asserts Red Burns, who has run the program since 1983 (and whom I have known since the early 1990s). "Competitive people have energy, they're interesting and so forth. But they're so focused on the competition they fail to see what they're doing. They just want 'better, bigger, stronger, longer,' and they miss the periphery. And that is where you find things you don't even know are there."

If history holds true, more than 2,000 people will arrive on Professor Burns's doorstep this week to sample the fruits of this philosophy. On Tuesday and Wednesday, the program will be host for its annual spring show of student work, which is open to the public.

A department within the Tisch School of the Arts, I.T.P. (and its predecessor, the Alternate Media Center) has been known for more than 35 years as a hothouse for innovations that use technology to connect people to one another and to the rest of the world in new and unpredictable ways.

A recent project called Botanicalls, for example, allows thirsty plants to place phone calls to ask for human help.

A collaboration among Robert Faludi, Kate Hartman, Kati London and Rebecca Bray, Botanicalls is "classic I.T.P.," said Clay Shirky, a member of the program's full-time faculty. "It's playful, but also illustrative of a set of solutions that could be applied to a larger class of problems" — like a car that needs an oil change or a goldfish that needs feeding.

Another project in this week's show was designed by Pollie Barden after she consulted with wheelchair users who said they had concerns about securing and organizing their personal items.

Ms. Barden created a series of networked, color-coded bags called iN-BaGs equipped with built-in sensors. Linked to a hand-held controller, the bags can signal their owners — or their owners' helpers — which bag contains an item, where to put new items, and whether they have been left open.

More than 1,600 students have graduated from I.T.P. since 1979. Graduates of the program populate some of the world's largest and most influential media, design and technology firms, as well as start-ups of many stripes.

Organizations that are eager to be infused with its students' energy often pay for not just one student, but for an entire group of I.T.P. of interns, to join them for a summer of creative disruption.

This year, some of the student designs that have resulted from the program's assistive technology courses look so promising that N.Y.U.'s Rusk Institute of Rehabilitative Medicine wants to evaluate them for possible commercial development.

After more than a quarter-century, the influence of I.T.P.'s work is obvious to those who follow the interactive media world. For those who have struggled to innovate in their own worlds, the intriguing question is how the program has managed to keep its creative mojo so strong, and for so long.

According to Professor Burns, the twin forces that fuel innovation at I.T.P. are collaboration and diversity. "We have students from 40 different countries outside the U.S. this year," she said. "We try to keep our gender split half men and half women. Our faculty and our students are from all over the place, discipline-wise. People here aren't trying to beat each other at something, or win something. When you walk around and feel the energy, it's extraordinary."

How did she manage it? For starters, "I played under the radar for a long time," she said. "I know that when you're trying to do something new and you have no history or justification for doing it, people are too quick to jump and to pull on you. And I just wanted to be left alone."

She got her wish in part by way of an "enormously supportive" dean, David J. Oppenheim. Also, she said, she stayed out of sight by raising small amounts of money for the program from various sources outside the university.

Benefactors have included the Markle Foundation, which paid for the program's work in the 1970s, and the Nathan Cummings Foundation, which has supported its recent forays into designing assistive technology for people with disabilities. There has also been a long list of corporate sponsors, most recently Microsoft and Yahoo.

Daniel Rozin, I.T.P.'s. former director of research now a visiting arts professor, has observed firsthand the benefits of this strategy. "When you get small amounts of money, how you spend it is virtually unrestricted — you can do whatever you want to do," he said.

This enables a form of academic exploration that leans more toward the artistic than the scientific.

The traditional mode, "where you have your hypothesis and you go out and prove it, is not the way it goes at I.T.P.," Professor Rozin said. It is much more free-form, and much more fruitful to explore: "As Red says, 'If we knew already what we were looking for, we wouldn't be looking for it.' "

The commitment to open exploration is also reflected in the fact that students need no computer skills to be accepted to the program. "If you let technology rule the day, you won't get anywhere," Professor Burns said. "The only thing that's important about technology is what you want to do with it."

Not coincidentally, these are the same general characteristics and attitudes that Professor Burns looks for in her surprisingly large adjunct faculty of 70. "The adjuncts are drawn from a pool of professionals in a wide variety of fields who contribute enormously to the richness of the program," she said. "Since we're in New York, there are lots of professionals who like to be in touch with young talent and who have things to contribute. We teach 55

classes a semester, and the adjuncts teach many of them."

With the seven full-time faculty members who serve primarily as advisers to the students, adjuncts make the program flexible enough to adapt at a speed that would be impossible with a dedicated faculty of specialists, Professor Burns said.

The flexibility gives full-timers a chance to explore new areas as well. Four years ago, for example, Marianne Petit, one of the program's full-time faculty members, teamed with Anita Perr, an occupational therapist from N.Y.U.'s school of education to start the popular new assistive technology group at I.T.P.

Similarly, Jean-Marc Gauthier of I.T.P., who teaches 3-D interactivity and gaming, has been working with Patrick J. Kelly, chairman of neurosurgery at N.Y.U. Medical Center, to develop a 3-D navigation system for operating on the human brain.

The students are expected to take matters into their own hands as well.

"Unlike most academic environments, the students' course of study is not managed by the teachers," Professor Gauthier said. "They create their own 'digital couscous,' using building blocks from several areas of digital media and from interactions with a diversity of teachers and professionals."

FROM Professor Burns's perspective, this kind of multidimensional creative chaos defines the program and its value. The experience has proved indelible for many I.T.P. graduates.

"Red taught us to be true to ourselves and to what we think is good for people — or interesting to do, or fun or valid — and less concerned with 'what is it,' " said Kenny Miller, a 1990 graduate who is now the executive vice president and creative director for global digital media at MTV Networks. "I've learned to love different points of view, and to cultivate them. Someday I hope to replicate that environment here."

Daniel B. O'Sullivan, the program's associate chairman and director of research, said: "Once graduates are out in the world, they're really in a spot where they can start to do the same thing we did here and create an environment where interesting things can happen." The collaborative spirit, he said, "is valuable, and it is profitable."

Denise Caruso is executive director of the Hybrid Vigor Institute, which studies collaborative problem-solving. E-mail: dcaruso@nytimes.com.