Making Change Happen: A Parable

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The Setup

“I'm a faculty member in a department. I have ideas for making big changes in my intro course that take administrative/infrastructural/financial muscle.

“What can I do?”
A Story

Our intro classes before 2010:

GEOL 100: Intro to Geology (lecture, 3 units)

- Several sections, different instructors
- 1 in 3 students also take the lab
- Taught by GTAs
- No coordination with lecture
- Little support from anyone

GEOL 101: Intro to Geology Lab (lab, 1 unit) *(Independent course)*
GTA working on GEOL 101 Lab activity
An Idea

Integrate GEOL 100 and 101 into a single course!

- Lecture & lab complement and reinforce each other (better student learning!)
- Instructor mentors GTAs & GTAs support each other (better GTA professional development, better student learning!)
The Response

• **High-level administrators**: Bad idea  
  *(less flexible, so harder to graduate)*

• **Chair**: Bad idea  
  *(new course number will confuse students, and it’s less flexible; so, lower enrollments)*

• **Old Faculty**: Bad idea  
  *(it’s not what we’re used to)*

• **Students**: Bad idea *(it will be more work)*
Lessons from Rejection

• Change is hard
• Fear of potential downsides can overwhelm hope from the upsides
• Without sheer charisma, hand-waving arguments will be met by speculative arguments
  – Result: stalemate, and no change
A Constructive Comeback

• Gather data (*qualitative & quantitative*)
  – Demonstrate severity of current problem
  – Support the benefits of the proposed change
  – Diminish likelihood of detriments from the proposed change

• Propose compromises (*reduce size of change*)

• Leave avenue of retreat to the comfortable status quo (*reduce perceived risk of failure*)
The Response 4 Years Later

• **High-level administrators:** Shaky idea
  
  *(less flexible, so harder to graduate; compromise on one less unit of lecture?)*

• **One Advanced Old Faculty Member:** Hmmmm
  
  *(maybe there’s something to this idea)*

• **New Faculty:** Well, duh!

• **Students:** *(Learned not to ask them)*
The Hardest Data to Ignore

- Focus group with former and current GTAs
  - Powerful statement of desperation, distress, and sense of abandonment by the Department
  - Strong positive response to idea of integrating lecture and lab and developing common set of lab activities
The Most Powerful Lever

$$$: Write a grant proposal!

- NSF-CCLI, 2010: Creating an Academic Community to Foster Curiosity and Discovery in Introductory Geoscience Classes
  - Integrated lecture and lab into one course
  - New name: “Our Dynamic Earth”
  - With GTAs, developed new lab activities
  - Redesigned classroom, equipped with laptops
  - New professional development seminar on teaching: “Our Dynamic Classroom”
The Assessment: A Happy Ending

- Interviews with GTAs & instructors (Anne Egger)
  - Night and day difference from before
  - Hard to imagine going back to old days
A Recap: What Can I Do?

- Identify & articulate a significant problem
- Gather data, research the literature
  - to document severity of the problem
  - to support benefits of proposed change
  - to put potential downsides in proper perspective
Recap: What Can I Do? (Cont’d)

• Listen to opposing arguments, open to compromise & others’ ideas, gently persist, acquire allies, make the change look smaller than it is.

• With your new allies, get $$$ for change
  – Collaborating is more fun than alone!

• Assess, evaluate, and revise your efforts