

The Trouble With Online Education

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“AH, you’re a professor. You must learn so much from your students.”

This line, which I’ve heard in various forms, always makes me cringe. Do people think that lawyers learn a lot about the law from their clients? That patients teach doctors much of what they know about medicine?

Yet latent in the sentiment that our students are our teachers is an important truth. We do in fact need to learn from them, but not about the history of the Roman Empire or the politics of “Paradise Lost.” Understanding what it is that students have to teach teachers can help us to deal with one of the most vexing issues now facing colleges and universities: online education. At my school, the University of Virginia, that issue did more than vex us; it came close to tearing the university apart.

A few weeks ago our president, Teresa A. Sullivan, was summarily dismissed and then summarily reinstated by the university’s board of visitors. One reason for her dismissal was the perception that she was not moving forward fast enough on Internet learning. Stanford was doing it, Harvard, Yale and M.I.T. too. But Virginia, it seemed, was lagging. Just this week, in fact, it was announced that Virginia, along with a number of other universities, signed on with a company called Coursera to develop and offer online classes.

But can online education ever be education of the very best sort?

It’s here that the notion of students teaching teachers is illuminating. As a friend and fellow professor said to me: “You don’t just teach students, you have to learn ’em too.” It took a minute — it sounded like he was channeling Huck Finn — but I figured it out.

With every class we teach, we need to learn who the people in front of us are. We need to know where they are intellectually, who they are as people and what we can do to help them grow. Teaching, even when you have a group of a hundred students on hand, is a matter of dialogue.

In the summer Shakespeare course I’m teaching now, I’m constantly working to figure out what my students are able to do and how they can develop. Can they grasp the contours of Shakespeare’s plots? If not, it’s worth adding a well-made film version of the next play to the syllabus. Is the language hard for them, line to line? Then we have to spend more time going over individual speeches word by word. Are they adept at understanding the plot and the language? Time to introduce them to the complexities of Shakespeare’s rendering of character.

Every memorable class is a bit like a jazz composition. There is the basic melody that you work with. It is defined by the syllabus. But there is also a considerable measure of improvisation against that disciplining background.

Something similar applies even to larger courses. We tend to think that the spellbinding lecturers we had in college survey classes were gifted actors who could strut and fret 50 amazing minutes on the stage. But I think that the best of those lecturers are highly adept at reading their audiences. They use practical means to do this — tests and quizzes, papers and evaluations. But they also deploy something tantamount to artistry. They are superb at sensing the mood of a room. They have a sort of pedagogical sixth sense. They feel it when the class is engaged and when it slips off. And they do something about it. Their every joke is a sounding. It’s a way of discerning who is out there on a given day.

A large lecture class can also create genuine intellectual community. Students will always be running across others who are also enrolled, and they’ll break the ice with a chat about it and maybe they’ll go on from there. When a teacher hears a student say, “My friends and I are always arguing about your class,” he knows he’s

doing something right. From there he folds what he has learned into his teaching, adjusting his course in a fluid and immediate way that the Internet professor cannot easily match.

Online education is a one-size-fits-all endeavor. It tends to be a monologue and not a real dialogue. The Internet teacher, even one who responds to students via e-mail, can never have the immediacy of contact that the teacher on the scene can, with his sensitivity to unspoken moods and enthusiasms. This is particularly true of online courses for which the lectures are already filmed and in the can. It doesn't matter who is sitting out there on the Internet watching; the course is what it is.

Not long ago I watched a pre-filmed online course from Yale about the New Testament. It was a very good course. The instructor was hyper-intelligent, learned and splendidly articulate. But the course wasn't great and could never have been. There were Yale students on hand for the filming, but the class seemed addressed to no one in particular. It had an anonymous quality. In fact there was nothing you could get from that course that you couldn't get from a good book on the subject.

A truly memorable college class, even a large one, is a collaboration between teacher and students. It's a one-time-only event. Learning at its best is a collective enterprise, something we've known since Socrates. You can get knowledge from an Internet course if you're highly motivated to learn. But in real courses the students and teachers come together and create an immediate and vital community of learning. A real course creates intellectual joy, at least in some. I don't think an Internet course ever will. Internet learning promises to make intellectual life more sterile and abstract than it already is — and also, for teachers and for students alike, far more lonely.

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