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24 June 2008

ONLINE LECTURE NOTES

The following ‘op ed’ piece, by a first year student in an unnamed Ontario university, appeared in the **Toronto Star**, on Thursday, 19 June 2008.

The crucial line in his essay is the following:

‘The classes I found most relevant and most enjoyed had little or no reliance on the Internet for class notes.’

So the question to be posed is this: should we university professors post our lectures on-line, if what this student says is valid?

Please read carefully this article; and then my comments below. I would welcome feedback on this issue.

Toronto Star

FIRST-YEAR UNIVERSITY

When expectations and reality collide

Lee Rimer

Special to the Star

19 June , 2008 04:30 AM

I didn't know exactly what to expect when I began university, but it certainly wasn't this.

On my left, someone is playing Tetris, on my right someone is creeping on Facebook, and in front of me someone else wearing ear buds is watching American Gangster on a laptop.

I am sitting in my Tuesday night astronomy lecture.

I didn't know exactly what to expect when I began university in Ontario as a general arts student last fall, but it certainly wasn't this.

After one year, I am disappointed with the academic aspect of university. Some of my classes have met and even exceeded my expectations, but at least six of the 10 courses did not. The classes I found most relevant

and most enjoyed had little or no reliance on the Internet for class notes.

I like technology as much as the next teenager growing up in the age of msn, Xbox 360 and cellphones, but the inappropriate use of technology creates a lethargic attitude to learning.

I blame WebCT, the program professors use to post class notes on the Internet, for undermining the importance of lectures. Often I've heard a professor read the exact notes posted on WebCT, neither expanding on them nor stimulating a discussion.

This makes it hard to find the motivation to attend lectures. Were it not for the guilt of spending so much money to attend university I don't know what would have propelled me to class. What's the point of going to class to take notes that are already on the Internet, especially if they are not going to be further discussed?

Even more frustrating is that the majority of students who do make it to class aren't even paying attention. Instead they are logged on to Facebook, playing online games or even watching a downloaded movie on their computer. They must feel they aren't missing anything.

I, too, am guilty of distracting myself during some lectures. Although I don't have a laptop, if the Raptors are playing and the professor is simply reading his online notes, I've been known to persuade my neighbour to stream the game online. If you stand at the top of a large lecture hall and look down on the students, it is unbelievable how many laptop screens show something unrelated to class.

The most productive and interesting lectures I have experienced are those in which the professor either does not use WebCT or posts only brief notes that are expanded on in the class.

One of my courses was full every lecture and encouraged student participation by debating controversial subjects. This was my only professor who did not permit laptops and had no notes on WebCT.

Technology, used in the wrong way, can give the false impression that it improves learning techniques.

Instead of using the Internet to post notes to expand on in class, some professors take advantage of the convenience and establish a lazy way of teaching. There are even online tests, which let students cheat easily or even get someone else to write a test for them. Many of these tests are not mini quizzes either; in one class, 20 per cent of the final mark was determined by online tests.

Besides cheating, this also makes it difficult if a technological problem occurs when you are logging on to WebCT.

The most frustrating aspect of WebCT is the way marks are posted on the Internet. As a student who wants to improve, I would like to have my papers returned to me, with a few comments. Unfortunately, there have been a few papers I worked hard on that were not returned. Instead, my grade was simply posted on the Internet.

How am I supposed to learn from my mistakes without reading comments or seeing where I went wrong? Some professors provide helpful feedback and review their exams at the end of a lecture. It is also possible to email a prof and make an appointment during office hours to look at a paper or exam. But why isn't getting back my essays and exams routine?

At the end of the first semester, I looked at my final marks and found I had a 92 in philosophy. Even if I'd written a perfect exam, I knew I couldn't have earned that. My peers said to just shut up and take the 92, but I decided to contact my professor. I wanted to know what I actually got on my final exam and what I deserved.

The next day, I received an email saying that it was pointless for me to see my exam because the marks had already been logged in and could no longer be changed. I sent an email back accepting that the mark could not be changed but suggesting it still would have been good just to know how I actually did. There was no reply.

I have chosen not to disclose the university I attend, but after speaking to many friends at universities across Canada, it seems my experience is not unusual, particularly for arts students.

Those studying math or sciences say they would fall behind greatly if they miss a class, and would certainly regret not paying attention to the lectures.

I frequently hear the same assurance: "It will change as you get into third and fourth year." This might be an acceptable to some students, but when I'm spending more than \$12,000 a year, it just doesn't cut it for me.

I would love to see professors post only brief notes on WebCT, thus encouraging students to attend class; papers returned with constructive feedback; and absolutely no online tests.

I am not suggesting we ignore technology and the Internet, just that we monitor how it is used so that it doesn't weaken the learning experience.

Lee Rimer looks forward to smaller classes and more interactive lectures in the years to come.

My Responses:

1. I am unfamiliar with WebCT – and am not sure that it is offered at the University of Toronto. I suspect that this student attended another Ontario university – though that fact hardly invalidates his arguments.
2. Evidently, for this student's classes, the lecture notes, in full or partial, are posted *before* the class is held. I certainly would agree that posting lecture notes ahead of time would have a very deleterious effect on students' incentives to come to class. And I fully agree that nothing could be more deadly dull than hearing a professor verbally repeat what was already printed in the previously posted online lecture notes. I think that the same criticism must apply to those professors who use PowerPoint and merely repeat verbally all that can be seen on the PowerPoint presentation.¹ What

¹ I do not use PowerPoint, for reasons I clearly explain to my students, based on the fundamental concept of Opportunity Cost. I have used PowerPoint for a recent conference paper, and fully realize that mastering the art of PowerPoint is very costly. At the age of 70, with – at most – ten years of productive life ahead of me to attempt to reach some goals of my continuing research agenda, I just do not have the time to master this art – and to convert all my thousands of Overheads into PP slides. If I were much younger, of

indeed is the point of doing so?

3. I never post my lecture notes before the class: only after the class has been held, perhaps a day later, when I have had the time to revise or amend my notes in the light of class discussions, including issues raised that I had not thought about in writing my lecture notes.
 - a) When I give any lecture – after 44 years of university teaching – I always read over and revise fully the previous year’s lecture, on the screen. Major reasons for doing so are publications on relevant issues that have appeared since my last lecture, and/or, new issues raised in my own research and publications. Then I print out the revised lectures, read it over, and make further revisions. As indicated, after virtually every lecture has been given, I revise the lecture a third time: to repeat, in the light of classroom discussion, which has the expected virtue of offering the unexpected. If I did not make those revisions immediately, I would probably forget them in the following year.
 - b) If I posted my lectures ahead of time - or worse, at the beginning of the year – I would have no such incentives to make all these revisions. Surely most students would prefer lectures revised and updated in this fashion – and in the ‘heat of the moment’, so to speak -- than having to read stale lectures created some time ago.
4. When I deliver a lecture, verbally in class, I never ever read my lecture notes. I rely on my memory of having just read and revised them; and otherwise I speak to the main points that are provided on my Overhead Transparencies. What I have to say verbally constitutes only a portion – probably less than half – of what is presented in the formal written lecture. And usually, when I speak – i.e., deliver the verbal lecture – what I have to say is not replicated in the online lecture notes, so that there are in effect often two major variants of my lectures. Students can and do learn from both.
5. I began providing my students with a printed version of my lecture (again: always post class delivery) in 1996, initially to meet the needs of a student with both a physical and related learning disability. For several years, I provided printed copies for sale, at cost only, in the departmental Resources Room. By no means a majority of students then chose to purchase the lectures. Later, after repeated student requests, I began posting my lectures on line, in the current format. How many students actually read the lectures online, I have no way of knowing – except from often dismal results on the final examinations, which suggest if not prove that the students never read them.
6. **My evolving reasons for posting my lectures, in full, online for not just my students, but indeed for the world at large:** anyone is free to access and to use them.
 - a) in view of the fact that a high proportion of students at the University of Toronto do not have English as their maternal or even their primary language, I felt that providing a printed version that students could consult at their leisure (and read them while consulting dictionaries or encyclopaedias) would benefit such students especially. I recommend that all students use <http://answers.com> and <http://www.reference.com/> for this purpose, rather

course I would necessarily do so, for the perceived benefits to my students, but at a much lower Opportunity Cost. At the same, I must note hearing or learning about some student complaints about the use of PP in their classes – especially when professors shift slides so quickly, or merely repeat verbally what is on the slide.

than actual printed dictionaries, etc.

- b) I feared that sometimes I speak too quickly, and do not always articulate clearly, so that many students – and not just those specified in (a) above – may have difficulty in following what I have to say. We all, regrettably, tend to speed up as the lecture hour comes to an end, in order not to leave the lecture ‘hanging’ at some indeterminate point, with major points not concluded or resolved (even if I can hope that students will see the completed points in the printed, online lectures)
- c) I soon realized that 50 minutes per hour of lecture (and I lecture for two hours, with a break) was never enough time to cover everything in my lectures, particularly if I provided time for questions and discussion. Thus I could lecture in a more relaxed fashion, knowing that students – or those interested – could read online the other parts of the lecture not covered in class.
- d) **Taking notes in class: a curse for so many students and professors**
 - i) In the past, before I provided paper copies of lectures and thus before posting them online, I had become very annoyed and discouraged by the considerable number of students who were intent on copying down everything that I was saying; and in so doing, they were not really grasping the major issues and debates involved in my lectures. In effect, they could not see the forest for all the trees.
 - ii) So once I had provided printed copies and then posted lectures online, I asked my students to refrain from copying everything that I was saying: noting that so doing was pointless if they could read the online version later. I recommended that they take only a few notes, only on the major issues, and conclusions, or notes about the class discussions that arose. I think that I have been reasonably successful in achieving this important objective.
 - iii) I provide my online lectures in both PDF format MS-Word. While the former is vastly preferable to read, in providing a much cleaner version, the Word version provides students with the opportunity of inserting notes and comments – which of course they cannot do with textbooks! Of course, just as in doing research for an essay, reading various publications, there is no point in reading online lectures without taking short notes on them, better to learn the key points.
- e) My lectures in European economic history are fundamentally *quantitative* in nature, with often a dozen or more tables and graphs appended. Virtually nobody can grasp such evidence fully by seeing a table or graph on an overhead (or PowerPoint) for a few brief moments; and the online lectures with such tables and graphs permit the student more time to comprehend more fully the significance of such online data. I also ask my students never to trust what I say in class or what they read in a journal or book without carefully examining the quantitative evidence.
- f) In effect, my online lectures for my two courses are the textbook for these courses – all the more so since no adequate textbooks have ever been available for my courses, as I present them. No one would object to having a supplementary textbook for their courses; so why

object to online lectures? That is also my response to some student criticisms that my lectures are too long or contain too much material (especially with the tables and graphs). But there is no more material here than to be found in many textbooks. The only major difference is that, unlike a standard textbook, my online lectures are not available before the class.²

- g) Certainly one of the prime benefits offered by my online lectures is to assist students in writing their two or three term essays, all the more so since much material valuable for their essays cannot be found except in my lectures and my publications – most of which are now also online. [That benefit evidently applies to many students at other universities.]
- h) At the same time of course, my lectures provide me with an extra benefit: they allow me to write down new ideas, as I come across them, that may be used in my research and publications. Especially in my late-medieval, early-modern course, the lecture materials are also very heavily dependent on my own recent research and publications. Of course, that point may not seem to be an argument for posting the lectures online: except for the very crucial point that I want and welcome feedback from others (and I know that many outside the U of T read my online lectures). I would hope that my students appreciate the fact that my lectures are to a very large extent (in this course at least) based on my own research – and not on someone else’s textbook. Indeed, I never use textbooks for any of my lectures.

7. **Costs, Benefits, and Tradeoffs: with online lecture notes (in full)**

- a) Of course, it would be not just naive but wrong to ignore the fact that posting my lectures online does provide some students with a disincentive to skip my lectures. So, of course, there are costs in posting my lectures online, even after the event. Indeed, I would say that a majority of my colleagues refuse to post their lectures online, for fear that class attendance will suffer correspondingly. One such colleague, who has won numerous teaching awards, said to me that “if I posted my lectures online nobody would come.” Well, it would never be that drastic, especially for someone whose lectures are so popular.
- b) I have always strongly emphasized in class, however, that the verbal lectures, with overheads, questions, class discussions, etc. are to be regarded as the primary student obligation: that these are far more valuable than the printed online lectures.
- c) I can understand, however, if students are faced with serious time constraints, in having to meet essay and/or lab deadlines for other courses, they may decide to skip my classes, with the online lectures, rather than skip a course without such online lectures. This would be a form of practising triage, I suppose.
- d) Nevertheless: To skip classes on the naive and indeed false assumption that the online lectures are sufficient is, for most students in my courses, a truly dreadful error, and a primary cause of poor or failing performances on the final examinations. Most students lack

² I should note here that once my courses have finished, or once the August supplemental exams have been held, I delete my online lectures, replacing them only after I have given them again, revised, in the following academic year.

the self discipline to read the online lectures every week; and if, therefore, they leave this task until near the end of term they will not have the time and energy to read them, and will certainly not be able to understand them. Even if they did read them each week, they would most likely fail to understand them properly, without having seen the overheads, and listened to questions and class discussion. Hearing a professor speak, seeing him gesticulate, viewing the overheads, hearing questions, etc. far better highlights what is truly important in the lectures.

- e) So, over the past ten years or so, I have always had to weigh the costs of a reduced class attendance (especially towards the end of each term) by posting my lectures on line, and then compare those costs with the benefits outlined above, in doing so. The entire realm of economics, as I know the field, consists of trade-offs, and measuring costs against potential benefits. For me, the net balance of the trade-off justifies my posting my lectures online.
- f) Finally, I should observe that my advanced age (now 70) and the opportunity cost argument precludes any consideration of creating a separate set of online lectures containing only a sketchy outline of key points. It is all or nothing, so far as I am concerned. And if I am subsequently convinced that I have made a mistake in posting my lectures online, then nothing will be posted (other than essay topics, etc.) In any event, why should I provide students with a set of brief notes, in outline form. If they want to learn properly, they should do this task for themselves

8. **Other points raised in the student article:**

- a) I won't here discuss the other points that this student has raised, apart from the lecture, except to say that I consider it absolutely unconscionable for any professor or lecturer to return student essays or other assignments without comments, other than the grade (and even worse not to return the work, while posting the grade, only, online).
- b) I might note that, while my TAs grade, and comment on, the two or three term required essays (for a full-year course), I and myself alone grade and comment on my mid-year January take home test (really another essay). It takes me much longer to grade the take-home test, though involving only one question, than the final examination, with three similar type questions, since of course we do return these exams and thus do not provide individual comments on each question.
- c) I might now consider this student's advice to ban the use of computers in my classes, for all the deleterious reasons that he has skilfully outlined..
- d) I would never provide online tests: but then I do not have any class tests, other than the one mid-year take home test, in January: handed out in the first week of the second term, with the requirement that it be returned the following week. This test is voluntary; and students who do not do the test, or cannot complete it in time, instead produce a third term essay, due a week before classes end in April.