



Education in the Electronic Ether: On Being a Virtual Professor

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On a recent business trip a man asked me what I did for a living. I replied that I wrote and taught college courses. "Oh?" said he. "Where do you teach?" A peculiarly honest answer came out of my mouth before I could think. "No where," said I.

It's true. Since 1990 I have taught and counseled for what a friend of mine calls keyboard colleges -- distance learning degree programs. Where I teach is inside the electrically charged ether that lies between my phone jack and the home computer of a group of far-flung, generally older than average, college students.

In 1989, I designed America's first online counseling center for distance learners. I've worked since then with over 10,000 learners online. I've flunked a few of them. I've never personally met any of them.

For want of a clearer explanation of my career situation I tell the man who inquired that I teach in cyberspace. "I'm a virtual professor." I try explaining. "Distance learning online degree programs ... virtual universities."

The man's face remains as blank as the sky on a summer day. I cannot tell whether he is silent out of respect or keen confusion: I imagine both to be the case, so I settle in to explain what I have to explain frequently these days: the decline of the American college campus and the rise of the American educational mind, as I see it.

Distance learning, or educational programs where pupil and professor never meet face-to-face, are not anything new. Sir Isaac Pitman of Bath, England, hit upon the idea of having rural learners learn secretarial skills by translating the Bible into shorthand, then mailing these translations back to him for grading. This he began doing in 1840.

I don't teach shorthand. I teach psychology and career development. I write many of my own lessons though, just as Sir Isaac had to do. My penny post is the World Wide Web. I post assignments to electronic bulletin boards and send graded papers across the international phone lines in tariff free e-mail packets. I convene classes and give lectures in online chat rooms when need be.

Is this a valid way to dispense a bona fide college education? Can people learn without sitting in neat rows in a lecture room listening to the professor or a Sage on the Stage? Yes, absolutely. In fact, while many people find it hard to imagine a college with no campus I nowadays find it hard to imagine teaching anywhere other than the freedom that is cyberspace. In cyberspace, I listen, read, comment, and reflect on what my students have to say -- each of them in turn. What they know they must communicate to me in words. They cannot sit passively in the back row twiddling their mental thumbs as the clock ticks away. They must think, and they must write. Thinking and writing: what else but these things are the hallmark of a classically educated mind?

I know my students not by their faces or their seat position in a vast lecture auditorium (as is the case on many campuses today), I know them by the words and ideas they express in their weekly assignments that everyone reads online. I am not a Sage on the Stage. I am a Guide on the Side. Often what my students "say" or write to one another or the way they incorporate their work and career ideas into their papers and debates with each other is more practically edifying than anything I could dish their way.

My average college kid is 40 years old. Not a few are in their 50s or their 60s. They are telecommuting to campus because they could not or would not uproot their careers and kids or grand kids to move to a college campus -- an entity itself modeled after the learning monasteries of medieval times.

Many of them know what they are talking about; more so they know what they came back to college to learn. A cyber-education suits them because it respects their ability to define and execute what knowledge is for them. It encourages them to argue in words their points and their perspectives without the censoring of a professor who might be tempted to step in to "calm down" or "refocus" an otherwise wonderfully enlightening classroom debate.

The idea that the American mind is best taught using a factory model -- where students sit in neat rows, holding up their hands for permission to speak, clock-watching their way through textbooks and lectures which are broken into discrete knowledge widgets -- has never been shown to be an effective way to learn. It has been shown to be a convenient way for colleges to transcribe that a standardized body of knowledge has been dutifully delivered. The American factory model. Everyone on the assembly line is delivered the same standardized units of information (re: lectures and textbooks); they then all must pass the same quality inspection (re: objective exams).

Maybe teaching a liberal arts curriculum via a virtual environment makes sense to me because it harks back to what I learned to be a true liberal arts education. Studying philosophy in Athens, Greece, I was taught that to really learn anything one had to throw away their textbooks and their notebooks. Throw away these memory tools -- in their place rely instead on one's native ability to critically think through a situation.

I was taught what Plato knew to be the nature of a true liberal education. It is independent of time and place. Real education does not occur on a campus. It occurs in the minds of the students. Good students eschew memory -- a simple learning trick -- in favor of developing their abilities to debate and argue their way through an issue. In short, good students develop their abilities to fling words at each other with amazing intellectual accuracy.

Plato and his students wandered around Athens arguing their way into understanding. While my cyber-students do have textbooks, their books are learning aides -- not the only pool of knowledge they will drink from. Instead, they will drink also from the collaborative efforts of online debates, conferences, and papers. They will think about what they have to say, and they will come to class each week amazingly prepared to argue and type their way into insight.

The virtual university: oddly enough it's just what a classicist like Plato would have practiced had there been an Information Superhighway way back when. Me? I'm in favor of less learning that takes places on-campus and more learning that takes places in the minds of the participants.

Vicky Phillips, is the founder of GetEducated.com, a consumer advocacy group that researches, rates, ranks and verifies the credibility of online college degree programs.