
Out of the Ivory Tower and Into the Chat Rooms -- Are We Giving in Too Much to Technology?

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Once upon a time professors pondered in offices, conducted research, and lectured to students sitting in straight rows in university classrooms. Students came to their professors for instruction; professors became personal gurus to many; their words were written down, digested and often repeated. Many long hours were spent in dark and musty libraries, searching the card catalogs, journals and other sources for literature reviews. Frustration was high when the typewriters ran out of ribbon or individual letters were unrecognizable because the keys were clogged with ink. Those days are somewhat- long gone. Gone, too, are those days when professors of academia sat in their ivory towers; students were in residence at the universities because off-campus sites were few, and distance learning meant either independent courses studies at a distance, or watching a televised series of lectures. While we are reminiscing, gone is the stereotypical professor attire: jacket with patched elbows.

Enter the 1990's where professors do research from their offices, word processors make revisions easy and students live miles away from campus. Distance learning is by satellite, on-line learning is done through computers and web sites, and both faculty and students enter chat rooms to discuss the latest research, articles and issues. Professor's dress codes change with the seasons or who the guest speaker happens to be. One of the biggest questions is how long will it be before even more changes take place. Arthur Schostak, a futurist from Drexel University, recently reported to a group of educators, that the new "Dick Tracy" style computer would be available in June of 1998. With events such as this becoming commonplace, the answer appears to be non-existent. A better question may be how do we cope and realistically use these changes?

Many of us have fond memories of the "old days," however, as the professorate moves into the new millennium, we must be prepared to work with the tools best known to our students. A few of our graduate students still express amazement with changes as evidenced by this student's remarks:

Our Library has certainly changed over the past fourteen years! There is no card catalog as I walk in the door. The copy machines operate by using a card instead of nickels. The microfilm machines are in a different location. At least the journals and the restroom are located in the same area. I feel antique!

On the other hand, the amazement changes to appreciation of the ease in access as the student further states "But I must admit; I am thrilled that I am able to complete the research for my paper in a few short hours".

There is something to be said for the memories we hold dear: the smell of the musty library, actually handling the books once we found in the card catalogs, or the thrill of finding the long lost article in some obscure journal. Or other memories of walking down meandering paths around the ivy covered buildings, hanging out and participating in face-to-face debates over a cup of coffee, and waiting around the corridors for the professors to appear, and then the feeling of apprehension as they read our lasted version of THE paper. What are we missing? Will communication and the "hanging out" be a thing of the past? Will students and professors miss the study carrousel and the meeting places?

We all experience anxiety over change, however, the anxiety is short-lived. New strategies make teaching and research fun and exciting. One of the newest changes that we in academia are experiencing and will continue to experience well into the new millennium, is the use of web sites in teaching. Courses on-line are used as virtual reality classes, supplements to face-to-face, and in juxtaposition with distance learning and video-conferencing. Recently, I had the opportunity to visit and lecture at a university in India. My classes in the United States were held as usual, however, I was teaching and interacting with my classes via the Internet. There were some initial anxieties on both ends: would I get on the web? Would the students really be able to ask questions, and would I answer them in a timely fashion? The answers were YES! While there are still some concerns about virtual classrooms, the pros far outnumber the cons. In fact, other classes often include professors from foreign countries who add their comments and insights, giving students a better understanding of comparative education and its diversity.

Many of our classes are large, and in the time frame of weekly classes, not all students participate. Now, however, students, who before had no voice, are participating in on-line bulletin boards. They are not using technology to hide; they are using technology to reflect before they speak. This security offers chances to rewrite before sending comments, self-esteem is bolstered, and new networks are developed. My students now state their names before they speak in class. Others recognize the name and put a face to the messages they received. Group projects are more productive because students who normally would not work together because of distance are about to share information over email and through chat rooms. Reflective journals, once turned in every couple of weeks and returned a week later with comments are now sent over private email and professors can send immediate reactions. Students no longer have to wait for feedback. Handouts are minimal and note taking becomes more sophisticated, Power Point presentations can be downloaded or accessed for further study. Does this take time? Of course it does, but time is more productive. Even with deadlines, entries come in a little at a time, so remarks and grading are more in depth.

One unexpected bonus for my students is that professors from three foreign countries are part of the class discussions through the Internet courses. Students can ask questions about curriculum, instruction and demographics. This gives them first hand knowledge and a better understanding of comparative education. The students are more aware of the various ethnic and cultural diversities. This interaction fosters a bond and provides a means of networking with someone a half way around the world. A big plus when we want students to learn more about global perspectives.

Finally, another benefit for professors is that teaching becomes more relevant. Students' conceptual knowledge can be ascertained when they respond to questions about specific readings or chapters- usually by noon the day before class. I am more prepared to meet their needs, and more important, students are better prepared for class since they may receive one or two points for responding to questions on time.

With so much research on distance learning, just in time learning, or whatever the current terminology may be, several questions still persists: Is this true college teaching? Are we giving in too much to technology? Are the sacred halls of learning still sacred? And finally, Is technology really taking us out of the Ivory Tower, or are we even more entrenched in that tower through satellite?