

## A NEW WAY TO ATTAIN AN OLD IDEAL

Imagine the ideal university-level teaching circumstances: a small student-teacher ratio, say 8 to 1; a high degree of interaction, both student-teacher and student-student; frequent opportunities for students to write and critique each others' writing; small groups making discoveries and solving problems together, without the intrusion or domination of the instructor. In short, the kind of collegiality around which higher education was originally designed to function.

A thing of the past? Yes. The expansion of post-secondary institutions, skyrocketing enrolments, students' need to work as much as forty hours per week to support their tuition, as well as other factors have made the original dynamics of higher learning seem an impossible dream. A thing of the future? Again yes. New technologies as applied to teaching and learning hold the potential to revive the university environment of an earlier era.

In September 1996, I explained to my students in History 2100 — Ancient Greece and Rome— that we would be exploring some of the oldest texts in Western civilization using some of the newest technology. We would meet in person periodically, but more and more frequently as the year progressed, we would use electronic conferencing software called FirstClass to mediate our discussions. FirstClass is akin to internet e-mail with a few enhancements. Individual messages, for example, are easily "threaded" in such a way that following the discussion of a single issue is easy.

As tutorial leader, I would post questions to stimulate a discussion of issues arising from twice-weekly lectures and regular reading assignments. Students could respond either to my questions or to the responses of their classmates. Individuals could communicate privately with one another or with the entire group publicly. Those who didn't wish to share their thoughts with the whole group (for whatever reason) could send comments directly to me. At the end of each unit and by the end of the term, there would be a complete transcript of the debates which had taken place and students would have a record of the body of learning they had produced themselves collaboratively.

This method of learning has numerous advantages. First, it is based in writing. Students have ample opportunities to hone their rhetorical skills and to work at their own pace without being put on the spot as is so often the case in regular, oral classroom settings. This is a particular benefit to individuals who are inhibited, new to the English language, or unaccustomed to or uncomfortable with the opinionated and adversarial nature of conventional tutorial debates. On occasions, shy students have responded to me privately and, with their permission, I have redirected their comments to the whole group. The effect of this is to make reluctant students more confident in their abilities by allowing them to run an idea by the instructor first.

Another advantage derives from the asynchronous nature of electronic conferencing. Students no longer have to be in the same place at the same time to participate in tutorial discussions. This is helpful to students who live at a considerable distance from the university campus or whose jobs make it difficult or inconvenient to attend classes. Computers are available at all times of the day and night and students fortunate enough to own computers can

hook up remotely whenever they wish. Ideally, participants log in several times over the course of a week, read through the discussions that have transpired to that point, contribute their own thoughts, and log out.

There are still more benefits. This method of teaching is highly adaptable, allowing the instructor to modify objectives and technique as the course evolves. In HIST 2100 this year, for example, it became necessary to reorient the weekly tutorial hour so that more factual and conceptual structure could be given to lectures that were often expansive, abstract, and potentially difficult to place into a larger historical framework. The computer component of our course permitted us to do this additional work without foregoing the important pedagogical experience of discussion and debate because of time constraints. Furthermore, this means of communication tends to remove some of the subjectivity inherent in cultivating skills and evaluating tutorial discussions. FirstClass provides a written record of students' contributions which permits the instructor to know precisely what aspects of a student's work needs to develop skills, as well as to reinforce aspects of learning that students have mastered proficiently. Finally, exposure to computers and cutting-edge methods of communication give students hands-on experience which can only help when they graduate from university to an increasingly technologized job market.

This last point leads me to address those who have criticized the introduction of computer-mediated learning and the links between new technology in the classroom and the demands of the modern economy. York Social Science professor David F. Noble has recently condemned what he calls "the wiring of higher education," claiming that as we convert "instructional activity into a commodity" we are using our students as unwitting and unwilling research subjects. To an extent he is correct, but first, this is nothing new, and second, it is not the technology that is the culprit. University instruction has for generations been associated with the pragmatic imperatives of the world beyond academia. Our students accept this; indeed, most of them insist that the skills they develop at university will enhance their career prospects and relate directly to future employment. To a degree, students are part of an experiment. A good teacher is always experimenting with new ways to enhance the classroom experience, looking for the best possible means of achieving pedagogical objectives while pushing forward the limits of intellectual endeavour.

The critics would probably agree that the best kind of higher learning is typified by the classical ideal outlined in my introduction. Thus far, my experiences teaching with computers has been far from flawless. One can, however, see the potential of new technologies to enhance university-level learning, bringing intimacy, intensity, and engagement back into the classroom without compromising access or overextending budgets. Computers may not revolutionize the way we teach and learn at university but they can return to us some of the dynamism that makes for true intellectual development.

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