

The Best of Times, The Worst Of Times

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Never in the history of higher education have faculty and students faced so much change. Not even the invention of the printing press brought about the level of promise, perplexity, opportunity, and threat that we have experienced in the last half-century, and especially now. There are several reasons that may explain why this is so. Also, no doubt, the reader can offer other explanations; but bear in mind that the writer's purpose is to raise questions—not provide answers.

The first cause of change is obvious: two generations of learners have grown up in front of the television set, where stimuli have been both verbal and visual, not to mention entertaining. Are we not challenged even to hold the attention of such learners?

Second, we are experiencing tremendous demographic change. Not only are exploding numbers of people choosing to avail themselves of college education, the academy now includes older students, many more women, and a much more diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic mixture.

Third (and perhaps a function of the changing demographics mentioned above), students' reasons for attending college are often quite different from those of their counterparts from a few generations ago. Whereas past generations may have thought of the university as a kind of finishing school for the sons of the wealthy, higher education is now also sought after by upwardly mobile men and women seeking to boost their careers. They enroll in college looking for a high quality learning experience that will prepare them to earn a better living as well as prepare them for a higher quality of life. In short, they are extremely consumer-oriented.

Along with the expectation that college will prepare them professionally, today's students insist that technology be a part of their educational package. Paradoxically, though, they often feel threatened when the computer is part of their educational package. Also, their exposure to technology is anything but consistent, since faculty acceptance of this new teaching aid ranges from total rejection to blind acceptance of anything that is high tech.

The next change agent is, quite frankly, the academy's competition. Corporate training—the in-house university—and the for-profit universities are making increasing inroads into once-sacred higher education territory. Add the emerging on-line degree programs and the university faces, for the first time in history, genuine competition from those who are willing to meet the immediate needs and wants of students.

What is to be made of all this? Clearly we face both great opportunity and great threat. If Tale of Two Cities had been written in the 1990's, perhaps Charles Dickens' opening line would have been (perish the thought!), "There was good news and there was bad news." With

this unsettling thought in mind, ponder the following observations:

The Good News

More and more students attend college with an unprecedented seriousness of purpose. They really want to learn.

We have an amazing new technology at our fingertips.

A college education is in reach of many who were once denied the opportunity.

We have the opportunity to redefine what a college education should be.

We have the opportunity to redefine what good, effective teaching is and to explore new presentation modes.

The artificial boundaries separating teaching, scholarship, and service are disappearing.

Teaching is regaining its proper level of respect as the university's most important mission.

Academe's competition is forcing us to reconsider our product and mission. This needs to be done and is healthy.

The Bad News

Students' ideas of college curriculum are often at odds with what the faculty thinks is important, and their motivation to learn may not be for the right reasons.

Some faculty and students are threatened by computer technology. Information on the Web is not evaluated as to quality; the efficacy of computer-assisted learning is still unproven; and many faculty actually fear for their jobs.

Higher enrollments often mean larger class size.

Redefining the meaning of a college education is hard work, the most difficult part of which will be reaching consensus.

Traditions die hard. Some will never see teaching as anything but "telling" or learning as anything but "mimicking."

Traditions die hard. Some will never see the potential for merging teaching, scholarship, and service.

Some will die believing that teaching is the "weak sister" when compared to research.

Some universities will become market driven, forgetting their unique mission.

In light of what has been said, maybe you feel pessimistic about higher education's prospects, and perhaps, fearful about your own future. Let me try to provide some reassurance. There will always be a place for dedicated, caring, effective college teachers. While computer assisted learning intrigues students, they also have demonstrated that they need and want the human touch.

There will always be a university. Students need and want a learning community where they interact with professors and peers and learn from one another. The American professorate at traditional colleges and universities is the best prepared in the world. For-profit and corporate teaching institutions will be hard pressed to match our faculty expertise. Our challenge to improve is an exciting opportunity.

Further, most colleges and universities have solid and well-thought-out curricula. We do not need to scrap the curricula, but rather to show how the traditional arts, sciences, humanities and social sciences, and the array of professional courses address and enhance our students' personal and professional lives. And yes, technology can and must be infused into all the curriculum, traditional and non-traditional.

Let us take further comfort in the fact that teaching is a skill that can be improved. Even the lecture method—arguably the least effective teaching medium—can be

improved. Let us realize, however, that there is so much more. While there is no one methodology that suits every instructor, nor every subject, nor every occasion, there is a veritable arsenal available to the resourceful professor.

Let us also recognize that learning is a skill that can be improved. It is imperative that, as part of our teaching, we help our students improve that skill. We do so by first knowing and honoring the many ways people learn (some very different from our own), by teaching students to be more responsible for their own learning, and by creating the awareness that learning is a never-ending, life-long process.

Reaching Through Teaching has never claimed to provide either quick and easy teaching methodologies or pat teaching philosophies. It is, rather a forum for conscientious, intellectually curious, entrepreneurial professors to share their successes (and even failures) and to learn from one another. If this interests you, read on.

Student-Driven Knowledge & Experience Creation: A Theatrical Lesson for Higher Education in the Next Millennium

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"Learning: The Old Paradigm: ... Teachers, by virtue of their own success in the learning system, have come to know what should be known, and so, define the learning tasks. Education is production. Teachers give assignments to students. Error by students is discouraged, detected and corrected; the less error by the student, the more learning taken place, and in the limiting case, no error means that maximum learning has occurred."

"Learning: The New Paradigm...Education is mutual exploration. Teachers write and talk as impetus, creating an environment in which learning can take place. Error is encouraged as the mechanism by which knowledge is generated; in the limiting case, large error may take the learner far from the current equilibrium to higher order of understanding." — Col. Chuck Yoos, USAF (1995)

An introspective analysis of the direction of higher education is not new. Indeed, there has been extensive debate in the academic arena regarding how best to stimulate, guide, and perpetuate the learning process. While the narrative of higher education has substantially evolved over the past one-hundred or so years, the most recent third of this period (the last 30 years) has experienced more revolutionary attempts to modify curriculum and pedagogical approaches. As we approach the milestone of the millennium, it therefore seems appropriate to re-examine alternative perspectives of dynamics of learning.

It may be argued that many involved in systems of higher education adhere to a particular view of students as

"works-in-progress" who are eventually molded into what the University deems finished, quality-controlled, and ultimately salable products. Since, from this perspective, students are little more than raw material or assemblages, decisions regarding curriculum content or requisite learning must be developed by the factory managers or administrators. In a system and vision of this sort, there is a little room for the eventual "products" to participate in the design of the production process. Consider a statement by Herbert Hoover in 1957 as a means to sum up this perspective: "you simply can not expect kids of those ages to determine the sort of education they need unless they have some guidance." (Time 1957). Guidance regarding curriculum is certainly important, and is of course a reasonable expectation of the university mandate/objective as a whole. However, it may be that this manufactory perspective, compounded by the mass-production concept dictates of scale economies (larger and larger masses of students with little opportunity for individual attention or assessment) has led to what might be understood as the McDonaldization (Ritzer, 1993) of education. This mold-making and mold-filling approach to curriculum development and delivery has no doubt potentially impeded the growth of creativity and innovation in the learning process.

In order to then augment and rejuvenate this sterilized content and delivery strategy, traditional teaching methods have been expanded to include cases, videos, simulations, or other representations of the "real world". While these