

THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

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Brown Online: Will It Transform Teaching & Learning?

The November 19, 2000 article in the *New York Times Magazine* entitled "Online U: How entrepreneurs and academic radicals are breaking down the walls of the universities" by James Traub reflected the high level of interest beyond the academy in the early stages of experimentation in on-line teaching by universities such as Brown. Many faculty within the academy are also keenly interested in the impact of on-line teaching on student learning. [The Teaching Exchange](#) invited the first Brown faculty participants, Dietrich Neumann, Massimo Riva, John Tomasi and Darrell West, to describe their perceptions of their experience. In particular, the *Teaching Exchange* is grateful to them for sharing their initial impressions and hopes that other faculty will be inspired by their ideas.

Each faculty member was asked three questions:

- [1.](#) Which course did you choose to adapt to an online form?
- [2.](#) How did developing an on-line course transform your approach to teaching (either for the GEN course or in general)?
- [3.](#) How will you know if this new course form will enhance student learning?

1. Which course did you choose to adapt to an online form?

Dietrich Neumann, *History of Art and Architecture: Modern Architecture from 1900-1960*.

Massimo Riva *Italian Studies: IT 102* — Boccaccio's Decameron in English translation; this course has already a web-based component (the [Decameron Web](#)).

John Tomasi, *Political Science: PS 11*, Introduction to Political Thought

Darrell West, *Political Science* PS 111 lecture class "Mass Media", which covers the role and impact of the American mass media on culture, society, politics, and elections.

2. How did developing an on-line course transform your approach to teaching (either for the GEN course or in general)?

Neumann: When planning for the filming of my lectures, I transformed each one into a number of shorter units and I had to plan each segment very carefully - almost like writing a movie script, coordinating the text with images and film-clips - I think the lectures actually profited from this.

For the first version of the course, the use of film-clips is still somewhat small. In the long run, I hope to include a lot of video footage, computer generated moving imagery (for example a walk through a building that was never built and only exists in drawings) and animated graphics, that will help to explain a building floor plan, for example.

One of the great advantages of presenting material on-line, will be the freedom for the student to replay certain parts of a lecture, or to look at an image as long as he or she wants (rather than as long as the instructor keeps it up on a classroom screen). Traditional lectures are, in some respects, a rather dictatorial format of presentation, in which the listener is dependent on the presenter's speed, patience, clarity. My own attention span is fairly short, so I believe that students will enjoy the fact that they can intensely follow 20 minutes of a lecture, then interrupt it to have a soda, and then return and continue. In a dark lecture hall, where slides are shown it is often hard to stay continuously concentrated for 50 or even 75 minutes.

Riva: I wouldn't use the word "transform" — that transformation had already taken place for me over the past few years, as a result of the faculty-student weekly workshop with digital media which has produced most of the web-based resources for my Boccaccio course.

Working with GEN has forced me to take a specific look at the ways in which a taping of my lectures could be effectively interfaced with other pedagogical inter-activities (within the framework of the GEN prototype). What can a traditional

"lecture" (even more "traditional", in a sense, than the actual lectures I deliver in my course at Brown, which are always influenced by some degree of live interaction and "environmental" serendipity) add to a user-oriented learning model? Taking this question seriously, I was forced to re-conceive my lectures and lecturing style as a specific "performance" for the virtual environment to which they are destined. I am currently writing what I would call a "script", based on my lecture notes and yet more "polished", or "premeditated", if you will.

Tomasi: I view my online course as a kind of limiting test of the pedagogical philosophy I have developed here at Brown. My pedagogy, in brief, is all about my finding ways to "stand out of the way". I assume that students want to learn, that they have that desire from the inside rather than as something that must be imposed on them. So, in various ways, I try to set up problems for them to work on in whatever way they think best.

PS 11 is a large lecture class with the danger of students becoming passive learners ever present. As per my "stand out of the way" pedagogy, I have tried to turn the passive nature of the lecture hall experience into an advantage. I focus the course on a weekly student-run seminar: each devoted to some big question in political philosophy, each run by the students themselves with the TAs required to sit like sphinxes, saying not a word. In my lectures, I emphasize that what matters in the course is NOT what I do in lecture, or what they experience when they sit there taking notes watching me, but rather what THEY do on their own: sit down by themselves and read the book, write out their own thoughts about it, or attend and participate in the seminar.

The danger of passivity in a large live lecture is magnified by the online format. So my idea is to try to turn that danger to a pedagogical advantage in just the same way. Lecturing online makes it even easier to convince the students that if they are passive objects then the course will be a failure - a failure not just for them, but a failure **because** of them. We are experimenting with online seminars, which in a leap of faith I have made the centerpiece of the online version of my course. If the course is to succeed, then the combination of my lectures and GEN technology must be able to create a forum for genuine intellectual community among the students who take my course. Can my lectures deliver the same motivational punch when experienced online? Will the technology be able to provide students with a real

sense of intellectual engagement with other student's minds? My GEN course will be test of that in the sense that I view the experience as a test of the limits of the pedagogy on which all of my teaching here at Brown is based. It is an attempt at electronic judo: to turn the distinctive danger of passivity associated with on-line distance learning into the course's main pedagogical strength. My pedagogical message is even magnified in this forum: these lectures mean nothing, it is what YOU do, that will determine whether this course succeeds. The course itself is a test of the students, and of the authenticity of their desire to learn.

West: Developing an online course had a major effect on my teaching because it encouraged me to revisit old assumptions about how to engage an audience and connect with a new generation raised on videos and the Internet. In the GEN course, I scaled back my use of lecturing and instead relied on a mix of pedagogies such as online discussion, videos, question and answer periods, and self-assessments. In my lecture course, I added videos and course newsgroups designed to get students to grapple more directly with controversial questions about how the media cover major cultural and political events. I also developed an advanced course website at www.INSIDEPOLITICS.org, which placed lectures and discussion materials online along with supplementary material such as paper assignments, class guidelines, and reference and educational materials.

3. How will you know if this new course form will enhance student learning?

Neumann: This is a very important question. While the range of formats for teaching is constantly expanding, that doesn't automatically guarantee that the actual learning automatically improves as a result of it. For example, I have been trying to learn Portuguese for some time. I have a wonderful CD and found a good program on the Internet, where I can study at my own pace, and can listen to each word's pronunciation by just clicking on it. It is absolutely fantastic. Nevertheless, I haven't made much progress yet with my Portuguese, because I lacked the time and commitment.

One of the most important elements in the process of learning at a place like Brown is the personal contact with someone who is enthusiastic and knowledgeable about the subject. In a seminar and lecture class, that contact is with the community of others who share the experiencing of profiting from this enthusiasm and knowledge.

Those elements will not be easily replaced by any of the new formats for presenting knowledge. But GEN makes an important effort in that direction by actually showing footage of a professor teaching (rather realistically, including an occasional mispronunciation or repeated sentence).

Once the course is online (sometime in the spring) we will get feedback from the students, and they will have to answer questions in their tests and send in essays they have prepared. At that point we will see how well the system works.

Riva: This is (from a pedagogical point of view) the most interesting and yet unresolved question of the whole enterprise: how can a "virtual" interaction (outside of the instructor's presence and control, except for the possible interaction with online teaching assistants) be as effective or just "effective" tout court? The jury is still out and it will remain out until we have at least some feedback from actual users.

Obviously, one of the important tasks will be to design self-assessment tests or exercises as part of the learning model and for the benefit of the user. But here is the problem: what I am teaching is a literary classic: there are so many things that we can learn from reading a great book like the Decameron and they are all impossible to "quantify" or even limit (at the discretion of the instructor). They tend to emerge in what I consider the most rewarding part of my teaching: the actual dialogue (written or spoken) with my students. Is this "dialogue" reproducible online? Yes and no... Ultimately, it will be up to the user to decide if and what she has truly "learned" in this course. This is, perhaps, another implication of a user- or consumer- oriented pedagogy.

Tomasi: By checking in the seminars from time to time and by reading what students are posting, I'll be able to know immediately whether its is "working"—or if its been a complete bust!

West: For the GEN course, we use a variety of formal testing and research papers as well as student self-assessments which give them a chance to see if they are picking up key concepts. For the classroom course, I have asked for frequent feedback on new features of the class to see how they are aiding student learning and facilitating delivery of educational material.

It was tremendously exciting to be in on the ground floor of what is sure to be an educational revolution—the introduction of technology into the classroom and the use of the Internet to deliver class materials. In certain respects, it was like being a first-time instructor and having to think about all of the traditional questions of student engagement and learning styles. There is no question in my mind the entire experience has aided my development as a teacher and made me more sensitive to the various ways students learn new material.