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Teaching, Information, and Restraint

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When I teach a class of more than 25 students, I am pleased if I can match faces with first names by the third week. Learning last names is something that usually has to wait until after the first written assignment, if it is to happen at all. One might think e-mail would change this pattern: seeing a student's first and last name in their address, if not their signature or tag, might make for better teacher training. Unfortunately, many students continue to use their aol.com or hotmail.com addresses, even after they arrive at college, and often these addresses have names like BunBun17 or YeezNJ. This makes easy identification of the senders quite impossible unless they have included their names in the message; I don't learn surnames any faster these days, though I think I pay more attention to names generally.

While reading paper topics proposed by my students last semester, all of which arrived by e-mail, I came across a surname that struck me as extremely familiar or peculiar – I cannot remember which – and, as I was just a click away from a Web Browser, I decided to put the last name into a search engine; i.e. I “googled” the name.¹

I imagine that librarians, who spend so much time thinking about how to help the rest of us find authoritative information and the texts we really want, are quite frustrated that so many of us turn to search engines on the Web for inquiries great and small. The case of my googling a name, however, shows that the search engine is simply the tool of first resort; using a search engine is like asking the people in the immediate vicinity for help in spelling an unfamiliar word. If the people around us don't know or aren't sure about how to

¹ Use of the search engine at Google.com is so widespread that the term “google,” used as a verb, has entered the English language without capitalization. Indeed, “google” was Word of the Month for December, 2002, at the Oxford University Press site: http://www1.oup.co.uk/elt/oald/buzz_words/

spell the word, we seek out a dictionary; unfortunately, many of us are still learning how to recognize a Web search that, while returning links to hundreds of documents, should tell us that we had better go (back) to the library.

In this case, however, motivated not by scholarship or grammatical correctness but by curiosity (or nosiness depending on your perspective), I typed the student's last name in a rectangular box and clicked "Search". The first several links returned were to obituaries for the father of my student, who had died when the World Trade Center collapsed on September 11, 2001.²

I was shocked, of course, and felt terribly for the student. But I was also and immediately disappointed in myself. I felt that, as a teacher, I had done something wrong when I casually searched the Web using the student's name, and I have been trying to figure out why exactly I think my action not merely unfortunate or imprudent, but professionally unethical.

Wasn't the information something I might well have learned from a casual conversation with a Dean or the student's advisor? Wasn't the information I found "public"? Indeed, isn't it easy to imagine a scenario that makes my knowing this information *important* to my relationship with this student?

Yes, to all of the above. But what does that tell us?

First, in an age of disembodied information that can spread as easily and consequentially as a virus, our habits of information gathering and exchange at the university probably need some attention. Unlike medical doctors, whose contracts routinely and explicitly acknowledge their assent to rigid guidelines about the gathering and use of patient information, teachers are expected simply to use their good judgment in dealing with the wide expanse of student information that lies between the grave and the trivial. Even if one believes that this good judgment was sufficient in the past, when there was a rough but reasonable correlation between the significance of private information and the effort required to obtain it, the ease and speed with which we now find and exchange information of such different kinds and moments suggest we need to worry about the future of that judgment.

Second, for a teacher, the distinction between "public" and "private" information is perhaps no more important than the question of how and whether we allow our students

² I have changed many of the details to disguise the identity of the student, but keep the spirit of the example.

to be the persons – primarily and perhaps exclusively the persons – who present themselves to us at the start of a particular course in a particular semester. Just as medical doctors learn to react to a patient as the patient “presents” -- they are forbidden to seek out any other information about the patient without the patient’s permission -- so we should consider acting with similar restraint, especially when we face a future in which every one of our students may have rich and/or numerous “public” and quasi-public identities, histories, and traces in cyberspace.

Finally, and especially in courses where we deliberately elicit autobiographical information from our students, we need to be much more explicit about where the informational boundaries of the classroom will be drawn and how they will be honored. Given our country’s reputation for making possible the lifelong reinvention of the self, and Brown’s commitment to student freedom and choice, it seems a reasonable and desirable thing that our students have a right to make or remake themselves, when they arrive, as they wish. This may have been an easier thing to accomplish in the past, before information networks made leaving behind a high school, a hometown, a family, a religion (even old 5K road race times) more difficult than ever.

So why exactly was I wrong to google the student’s surname? Perhaps because I was treating the student as a means (to information) rather than as a person deserving of treatment as an end in himself; perhaps because I was violating the student’s right to privacy by searching without permission; perhaps because I had no reason to believe any greater good would be served by my search. More clearly: because I was snooping. And in snooping I not only found out something I didn’t need to know, and shouldn’t have known as a teacher unless the student (or the Dean) wished me to know it; but I also wrecked a valuable boundary between the increasingly formidable world of disembodied information and the significantly embodied and protected space of the classroom.

In suggesting that, as teachers, we need to exercise some restraint when so much information is so easily obtained, I don’t mean to say that we need to make the potentially rich relationship between teacher and student into something clinical -- in any sense. But just as the Web has made us reconsider the wisdom of our curriculum and teaching practices, so too it should inspire us to rethink how our interactions and relationships with students may be influenced by, and need sanctuary from, something as simple but as big as a google.