

THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

BROWN UNIVERSITY • VOLUME 14 / NUMBER 2 • JANUARY 2009



Pardon the Interruption: Setting Limits on Technology in the Liberal Arts Classroom

Luther Spoehr

Education, History

My son sits on the couch in the family room. He's doing his homework. At least, I think he is. His laptop, complete with Instant Messaging, is up and running in front of him. His cell phone, complete with text-messaging capability, is beside him. His iPod has been granted access to his ears. I am often told he's entirely typical of his age group.

That's also the conclusion presented by Julie Evans '79 at the Sheridan Center's Twentieth-Anniversary Celebration in October 2007. According to Evans, CEO of Project Tomorrow, the new "Millennial Generation" of college students feels like they're traveling too light if they don't have their iPods, cell phones, and laptop computers (with wireless Internet connection) with them everywhere, all the time. Unlike their parents and teachers, or even their older brothers and sisters, they are "technological natives," not "technological immigrants." They have grown up immersed in this stuff.

Not that this is news to those of us who teach them or have children of a certain age. But what does seem new is the casual, unacknowledged assumption that the Millennials' instructors should adapt to them and their multitasking "learning styles," even in the

classroom. If that was not made plain enough at Evans's talk, it was made crystal clear by the panelists discussing the same topic the next day.

One student panelist confirmed that she expects to be able to tap the Internet any time she wants to—whether walking across campus or sitting in a classroom. “Even the best professors don't know everything,” she observed helpfully, so she wants to be able to use her laptop to check their accuracy or find more information during their lectures. Several students made clear that they prefer—indeed, expect—professors to post their lectures online, for review or even first viewing by students unable to attend class.

So what's wrong with this picture? My brief answer: “Plenty, if we claim that we are providing liberal education at Brown.” I rise to speak on behalf of “Project Yesterday.”

Before explaining further, a disclaimer: I'm not a Luddite. At least, I don't think I am. Like most of my colleagues, I try to use technology whenever I can to enhance learning in my classes. I can't imagine academic life without e-mail or MyCourses or JSTOR or Google (although I'm still withholding judgment on Banner), and I want my classroom to have CD and DVD players, and similar tools. But that is just what they are: tools. Means to an end. And we are in danger of losing sight of that end if our conversations about tools go no further than the ones I heard at those early November presentations. Even when asked directly, presenters (including both students and their older enablers) simply couldn't wrap their minds around the issue of the relationship between technology and liberal education.

Their vocabulary gave them away. Classes invariably were referred to as “lectures,” in which the professor “transmitted information.” According to this model of instruction, the professor is merely one more source of information (who doesn't “know everything”), so students are well advised to open their laptops at the beginning of class and log-on to other sources right away. In other words, the classroom is just like their dorm room or their table at Starbucks: a place where they pay “continuous partial attention” (as one researcher has described it) to a variety of stimuli. A professor who wants their undivided attention, even for three hours a week, is seen as a control freak.

So I guess I'm a control freak. Because most of my classes, like most classes at Brown, enroll fewer than 30 students, I rely primarily on discussion, not lecture. (And when I do lecture, I hope I'm doing more than just transmitting information.) The

conversations I want students to have with me and with one another can only happen if we are listening and responding, carefully and continually, to one another. Such conversations must be based on facts, but are mindless if they contain only facts. “Information” has the same relationship to “knowledge” as a pile of bricks does to a house. Or, to borrow a Churchillian metaphor, the pudding needs a theme.

Although I’ve had a few cell phones ring in my classroom (nobody has yet had the gall to answer), few students use laptops there. Those who do are almost always less involved in class than those who don’t. Making eye contact with a screen obviously isn’t the same as engaging the student across from you. The student who’s busily checking online to see if we had the right number of students enrolled in voucher programs, or whether Robert Hutchins became president of the University of Chicago in 1928 or 1929, isn’t engaging the larger issues, such as, “What do we mean by an ‘effective’ high school reform?” or “What arguments for a Great Books curriculum might be considered most persuasive?”

The large questions that students and instructors are supposed to be wrestling with in a liberal arts curriculum, questions about justice and democracy and equity and the like, have been asked and argued about for centuries. Our students will not be able to join the conversation if they continue to assume that education is entirely or even primarily about “information” and that the classroom is just one more place to get it. But if we indulge them by allowing, or even encouraging, multiple distractions in our classrooms, many of them will assume exactly that.

Over 150 years ago, Thoreau worried that “Men have become the tools of their tools.” If we want our claim that Brown provides a truly liberal education to have real weight, we should think harder about just what high tech tools our students should—and should not—be bringing into the classroom.