



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY IN THE FACE OF DEATH

Facing death puts things in a new perspective. Prior to my brain surgery, I asked the doctor all the usual questions. As the day of the surgery approached, I realized that I had asked all the wrong questions. My questions had failed to reflect my dedication to my educational philosophy, so I prepared questions consistent with the current processes on our campuses. Unable to ask them of the doctor because I succumbed to the anesthesia first, I offer them here:

- 1) When you were in medical school, did the faculty make you feel good about yourself?
- 2) Do you like your work?
- 3) If the surgeon who assists you arrives at the operating room without having familiarized himself with the intricacies of my menacing condition, which makes him unprepared to assist in the session, will you let him participate if he has a good excuse?
- 4) During the operation, what opportunities do you provide for all members of the surgical team, even the lowest ranking nurse, to engage in critical thinking?
- 5) If any person on the surgical team does not understand what you are doing, will you slow down or simplify your procedures so that person can keep up with the rest of the group?
- 6) Do you have a variety of dissecting techniques to suit the different personalities of your patients?
- 7) If I die under your knife, will it affect your self-concept?
- 8) If I leave surgery alive, will you respect the opinions of all subordinates who have different views about my further treatment?
- 9) If the operation is a total success, but I die due to the poor work habits of a person assigned to my recovery, will you overlook my death if the bungler promises to try harder next time?
- 10) If I survive, to what degree will you give credit to the other members of the team?
- 11) After you remove all the unwanted tissue from my head, will you treat me as a unique individual who is merely brain-mass disadvantaged?

12) If the removal of the tumor makes it necessary to reduce the size of my brain so that I conduct myself like an idiot, is my employer legally required to ignore my ineptitude in order to spare me embarrassment?

13) Different parts of the brain control different functions. If you goof, are you tampering with parts of my brain that could alter my educational philosophy or leave me with a distrust for the direction taken by the North Central Accrediting Association?

14) When you notify your surgical team of an operation, do you have a mandatory attendance policy? How flexible are you regarding tardiness? If someone on the team has an urgent appointment, can he/she leave the operation early?

15) If your surgical team is unionized, does their contract permit coffee breaks in the midst of a complex, life-threatening maneuver?

16) When I am unconscious, what do you do with me during a fire drill?

17) If the hospital administrator drops in to observe you, will you attempt something fancy just to make an impression?

18) Have you or the members of your staff placed bets on the outcome of my operation?

19) If medical students are present, will you be tolerant of those who have short attention spans? How will you make my operation interesting so you hold their attention? What alternative surgical techniques will you provide to those students whose learning style does not fit your egocentric tactics?

The truest test of an educational philosophy is to ask ourselves what it will look like in the hands of our graduates. As educators, we should be prepared to face the consequences of "whatever goes around, comes around."

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THE MESSAGE IN THE MEDIUM

Fearing that education would lose intimacy and immediacy with the imposition of the new media in the classroom, I wrote an editorial called "Virtual Education" for a New Jersey daily newspaper more than three years ago. In it, I stated that Internet-based distance learning "is to education what phone sex is to procreation." Even though I still like the sound of that analogy, I have to admit that it's bogus.

A year after my attack on distance learning, I had an epiphany during an in-college workshop on the Internet. At the time I was looking for ways to revive a dying, outmoded print journalism program. Suddenly, I realized that the World Wide Web is a new medium with the capability of revitalizing and transforming the form and content of many college courses.

As a result, I developed and am entering the third year of teaching an Internet-based, on-line college course, *On-line Journalism*. At first I was skeptical about this venture, thinking that perhaps my on-line students would be lost in cyberspace, unable to emerge as real people. But that clearly isn't so. True, personas change, but not in the ways I imagined. The once-shy student who would sit unobtrusively in the back of the room, hoping to fade into the wall, now is on equal footing with classmates. The wisecracking troublemaker is neutralized. The fast learner is learning faster. The slow learner is given more time and attention, and dreads deadlines less. Expression is not thwarted; it's encouraged.

What's more, students feel they have been given a new sense of time and space in which to learn. Icons have replaced menus, acronyms whole sentence, and GIFs, even entire paragraphs. Resumés are passé compared to highly individualized, totally idiosyncratic personal Web sites. Investigative research, an often tedious, frequently unrewarding search for arcane information, has been transformed into an explosive, interactive process where the researcher has become more of a sleuth and less of a scribe. Literature, genuinely exceptional creative work, has been given room to expand via the thousands of on-line magazines eager to work with and publish new writers.

A few caveats are in order. For a course like mine, which is writing-intensive, I average significantly more time critiquing on-line writing than traditional classroom writing. Each assignment stimulates a full letter from me to my student. This is individualized instruction brought to a new, and in some ways fuller, level. However, this expenditure of time is counterbalanced by a greater freedom: I'm not constrained by a formal schedule.

Furthermore, with an on-line course, the single most difficult transition for students and faculty is honoring the aspect of immediacy. It becomes easy to forget that when one receives e-mail, there is a person at the other end who expects a response. After 24 hours, even the most patient and understanding students begin to feel ignored. Responding involves discipline and scheduling. Fortunately, my journalism background and training make me appreciate a sense of urgency.

Most of my cyberstudents, traditional and nontraditional, have embraced this new way of learning. For many, clicking a mouse has replaced cracking the books. Two student responses should suffice: (1) "I am quite sorry to see this class end. Your responses to my assignments...have encouraged me to turn in my best work and given me self-confidence to express my ideas." (2) "I have enjoyed this class and now wonder if you teach an even better class in person."

Yes, we live in a Brave New World. Then again, maybe it should be appropriately christened a Brave New WWWorld.

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