

Beyond “College in a Can”: Teaching with Integrity and the Problem of Online Academia

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May 2012

Jasmine G sat across the desk from me, dandling her very active eighteen-month old son on her knee, talking to me about how hopeless and helpless she felt as she looked to her undergraduate commencement ceremony in May of this year. This extraordinary, twenty-five year old mother of two – her daughter is just turning five – is married to an enlisted man in the United States Air Force. She has been “living like a single mom” while he has been temporarily stationed in the Middle East for the past year and a half. She’s graduating and he’s finally coming home – literally, because once he returns, home for their family will become a small, desolate Air Force base community located in a place called Mountain Home, Idaho. I’m from Idaho and I can assure you of the ironies here: there are no mountains in Mountain Home and, for a young, African American couple from Virginia, life in this overwhelmingly trout-belly-white place could never really feel like home. But that is where they are bound and that is why Jasmine is so sad.

“There’s nothing there for me!” she explained with exasperation and not a small hint of student/maternal/graduating senior exhaustion. “What do I do once we get out there? It’s 40 miles to Boise, but even then, there isn’t a graduate program in political science or international relations or frankly, anything else I might want to study. I want to go on to become a humanitarian doing work with a non-profit organization making the world a better place for others. How am I going to do anything like that sitting in the desert of Mountain Home, Idaho? I can’t stand the thought of giving up my dreams. I want more than to be a stay at home mother.”

I’ve never said this to any of the nearly ten thousand students I’ve taught at VCU over the years, but for the first time in my academic career I said, “Let’s look at what might be available in an online master’s program for you. I think I know somebody at Tulane’s Payson Center. I seem to recall that they have an online Master’s in International Development. Perhaps that would work.” We spent much of the subsequent afternoon, with me breaking open my “kid’s corner” supplies of crayons and coloring books and toy cars and balls that inhabit my office closet for just such occasions (sometimes used by my own children as well), exploring online master’s programs around the country and around the world. The

pickings are slim; there are really only two choices – a handful of commercial “for profit” online programs, such as those offered by the so-called Phoenix University, or a smattering of online programs offered through established, reputable colleges and universities like Tulane or John’s Hopkins. It is unclear from reading the various websites how those online courses are conducted, but given my own experience with online education at VCU and my bias against for-profit education, my inclination was to steer her toward the academic institutions rather than the commercial ventures.

I have personally taught an online version of one of my most popular political science and women’s studies courses for more than fifteen years at VCU and yet I’m fairly well known at the CTE for my sincere skepticism of online education.¹ My skepticism is derived from several sources – some personal some professional – but all experience based. In recent years VCU has offered several faculty development courses online – notable among them are the near legendary but still mandatory faculty course on “terrorism” and the ubiquitous IRB certification program. It disturbs me greatly that I passed both of those courses with extremely high marks but remember virtually nothing from either of them. Indeed, once I learned what each of these courses entailed, I completed their requirements while doing several other things simultaneously. Learning was not actually necessary to complete either; instead, I simply needed a modicum of short-term recall and recognition and a pen and paper. Some years later I completed a much more extensive online course on teaching online – but the experience was very familiar. Ask me what I “learned” in that “class” and I honestly don’t think I can recall *any* content – just the enormous sense of frustration that the course created for me. It was the intellectual equivalent of a frozen dinner; though it was “pre-prepared” for me, I had to “cook it” myself; it took neither time nor attention to consume it; and I forgot it almost immediately once I was through with it. It was, in so many respects, just a “class in a can.”

How then, could I, in good conscience, either teach my own online courses or recommend them to a valued student? In my view, there is an inherent incommensurability between the idea of online “learning” and what education seems to me to really be about. In this short paper I will explore whether or not it’s actually possible to square that circle, drawing on my own experiences as both a student of some online classes and, more importantly, as an instructor of one that diverges dramatically from the models I’ve experienced in those online settings and as an in class professor with some 20 plus years

¹ The course is titled “Gender Politics in Popular Culture.” It requires students to complete five content modules over the time period of the course. The first module requires all students to individually watch the same film and write a critical essay of it as an ice breaker to get the class communicating with each other and to establish course ground rules, etc. Then students complete three content/genre modules, selecting from among 13 possible options. The genre modules include such areas as “Chick Flicks,” “Women of Color,” “The Cinematic Military and Gender,” “Fairy Tales and Feminisms,” and “Masculinities on Film.” Students must watch 4-5 films selected from a menu of possible films within each module and then write an integrated, comparative essay about the central topics encompassed in that module. Finally, students are required to view 2 currently playing films, read several professional reviews of the films, and then critically analyze how gender politics are produced within the films and reflected in the reviews of the films. At all points students must read and respond to all of the essays of all of their peers, and to my comments and responses to their essays and postings. Students also have a couple of online multiple choice quizzes that cover the assigned readings. I have no illusions about this aspect of the course; it is, essentially, an open-book quiz. That’s fine; at least they have to read them enough to be able to find the answers. It is also a requirement that they provide evidence of having done the readings in their essays.

experience. What I have to offer, in the end, is but one more paradox within that squared circle: I think it is possible to provide a course that has some academic merit and integrity through the online medium, but doing so ends up abrogating most of the institutional reasons one might want to do so in the first place,

Why teach online?

Many of the incentives that encourage institutions, faculty, and students to turn toward online “teaching” opportunities are readily obvious, but I’ll address a handful here. From an institutional perspective, it can be enticingly cheap to provide courses online. Once a faculty member has developed the pre-prepared “content” for “delivery” in a cyber-suitable format, the course becomes virtually self-taught for the people enrolled. This is the model used for VCU’s mandatory online faculty terrorism class. Students need only work through a set of pre-packaged “content modules” and then perform sufficiently on an electronically delivered and graded series of tests to “complete” the course. Such courses shift the labor needs of institutions from teaching faculty toward course “designers” and the minimal oversight of cyberclass managers or facilitators. Ironically, no particular knowledge or skill level is required to manage such courses, once they are crafted, so faculty actually become superfluous to their on-going delivery once designed. Additionally, online education in this format offers an economy of scale that was, until recently, simply unfathomable, even for institutions that have gone to “jumbo-tron” style lecture classrooms with massive numbers of students in stadium-like “educational arenas.” One Stanford online instructor famously boasts that he has enrolled more than 130,000 students in his asynchronous online course.² Using this kind of mass production educational model means that universities are freer to hire fewer faculty, more part-time faculty, or even dispense with faculty once courses are created and up and running.

While there are other models for online classes, ones that are designed around more interaction between students and faculty members, economies of scale and finding cheap sources of labor for off-loading the economically expensive burden of teaching continue to drive most public universities around the country today.³ Thus, the incentive to “can” online courses and hire TA’s or part-time course facilitators, even in the case of an already established, higher contact designed course, still looms large.

From the perspective of the students, online access is convenient, allowing them to learn “at distance” or simply in their pajamas, on their own living room couch, in an apartment that might be located just down the street from the university offering the course, perhaps with their kids sitting on their laps as they read and type online. The old model of the “correspondence course” has now cyber-morphed into the modern-day, technologically enabled, online course, but the advantages for the students remain the same: doing the class without having to attend the class. And thus, my impulse to encourage my very bright student, Jasmine, to seek an online degree. She may as well do *something* while she’s sitting in Idaho tending her kids. She has become a very capable “self-learner,” and with some systematic

² I am as skeptical of this format for delivering education as I am of the online method for very parallel reasons. See Bill Keller, “The University of Wherever,” NYT, October 11, 2011.

³ It is interesting to note that Universities have not also opted for a “part-time” administrator model in which they adjunct out administrative duties as a means for cutting costs.

coaching, some persistence, and a bit of luck, she could learn to ferret out a significant amount of information about international relations on her own. Perhaps what she could teach herself would even match the same information she would learn through an online degree program or even through the traditional classroom. What she can't provide for herself, however, are the credentials that attest to her actually having done so. The online degree system, as mitigated as it seems to be thus far, can at least provide some external confirmation of her having met someone else's performance requirements to qualify as having "learned" a required block of information.⁴ She can't physically get to a classroom, given her living situation, so the classroom can seemingly come to her. It beats counting scorpions in the Idaho desert!

I originally designed my own online course as an intersession or summer course precisely because so many students expressed the need to take a course while away from campus during our academic break periods. At that time, a history of budget cuts and reductions in the faculty teaching force were pushing us toward finding creative means to achieve an improved five-year graduation rate. The same cadre of teachers simply needed to offer more courses at times outside of the regular semester calendar in order to help our students graduate. In the intervening years, ironically, further budget cuts and an even greater reduction in the number of full-time faculty, have now moved us toward aspirations of achieving an increased *six*-year graduation rate! While I cap my online course at an overly ambitious 30, the University offers monetary incentives to faculty who open their classes beyond a 65 seat enrollment. They were able to lure me into that trap only once and I'll never do it again, for reasons that I hope to make clear below. In the fifteen years that I've taught this course, typically twice a year in an online format, some students have taken the course from around the country and even while abroad.⁵ The majority, it turns out, however, take the course from within easy commuting distance – just as many of them do during their regular academic semester courses.

In addition to flexibility in completing the course, the additional advantages of taking online courses frequently cited by commercial and other online teaching advocates include being able to work at one's own pace, having classroom anonymity, and not being required to speak in front of other students in a classroom setting.⁶

The incentives for faculty to create and "deliver" online courses are equally alluring. As most faculty know, while many of us became professors because of our love of teaching, the incentives and rewards at most public research institutions are structured around research productivity. Thus, it is in our

⁴ This of course is the same issue that plagues colleges and universities today and which necessitates "assessment" tools like tests, assigning course grades, and transcripts. Grades are supposed to help distinguish between levels of knowledge attained and course accomplishment in service to this problem of external validation.

⁵ It is my anecdotal experience, however, that the students who have enrolled while studying or traveling abroad, and even those who have taken the course while out of town, have not generally fared well. They mistakenly think they can just sort of "pop in" to the course once in awhile and "get it done" quickly. That is not the case, given my course design, and they are typically unsuccessful in the end.

⁶ As a political theorist I have to say, I am not persuaded by any of these arguments as the point of getting a college education is to stretch beyond one's comfort zone so that one can engage as a democratic citizen in our collect self-governance. Helping people avoid learning those lessons actually detracts from the attractiveness of the online classroom for me.

professional interest to minimize the time we spend on teaching and maximize the time we spend on research. Therefore, it makes sense for faculty to seek ways to make their teaching more “efficient” and less time consuming. For some faculty, this results in the cliché “frayed and worn out lecture note” syndrome. For others, it means resorting to electronically graded multiple choice tests for assessments. In my own case, as a tenured faculty member at a major research-focused state university, teaching 3 courses a semester while trying to do research (and be a good university citizen to boot) is simply exhausting. The more “automatic” I make my courses, the less contact time I spend with or on students, the more time I have to do what “counts.” Creating a “class in a can,” with pre-prepared, recorded lectures that are linked to essays or assignments I’ve crafted into modules, and electronically administered and graded multiple choice tests, would free up a significant amount of my time. Students are *time consuming* and online teaching creates an effective barrier between the teacher and the student that inevitably reduces face to face contact. While most *teachers* lament this; most researchers sigh with relief.

Furthermore, there is a great attraction to being able to sit and “teach” in *my pajamas*, on *my couch*, in *my house*, with *my children* running in every minute or two as I work. At least a part of me likes the anonymity and seeming freedom of not having to “get up” for my classroom persona and performance. It’s one of the things most of us love about doing our research; we can be utter slobs while we do much of it and we don’t have to make ourselves presentable to the world until we gear up for our annual research conference presentation! Unfortunately, what I have discovered is that I tend to ignore and “uh huh” my children when I am involved in teaching online – thus making me both a more mediocre teacher AND a more mediocre parent at the same time. Moreover, despite its efficiencies, teaching online becomes incredibly time consuming, even in “class in a can” models of online teaching, because students seem to believe they because they can access the class on a 24 hour a day basis, they can also access the teacher on a 24 hour basis. Thus, while I’m able to teach in my jammies, I find that I’m working *all the time*.⁷ The result is that the allure of “teaching online at home” has become somewhat of a chimera for me.

How does the online classroom “educate?”

Like traditional, embodied lectures and classrooms, online teaching models seem to fall into two gross categories; courses that are driven by the desire to transmit content or courses that center on critical thinking and thus communicative/discussion in order to make integrated sense of content. While these are not mutually exclusive approaches, and indeed each necessarily draws on elements of the other in their pedagogical methods, they do create distinct requirements for online classroom design. Content driven courses, like the mandatory VCU faculty terrorism course, obliges students to read a stock set of materials, and then simply tests them on that content for, primarily, recall and recognition. While some elements of comprehension and integration may also be required in the assessment tools for this model

⁷ There is some research that suggests there is a kind of “Facebook addiction” syndrome that I suspect may have equal salience when it comes to the endless urge to be checking one’s email or reading one’s class blog, discussions boards, etc. See, for example, Cecilie Schou Andreassen, Torbjørn Torsheim, Geir Scott Brunborg, and Ståle Pallesen (April 2012) Development of a Facebook Addiction Scale. *Psychological Reports*: Volume 110, issue 2, pp. 501-517.

of class design, the objectives generally center on transmitting particular information, rather than on developing integrated, sophisticated, or critically derived knowledge. This is the most pure form of a “class in a can.” Once the class has been designed and produced, no instructor is ever required for the course again. The electronic capabilities of various educational software programs now allow such a course to become fully automated.

The second model, the one driven by the goals of teaching critical thinking rather than content, employs course content as either the data/artifacts under study or simply as the informational platform upon which knowledge is then constructed through in-class dissection, discussion, analysis, and critical integration. This online class design is inherently *very labor intensive* and requires significant interaction either among the students or between the students and the faculty member, or in some cases, both. This is the model I use in my online course, titled, *Gender Politics in Popular Culture* and it is *incredibly time consuming* for me to teach and for my students to learn. (See FN 1 above) It requires them to individually watch several popular culture films and read several works of fiction, read numerous academic articles and books about popular culture, gender, and politics, and then to write a series of analytical essays about the films they watch and the books they read from the perspective of gender politics. They are required to simultaneously master elements of several intellectual disciplines and integrate them through a critical perspective that uses gender politics as the main lens of analysis. At the same time, they are required to read and respond to the essays of their peers, even when written about a different set of films or different topic area. My role, as the teacher, is to guide them through the process, respond to or redirect them when they make erroneous claims or observations, provide the framework for integration of the material through what I call my continuous online “lecture moments,” and to provide ample feedback, not only to their written essays, but to each of their threads and comments. Together, the class weaves an intellectual tapestry that is rich, layered and complex, but one that easily takes twice as much time for all of us as when I teach the class in the traditional in-class format. I can respond quickly and ubiquitously in class to questions, ideas, comments, or observations. Teaching online in this manner, however, is more akin to teaching 30 independent studies from within an electronic web that is constantly developing, evolving, and moving. I’ve charted the class for more than 10 years now. Students consistently report to me that the class “changed their life,” whether they’ve taken the class online or in the classroom. However, online students clearly learn very different lessons from those learned by their in class counter parts, and they simply learn less than those who take the class with me in the classroom. There is a vast difference between watching a film, for example, with me in the room to dissect it as we go along, pointing out nuance, motion, dialogue, political trope, etc, than when students watch the same film, alone at home, in their jammies with only their own history, perspective and prior knowledge to shape and inform their perceptions and observations. I try, as much as is possible, to arm them with as much of the critique as they would get in class with me, but the truth is, the online format necessarily robs the class of the kind of intellectual spontaneity that happens as I watch each film *with* them. Thus, even in this more labor intensive, hands-on, interactive model of online teaching, my participation is mitigated to the roles of tour guide and course manager; it remains up to them to teach themselves in the online environment.

So, what *is* education and what does it require?

Recently, I was privy to a conversation with a colleague whom I respect very much, but who has fully “drunk the Kool-Aid,” as we say idiomatically today, when it comes to online education. He defended his vehement enthusiasm for institutional online education by rhetorically asking me, “Why, given the fact that libraries are full of books, have we *ever* used the classroom model to teach? The internet is just like an easy access library; everything anybody wants to know is there! All we have to do is teach students the skills to be a life-long learner and they can educate themselves!” On the one hand, this is a simple truth. Anything anybody wants to learn that others have already learned is probably available in a written form somewhere. The problem, of course, is how to find it and how to understand it once we do so.⁸ We call this *research* in the social sciences and it is a time consuming process; one fraught with dead ends and false leads and mistaken interpretations and flawed assumptions. It takes a critical eye and a honed mind to separate the information from the knowledge, and the knowledge from the opinion, and *students*, by definition, are not yet experienced enough to do so. That’s why they need teachers.

Effective, traditional in-class teaching is labor and time intensive, requires a committed physical space, and necessitates that students and the faculty member will be physically present at the same time and in the same location at regular intervals. It anticipates that students will come to class prepared, for no lecture is ever sufficient by itself.⁹ Indeed, I explain to my students at the beginning of each semester that the learning process is like weaving; we are making a tapestry of knowledge, in which the readings I assign them are the warp, the lectures I provide them are the weft, and the discussions we all engage in are the shuttles that bring our threads together to make the fabric that becomes the tapestry’s image. It is an engaged, active, vibrant, *political and social* process.

The ironies of delivering an online course with academic integrity

My conclusion, then, is that neither teaching nor learning is an “efficient” activity; but then, efficiency really isn’t the *sine qua non* of human life. The traditional “walk, talk, and chalk” lecture approach to in class learning, which focuses on the persona on stage and requires a command performance from that teacher to really be effective, also requires the student to bring themselves to the classroom – open and ready to participate in the learning experience. In less traditional, more experiential, classrooms, though students may carry more of the active vocal burden of the course, the teacher still functions as the

⁸ The double-edged sword of a tool like Google is that it allows us to “search the world,” but Google’s search algorithm simultaneously captures, controls, and narrows our searching capability, even though most of us are oblivious to this fact. It’s somewhat like not being told there are other floors with other things available in our favorite library.

⁹ There are, of course, exceptions. One of my graduate school mentors, the late wonderful Wilson Carey McWilliams, was the Dumbledore of lecturers. I think I remember everything I ever heard him say in a classroom; he was just *that* engaging and just *that* good. By contrast, it is interesting to watch the TED YouTube videos or the MIT open access course lectures. They are interesting and one can “learn” a significant amount from them when it comes to facts and information, but if one really wants to *learn* something from them, they are stymied when their impulse to ask the teacher anything! It is an interesting but often frustrating experience to try to learn in this way; which is what research often tells about how students respond to online learning – they feel frustrated and want more contact with their professors!

“maestro,” conducting the disparate “conversations,” commenting and directing the flow of the conversation, challenging members of the classroom orchestra to rethink their interpretation, all with the aim of creating an integrated, harmonious, and rich learning experience. It is possible to come close to this experience using the online classroom format, but only if the teacher is really willing to teach.

My own experience as a teacher of an online course over the past fifteen plus years tells me that the primary institutional incentives and motivations for developing and offering online courses are simply at odds with what is required to make an online class an effective learning experience. Teachers are not books or journals; we’re human beings who think, reflect, respond, react, integrate, change, and live, what we know. We are constantly changing and growing and evolving ourselves; we are first and foremost, students. It’s why most of us do research; we never wanted to stop learning. It’s why we go to conferences to listen to the papers of our colleagues when we could just as easily wait for them to come out in print form – we need to *talk* about them with them in order to really digest them. In order for me to really be a *teacher* for my students, I have to be there. I am convinced that the educational process fundamentally requires “being there” for the alchemical experience of *learning* to take place. If we are to do this with integrity, then we must face both the realities of the limitations and the requirements of online learning. If we do not, then all we are delivering is just more college in a can.