

WHO SAYS ONLINE LEARNING IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR THE REAL THING? IT IS THE REAL THING!

Those who dismiss online learning as a parody of “real” or “genuine” education would do well to remember Marshall McLuhan’s famous aphorism, “The medium is the message”. What McLuhan was suggesting is that we tend to focus on the obvious with any new invention and overlook much more profound, longer-lasting structural changes that innovation effects. An example I often give is the invention of the printing press in the 15th century. To the unreflective observer the printing press is merely a machine for reproducing text, but that would be to miss the whole point of the invention. The printing press literally *created* a literate society, and it brought Europe the Reformation and the Enlightenment as religious objectors and scientists alike deployed the new machine to reshape the foundations of society itself.

The current debate about whether face-to-face learning is better or worse than online learning is another instance of focusing on the superficial while overlooking the underlying message or, as McLuhan would have it, looking at the “figure” and ignoring the “ground”. Electronic communication is the new printing press and the so-called Arab Spring is only one of the dramatic social changes for which it has been responsible. Electronic communication is transforming society in truly staggering ways and there is no going back now.

As for education, it will change in two fundamental ways. First, there will be no need for what I call broadcast approaches to teaching. The archetypal form of broadcast teaching is, of course, the lecture, where the teacher stands in front of the class and broadcasts the same information to everyone in the room. This form of teaching is no longer required. Not only is there infinitely more information available in cyberspace, but that information is customizable to individual students, so that the one class of students can arrive at the same destination via very different routes depending on their academic background, skills and interests. Second, the combination of social networking and increased bandwidth means that there will soon be no distinction between online and interpersonal communication; indeed, I believe this generation of young people has already given up on the distinction. When young people text one another or post on Facebook, they don’t think to themselves, “Now I’m leaving the real world and going into some second-rate online environment”. To young people, it’s all one – they meet, they tweet, they stream video, they post on Facebook, and they share the most intimate details about themselves with friends, some of whom they may have never even met. So anyone who says that online learning prevents the kind of deep learning that only human to human contact can provide understands neither the medium nor the messenger. Whether my generation likes it or not, young people today live and move and have their being in cyberspace just as surely as they do in playgrounds, parks and pubs.

As a result of all this, students are increasingly voting with their feet and not turning up to class and many universities are responding with punitive measures to make them attend. My view is that it’s too late for that, that the future belongs to universities that embrace the new medium and harness its transformative power to forge new approaches to teaching, to moulding individual character and to shaping the future of human societies.

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