

Teaching with Technology: A Discussion

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D.A. MUISE noted that the H-Canada list has had a recent discussion of the use of the web in teaching. There are plans to launch more Canadian history locations on the web, including a Canadian history portal site co-sponsored by the Canadian Historical Association. He also pointed out that people in this room have been involved in distance education in other ways than through the web.

BROOK TAYLOR observed that at Mount Saint Vincent University the students are 80 per cent women and 60 per cent are not recent high school graduates. Students have a mix of backgrounds and interests and they take various kinds of courses, including classroom, distance, video, television, computer and off-site courses. There is a support group for distance education, as technical support is necessary. At Mount Saint Vincent, some of these technologies are also being used at on-site locations so asynchronous discussion sites are used in which students are asked to go on-line with answers to reading questions before class. Web-based instruction can be a supplement or context for course instruction. There are pedagogical issues involved, and seminars are organized for off-site educators. In addition, workload is a major issue as it needs to be defined, and this will mean looking at underlying principles. But there are certainly opportunities.

MARGARET CONRAD agreed that there are both questions and opportunities. A preliminary question that is often skipped over is the purpose of the university. If it is to create a scholarly community around such themes as Atlantic Canada studies, then such technologies as the web and radio may enable people to take part while working in isolation. But without access to visiting speakers and conversations with others, a sense of community can be lost. In a scholarly community, students should see that the academic workload includes research as well as teaching, and only part of the activity is the delivery of courses. If students can e-mail a professor at any time, it implies professors are available night and day and that their principal activity is the delivery of courses. Does this change the university as place for the development and dissemination of ideas? There is also the issue of standards and providing credentials. How can you evaluate a student's capacity to produce particular work when you do not really know the student? And plagiarism is an issue as well. Downloading is actively done, and students often say they do not know the distinctions. Such matters need to be discussed and dealt with. STEPHEN DUTCHER commented that in junior high school his sons are encouraged to download work and submit it. This is not just a university problem. It is happening at the lower grade levels as well.

JEFF WEBB noted that the commercialization of the universities is eroding the medieval nature, the precapitalist social formation, of the university as an institution. It is not just technology that is causing this erosion. The social structure of technology determines its use, and uses that do not conform to commercial models are proving increasingly difficult to sustain. It is more difficult to use technology for non-business purposes. We are being trained to point-and-click, and now we want results in nano-seconds. This may be devaluing the thought and work that are needed in order to find an answer. TOBY SMITH stated that this development seems to be part of a way of viewing the world that sees politics, economy and social life as a kind of "efficiency

regime”. This managerial way of being in the world is about identifying clear objectives and going after them. We see this happening in administrative hiring. However, we are involved in a long, slow enterprise of training people in critical thinking and synthetic thinking – a messy kind of thinking. There is a shift taking place.

MARILYN GERRIETS stated that she could remember when videos came into general use. It was expected that videos would replace instructors. It did not happen. We need to consider what the purpose of the lecture is. It is about real persons interacting, even though other forms may also work. The use of the web does not preclude using the other tools of the traditional correspondence course. If students are in a situation where they cannot fit into the traditional classroom, then this is also about access.

RICHARD MacKINNON noted that one of the recent strike issues at the University College of Cape Breton was distance education, and it was not resolved. The preferred delivery mode appears to be through overload assignments or through the creation of a second or third class of untenured and insecure professors who are asked to do the work. JEFF WEBB stated that he currently belonged to that third class and that he taught more students than many faculty members but at lower pay.

DAVID PRITCHARD said that even though he made his living in video production, he believed that there was no substitute for having a faculty member at the front of a class. TOBY SMITH observed that there is an assumption that people learn when information is transmitted. However, people learn in different ways. One technology cannot cover all possible ways of learning.

HANNAH LANE noted that it is easier to teach modern topics on websites, as the available sources are predominantly 20th-century ones. It is more difficult for the 19th-century and colonial periods. How many images are available, and what is the quality of newspaper materials in this form?

JILL McMICKEN said that she had taught a web-based course at the University of Prince Edward Island and wondered whether web-based teaching was more time-consuming than classroom teaching. JEFF WEBB stated that web-based teaching seems to require a great deal of flexibility. In his experience, teachers are expected to be available to students at all times and he has received calls on Friday nights and Sunday mornings.

ANNE WOOD added that she has used problem-centred teaching methods for 30 years in education courses. The web could be useful for this approach, especially for monitoring student progress by asking questions and bringing the class along by continual follow-up on students’ work.