

Redefining post-secondary teaching

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Graduates at the University of Winnipeg's last fall convocation. The way post-secondary students are being taught is changing.

Harvard, MIT and Stanford are key players in a global rush to facilitate the education of millions through distance education. The goal is noble, particularly when courses are free. Anyone with a computer will welcome lectures from professors who are gifted speakers as well as experts in their field. Students may access electronic textbooks and even have opportunities for classroom discussion — although one wonders how lively the discussion was when MIT's first online course had more students than all of its living graduates combined.

Why should a retired professor care about this? Because education at a distance is redefining the word teaching in ways I find disturbing. What excites them are the shaping of course content, the refinement of delivery systems and the ensuing, mind-boggling student numbers. By this autumn, MIT alone expects to have 500,000 students in its online courses. Perhaps detecting a whiff of distance scepticism, one professor of Internet studies insists teaching online "is much harder than teaching a class face-to-face."

And there is the problem. Classes have no face, and classes cannot be taught. They, the impersonal collective, can only be given information. The degree of mastery that results from such data provision depends on the individual learner and on a teacher's effectiveness. That effectiveness is not confined to a lecture hall presided over by a professor in the flesh or by a screen of talking parts and visual confection. What happens within that classroom, the degree of individual success within it, depends on what many of us thought teaching was all about: one-on-one

contact with people who know each other's name; face-to-face conversations about work underway or completed; sometimes about future plans; occasionally about present, non-academic circumstances that compromise academic performance.

The principal goal is improvement of that performance, not simply for the sake of a letter grade but ultimately for the development of skill sets and the growth of self-confidence. That is what teachers do; and to succeed with that individual — whose name we know — we fall back on the familiar: confirming that we see them as individuals whose progress we care about; never confusing telephone, or electronic exchanges with in-person conversation; never settling for mediocre performance or allowing a performer to misunderstand the word; projecting a confidence that something better is possible without understating the effort required. Face to face, one on one, a proven formula.

Old-fashioned, too, some will insist. Or at least no longer workable in an age that often confuses efficiency with convenience. Online learning is here to stay and deserves qualified applause. More people will have more access to more information than ever before and, hopefully, will get some instruction on how to organize and analyze massive amounts of data and how to express coherently what they have learned. Such instruction, of course, has long been the goal of close-at-hand, in-the-flesh teachers.

But post-secondary teachers often face several obstacles. Class size is one. The difference in teaching effectiveness between a live lecture hall of 300 and an online course of 1,000 is probably marginal. Neither can offer much in the way of individual tuition unless the budgetary infrastructure will support squads of teaching assistants and markers. It seems ironic the growth of campus-based class sizes actually invites the expansion of mass teaching from a distance.

Another potential obstacle is the expectation of peer-reviewed research and publication. And that expectation is inspired by a belief that it is the professor's reputation as a national-international research scholar, rather than that professor's reputation as a classroom teacher, that best serves individual and institutional interests. Especially if that reputation inflates with successive research grants. With too many students to teach, and more kudos to acquire from a publishing career, it is tempting to assign teaching to second place, an obligation to be met but something that distracts from the main arena.

There is one more obstacle, and that is the triumph of three credit courses over those of six. This development is primed by considerations of programmatic flexibility as well as by those of personal convenience. But it does mean half as much predictable time spent together by the same teacher and the same student over the course of an academic year. So if a teacher's chances of doing something worthwhile increase with time spent together, shorter courses must compromise those chances.

Add that to the often unwieldy class sizes, and that to the competitive allure of research acclaim, and those to the undeniable attractions of online data provision, and some will understand why I think we are re-defining post-secondary teaching.

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