



DIALOGUE



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NEW EDUCATION

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Aristophanes envisions the debate between Old Education and New in the most severe way.

Old Education says of the New:

You, a Logic? Why you
cheap, stunted Loquacity!

You pipsqueak Palaver!

New Education replies:

I will refute you with
unconventionality. With
ultra modernity, With
unorthodox ideas.¹

Advocates of on-line instruction and their skeptics generally have a more polite discussion, but beneath the surface, there are similar suspicions on both sides. Supporters argue on-line education offers expanded access for an under-served population. It brings the new technology to the educational setting.

Critics reply that a traditional and essential value is lost. The educational community is, if not lost, seriously restricted. On-line education presents barriers to the personal relationship among students and between student and faculty. Aspects of the curriculum that require personal contact between student and instructor are ill-served in an on-line format.

Defenders contend that all these objections can be met by a careful and thorough application of the technology.

Colleges grapple with this question not only at this conceptual level but at the practical level as well. Should there be a limit on the number of on-line classes taught by any one instructor? Is there a workload difference between the traditional class and the on-line offering? How do contract faculty who teach primarily on-line meet their college service obligation? Can the methods of evaluation for the traditional class be transferred to the on-line class?

My aim is not to solve these institutional questions, nor do I think there is much benefit starting with the broad conceptual debate. I want to begin with what one on-line instructor said during a recent discussion, namely that the manner of instruction did not greatly differ in each of the formats. What I think I can show is that while there may not be great differences, there are significant differences. These differences are such that one cannot simply make the transition from the traditional class to the on-line class without addressing the special and unique issues contained in the on-line format. I indicate my view in each of the seven "Good practices" listed below.

The basis for these ideas comes from my own experience of teaching in the Old Education (Philosophy) and in the New Education (Business Office Technology) in both a lecture format and in an on-line course. I should also say that I understand that neither are pure categories. Lecture classes that occur in a wired classroom allow on-line access. "Turnitin.com" is available for written work in both methods. Mixing procedures from the two formats has generally been successful in my experience, but this is certainly not a scientific study. As a starting point, I want to examine each of the so-called Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education as they might apply in a non-hybrid setting, that is as they might be understood as a feature of the concepts of each rather than the practice of either:²

Good Practices encourages:

1. Student-faculty contact
2. Cooperation among students
3. Active learning

Good Practice:

4. Gives prompt feedback
5. Emphasizes time on task
6. Communicates high expectations
7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning

(continued on page 2)

NEW EDUCATION *(continued from page 1)*

1. STUDENT - FACULTY CONTACT. On-line education achieves contact primarily through e-mail. Questions can be asked and answered, ideas can be exchanged, confusions clarified. So, at a minimum, student contact can be achieved. I say "at a minimum" because "contact" can also be more inclusive. On my way across campus, I passed a previous student and asked how he was doing. He replied that he was about to give a speech in a class on a current election issue in which he was incorporating some concepts he learned in our Critical Thinking class. This may not be an Ed Code "contact," but I think of it as a reinforcement of our educational goals. I benefited from that contact, as I think he did.

On another occasion, during office hours, I came to believe a student was having some physical problems perhaps related to substance abuse. In conversation, he mentioned a future appointment with his college counselor. Allowing for privacy, I will follow up with the counselor.

Neither of these examples would likely occur nor lend themselves to being experienced on-line. I think we all could produce like examples; I am also a traditionalist enough to believe that the goal of student contact is not achieved when either of us is in our underwear or bathrobe.

2. COOPERATION AMONG STUDENTS. This has various manifestations depending on the curriculum. Perhaps the clearest case is in a lab portion, say in a computer or chemistry course. Here the usual promotional brochure shows fresh-faced eager students collected around the computer screen, begoggled students looking at test tubes with both amazement and satisfaction. It is hard to imagine how this same scenario could be captured in an on-line promotional brochure, but this just may mean that on-line instruction is not suited for a typical lab section. Student cooperation in problem-solving exercises can be achieved, to some extent, using discussion groups and chat rooms, but it has to be monitored lest it degenerate into gossip and phone number exchange. There is also a side benefit to at least in-class group work; the punk rocker may have an insight not expected by other members of the group. In addition, my traditionalist bias reappears here, too. I think it nice to be dressed when working with others.

3. ACTIVE LEARNING. This measure says students must do more than just memorize and "spit back." They must relate what they learn to their daily life. I am not entirely sure how an instructor can effect this in either method, so on-line may be no worse off than lecture. Clearly some

subjects have an advantage over others; for example a course in nutrition might be better suited than an introductory course in Pre-Socratic thought. But my thought here is that the on-line instructor and the traditional lecturer are equally challenged. Some instructors have told me that their on-line students are more self-directed, meaning, I guess, active learners. But they go on to admit that it is only true in some of their classes.

4. PROMPT FEEDBACK (not just prompt return of assignments). Others tell me that an instructor not responding is the most frequent complaint from on-line students. If so, the problem may be fostered by the on-line format. It is easier in lecture instruction to quickly respond to a question; in on-line instruction, the e-mail has to be sent, the recipient must read it, respond and send back a reply only to wait for it to be read and digested. Both the on-line student and instructor need to understand the special problems on-line instruction presents to this good practice.

5. TIME ON TASK. If I understand this measure correctly, it says the instructor must help the student to effectively manage time. In practice this must mean that the amount of homework assigned is possible in the time allocated, that the instructor sets an example

(continued on page 3)

NEW EDUCATION *(continued from page 2)*

by effectively using the lecture hour and practices reasonable turn-around for papers, quizzes, and exams (see #4). As in #3, I am not sure what more an instructor can do to effect this (unless it is a specific course in Time Management). So as in #3, I do not see any specific advantage or disadvantage in either format.

6. HIGH EXPECTATIONS. In the broadest sense, this is sort of a meta-result. Achieve 1-5 and you are on your way to 6. Therefore, where I have said there are special barriers to the on-line format (#'s 1, 2 and 4) they may spill over to this measure. But there is another species of expectation that I am told is especially important in on-line

offerings— instructor organization and clarity. (This is another case of Aristotle's imparting virtue by example.) Almost all I have talked to say that logical clarity in the course material is a must for on-line offerings, but this is nothing special for on-line education.

7. DIVERSE TALENTS. On-line education may win this one syllogistically—diverse ways of learning are good, on-line is a diverse way of learning; therefore, on-line is good. There are students who will profit from an on-line format, students whose schedule demand it, students who can work independently, and students who more actively can direct their own academic work (See #3).

In summary, #7 makes the case for including an on-line curriculum. What the above shows, I think, is that the optimism needs to be accompanied by skepticism. In those Good Practices where I believe I have shown problems, on-line instruction may not achieve that specific measure. In other practices, special attention may be needed to accomplish the objective.

Footnotes

¹ Aristophanes, "The *Clouds*", translated by William Arrowsmith, University of Michigan Press, 1962

² I found these principles in a document from Chico State. I quote from that source: "These principles were compiled in a study supported by the American Association on Higher Education, the Education Commission on the States, and The Johnson Foundation."

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