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SHOULD LIBERAL ARTS COURSES GO ONLINE?

*To attain certain goals, students and
teachers must be fully present to one another*

By William Evans

What is the good of liberal arts education? Can online and distance learning courses contribute to that good? Can such courses be justified on any grounds other than that they might help to solve the parking problem at your college?

In a recent *Conversations* essay, Robert Bellah offered a useful way to understand the good of studying philosophy, theology, English literature, foreign languages, natural science, etc. Bellah distinguished three candidates: formation of character; critical thinking; getting a job.

It should be evident that if either the second or third is the proper goal of liberal education, then online and distance learning courses can contribute to it. Take the third: get a job. Even if, as some critics argue, there are severe limits to the learning of skills by remote means – one can't learn to become a surgeon by online study – beginners and novices can get started on their lower-level studies, e.g. introductory courses, by remote means. A good chunk of the curriculum then could be loaded into online courses and a lot of requirements satisfied without any teachers or students ever actually meeting. Think of the cost-efficiency of delivering such courses online – not to mention the parking spaces freed up.

Readers of this essay probably recoil at the idea that liberal education is a mere means to the end of getting a job. Anyway, if that is the goal, what is the place of philosophy or history or Spanish literature? Perhaps the more legitimate-seeming goal of developing critical thinking skills recommends itself; for shouldn't students, however job-possessed they are, learn to think for themselves? What is more, they ought to want to, not only so that they become autonomous adults, but also because they want (and rightly so) interesting and challenging jobs, those that can't be done by mere drones.

Here philosophy and the other liberal arts might find a

place. In philosophy, in this view, what a professor talks about (Plato et al.) is by the way; it's the skills of critical thinking that count. And online courses can foster such skills, because the topics of critical thinking can be abstracted into lessons and delivered electronically to students wherever they are. Students can learn to analyze arguments, identify fallacies, test hypotheses, and so on. There is no need for any human beings to meet face to face in order to meet the goal of critical thinking. (In fact, to meet that goal, there is really no need to study Plato (et al.) at all, since any examples of arguments and reasoning could serve. But whether or not the study of the likes of Plato is necessary for liberal education is a story for another time.)

If this is right, then the second and third goals, critical thinking and getting a job, intersect, and within both goals online courses have a place. So will your car when you drive to campus.

But is the good of liberal education either critical thinking or getting a job? Bellah offers a third possibility: the formation of character. It is good that students can get good jobs; it is good that they learn to think for themselves. Is formation of character “by the way” — something extra, perhaps nice if you can get it but inessential to liberal education?

Formation of character is certainly not by the way in the tradition of *cura personalis* of Jesuit colleges, nor should it be so in any college professing to teach the liberal arts. So I'll set aside justifying the formation of character as our proper goal and ask instead: can online courses contribute to that goal?

In order to answer this I want to ask a different question: what is lost when liberal arts courses go online and when

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students and teachers are no longer present to one another? And I want to answer it by talking about what we do and about what actually goes on in the classroom, seminar, tutorial, lab, etc.

Any teacher of the intellectual disciplines that make up the liberal arts pursues the truth about something in certain ways. Even within one discipline, philosophy, say, each teacher exhibits a style in pursuing the truth that is quite unlike other teachers of philosophy. If style matters, then philosophy cannot be taught online, since style would be largely nullified. So what is so special about the style of a teacher? Is style merely his or her quirks or personal idiosyncrasies, such as talking too fast, or lacking any sense of humor, or requiring that students bring the book to class? Does a teacher's style have anything to do with the pursuit of truth that characterizes the intellectual disciplines of the liberal arts?

The answer is emphatically yes, and the reason why it's yes rules out teaching liberal arts online. Style is not mere quirks. Style includes anything that

goes into how a teacher pursues the truth and how he or she deals with students in doing so. Each teacher and each class is unique; but in this uniqueness there are deep and important connections among all the liberal arts.

To see this, consider what we actually do in the classroom. We teach some "content," e.g., Plato's *Republic*, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, the Big Bang Theory. We do so by giving, on each occasion, an example to students of how the truth is pursued in this discipline. While each discipline may be irreducible to the others in methods and topics, each of us embodies our concern for understanding the topic and our competence in dealing with it, and thus shows that there is something to learn. Each of us also embodies our honesty, in not necessarily claiming to know all the right answers; our willingness to put forward ideas

*Does the teacher's style
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Saint Peter's College professor William Evans engages students in philosophy.

that might upon examination prove wrong or inadequate; our courage in defending some idea even if uncertain.

But there is more: how do I, in teaching Plato's *Republic*, deal with students? Do I listen to them? Do I criticize fairly? Do I see that I can be harsh in criticizing one student but must be gentle in criticizing

another? Am I patient when students don't grasp some idea? Am I impatient when I should be impatient? And in all of this (and more) what students learn that is definitive of the liberal arts, as Michael Oakeshott put it, is not an item on the syllabus and cannot be taught overtly or by precept.

Online there is no mood, because there are no students who show, without even being able to put into words, their boredom, interest, perplexity, or mirth.

What students learn, or, better, begin to acquire, are certain qualities of mind and character: the ability to recognize and admit one's ignorance, and so see that there is something to learn; an open-mindedness, humility, and even wonder, that results from that awareness; attentiveness in listening to others; fairness in criticizing others; the courage to defend oneself when criticized and the courage to accept fair criticism, without resentment, from others; patience; concentration, and so on. In short, the intellectual and moral virtues.

Can this be done by online courses? Is the actual presence of teachers and students with one another dispensable? No. There is no learning of the virtues where there is little or nothing at stake. In the actual presence of others one feels the blankness of one's ignorance when one cannot answer well. Feeling such blankness is an opportunity to know that one does not know. Can such glimpses of self-knowledge occur online, where nothing is at stake? In the actual presence of others students can sense, without necessarily being able to explain, that they have spoken well or badly by the actual responses of the others in the class – the dull stares, the nodding or shaking of heads, the looks or murmurs of recognition or surprise, the glance of approval on the face of a friend, none of which is possible online.

All of this goes into what Berkeley philosopher Hubert Dreyfus calls the mood of the class, to which we must be sensitive in our pursuit of the truth with

our students. Mood involves what teachers and students actually experience as interesting or boring, salient or marginal, relevant or irrelevant. This perception is often marginal, out of the corner of one's eye, so to speak, an often inarticulate sense that things are going well or badly. This means that I as the teacher must take my cue both from what students actually say and from what they don't say but show in the class. And this particular occasion in which I and the students sense the mood of the class is unrepeatable: what do I do now, in the presence of this student in this class who has asked a question, or has answered well or badly, or who sits there mutely?

What do I do now when I sense that my exposition of Plato or Hume or Kant is not going well? Do I walk around, tell a joke, shift to a new example or perspective, yell at students to wake up? It all depends on this class, at this time, and on what has gone on before in this class. It all depends on my sense of this student, and that one, and that one: who is bored, who is interested, who is perplexed, who is laughing and who is not. Online there is no mood, because there are no students who show, without even being able to put into words, their boredom, interest, perplexity, or mirth.

By my sense of the mood of the class — and by my sensing the students' sense of that mood, and their sensing my sense of it — I may be able to teach the intellectual and moral virtues in all that I do. As Oakeshott also noted, this is done by tone of voice, in gesture, in asides, in oblique utterances, and, most of all, by example; by what I have called style.

If we consider what we actually do in the classroom, we find the very conditions for the teaching and learning of the virtues. But these conditions are utterly lacking from that land of impoverished resources and bleak horizons of online and distance learning that Dreyfus called *Cyberia*. If we take the formation of character as the good, the proper goal of liberal education, then we ought to consign online and distance learning to the outer margins of the curriculum (or even get rid of it altogether), and figure out some other way to solve our parking problem.