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TEACHING IN THE VIRTUAL CIRCUS

The multitasked mind and spirit

By James VanOosting

Much has changed about college teaching in the thirty years I've been trying to do it, not least the roles of professor and student. Many of these changes are due, I'm guessing, to the arrival of digital media as consumer goods. Not those technologies under a professor's control—e-mail, virtual office hours, and threaded discussions. I'm thinking of the i-connectivity of students in the forms of iPod, iPhone, IM, and the like.

From Know-it-All to Know-Nothing. One indicator of change has been the morphing of nouns to describe a professor. Back in the day, one was thought to be a general-knowledge 'authority.' This tweedy personage evolved into a discipline-specific 'expert.' Next came the 'content provider,' apparently when my back was turned. Now, authority, expertise, and content-provision are all passé, cap-sized by the wakes of Wikipedia and other Ask-Me-Anythings. Any digitized text is less than six degrees of separation from the papyri of Alexandria. Who needs an old-world professor scribbling on white board when one holds a three-ounce wizard in the palm of one's hand?

Such changes, I suspect, are a good thing. By relinquishing the encyclopedic, one may revivify the Socratic, shape shifting from cognoscente to conver-

sationalist. Witness the triumph of gerunds: reasoning trumps reasons; thinking outwits thoughts. Students seem to prefer engaged-by-learning to regaled-by-knowledge. Who knew?

From Multi- to Single-Tasking. Undergrads crave sensory stimulation and demand speed. I'm told they can listen to iTunes, instant message, watch TV, talk on the phone, play video poker, and read a magazine all at the same time, although I've not witnessed this for myself. Their split-focus, broadband, concentration differs in kind, not degree, from my slow-witted cogitation. I'm aware of an experiment measuring cognitive complexity, language comprehension, and integration of visual and acoustic signals in both multi-taskers and single-taskers. It turns out they perform at about the same level, although multi-taskers exhibit a slight deficit in retention.

I persist in believing there's some singular value in single-tasking. My students and I talk about this. They're doubtful, frankly, but willing to listen. I hypothesize that meditating on the long-term consequences of U.S. foreign policy, for instance, goes better if one turns the TV off, especially cable news.

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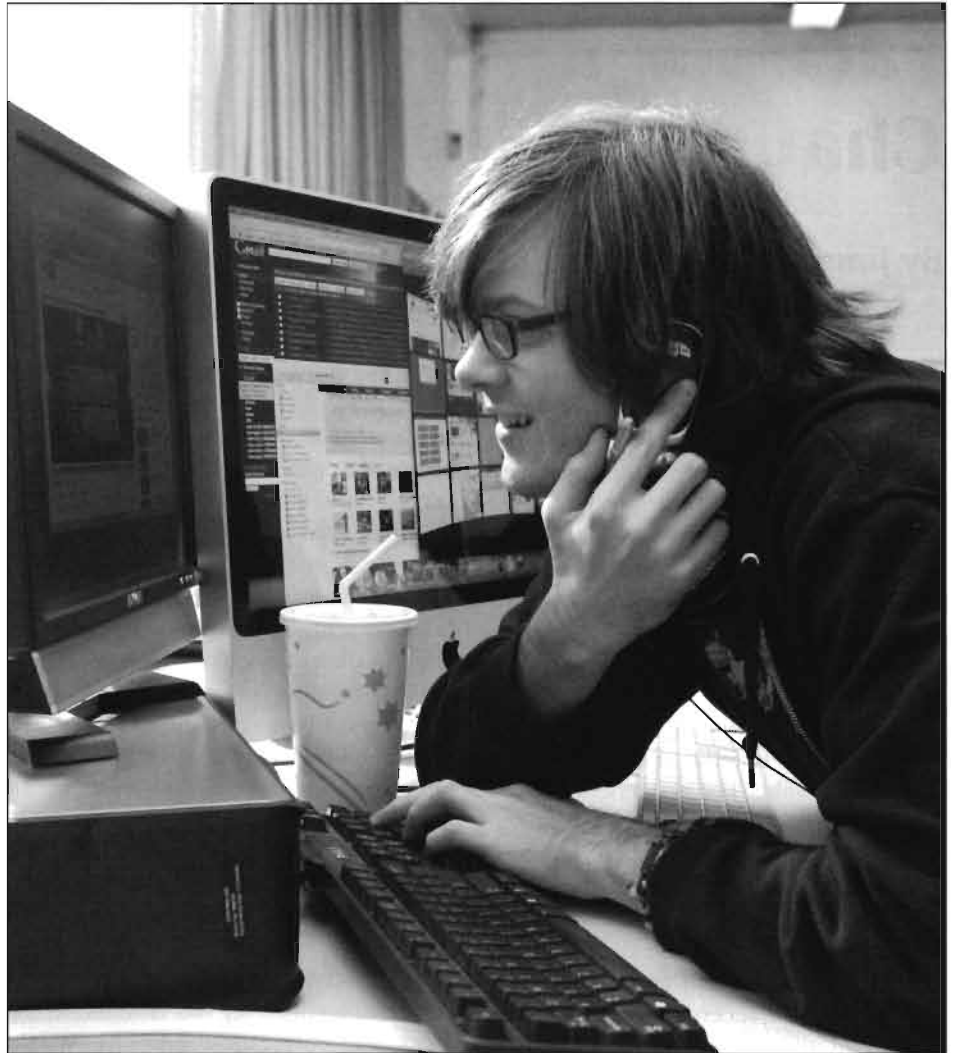
To contemplate the sneakier aspects of Incarnation, ditto: mute the music. If I taught golf, archery, sailing, piano, or chess, rather than media theory, I believe I'd be more persuasive when advocating for the benefits of single-tasking. Only a few of my students have memorized the first 100 lines of the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* in Middle English ('Whan that Aprill, with his shoures soote...') as I did in adolescence. Given that assignment, the argument for single-tasking would become moot.

Professor as Trapeze Coach in the Virtual Circus. John Steinbeck believed "teaching is the greatest of the arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit." If he lived in today's cyber-circus, I wonder whether Steinbeck might have accepted a trapeze analogy for teaching? Students are falling all over themselves learning how to fly through virtual space with the greatest of ease. Not a few of them get hurt, some seriously so. The least I can do for them, I believe, is to climb the tallest ladder, rosin my hands, and help connect one swinging thought to the next, catching the wrists of each apprentice within their troupe of death-defying learners.

Unburdened of expertise, I take on the maieutic. I can demo how to grab the bar, when to let go, and how to fall without killing oneself. If the big top is tall enough, and the arc of the trapeze is long enough, students may even come to enjoy unanticipated benefits of single-minded concentration. (Henri Nouwen invoked the trapeze as a model for faith; in his case, however, the rhetorical trope became a literal, gymnastic exercise.)

I hope I give my students some of the intellectual stamina required to single-task, as well as some persuasive reasons for doing so. What they give me, I know, is a greater appreciation for the value of multi-tasking, along with the courage to try it more often. Meanwhile, I give thanks for all forms of multi-tasking discourse:

Metaphors and similes
Compound-complex sentences



Semi-colons
Irony and paradox
Yiddish
Haiku
Improvised rap lyrics that reverence
bygone music
Baby Jesus
Abraham
Inter-racial romance within segregated
communities
Near-death experiences
Plus, all lions and lambs that lie down together
To wit: Blessed be the clowns, jugglers, bareback
riders, contortionists, and trapeze artists in the Virtual
Circus of Higher-and-Higher Ed. May God preserve all
three rings under the biggest top, simultaneously. ■