

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 27

Article 10

4-1-2005

Forum: Jacques Barzun on Jesuit Education

J. Robert Barth

Raymond J. Clough

Brian Young

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations>

Recommended Citation

Barth, J. Robert; Clough, Raymond J.; and Young, Brian (2005) "Forum: Jacques Barzun on Jesuit Education," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 27, Article 10.

Available at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol27/iss1/10>

JACQUES BARZUN ON JESUIT EDUCATION

FORUM

“Classroom technology consists of a piece of chalk and...”

Introduction: Ray Schroth, S.J.

‘Teaching is a person-to-person encounter,’ says cultural historian and critic Jacques Barzun, and sometimes the teacher’s attempts to be “creative” by using technology simply get in the way. In his monumental cultural history, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life* (2000), Barzun makes clear his respect for the Jesuit educational tradition:

Meanwhile, by care and thought and continually revised methods, the Jesuits shone as schoolmasters — unsurpassed in the history of education. They taught secular subjects as well as church doctrine and did so with unexampled understanding and kindness toward their pupils. Their success was due to the most efficient form of teacher training ever seen. They knew that born teachers are as scarce as true poets and that the next best cannot be made casually out of indifferent materials, so they devised a preparation that included exhaustive learning and severe winnowing of the unfit at every phase of a long apprenticeship...

From Descartes to Voltaire and beyond, a good many philosophers and scientists were educated by the Jesuits. Some of these bright pupils went on to undermine the dogmas they had so well learned; they became leaders of the 18C Enlightenment, to whom the church was the “infamous thing” they must crush. — *From Dawn to Decadence*, p.42.

Jacques Barzun’s “What Is a School?: An Institution in Limbo,” originally an address to secondary school teachers, is published, with another essay, “Trim the College,” in pamphlet form by the Hudson Institute. Though its immediate audience is

not university professors, it is a stimulating and challenging address, filled with practical advice on how to conduct a class which applies to any age group. In fact the traditional Jesuit college in the 19th century ran from grammar school through a master’s degree.

Two paragraphs touch on our discussion of traditional Jesuit pedagogy and contemporary technology. We have invited three teachers to comment.

Professor Barzun warns against the teacher substituting “special projects,” which might be entertaining, for real learning. Then he continues:

As for the devices called teaching aids, they are of dubious use. Too often, films, projections, discs, and field trips are an excuse for evading work. True, these provide for teachers and taught a change of pace, a relief from routine; and as shown by the legendary “Hawthorne experiment,” variety in work increases output. But if in class the variation takes up time adjusting equipment and adds little or nothing that fits the current lesson plainly and closely, precious time is wasted. It is rather the teacher who should change the pace and vary the action — going from description to drill to recitation; asking a sudden question in the middle of lecturing; discussing exams past and to come; summing up; and not being afraid to comment like a student or an outsider on the classroom action itself. If a greater break is needed, it would be better to declare a “holiday under guidance” and go to a museum or the zoo or the canning factory and see and hear about their offerings. After which, the teacher makes the point that the outing was a lesson in the use of leisure time.

The same objection holds for the pretense of “doing research” in “team work” fashion in the library or (as I have seen it) with paperback books on the classroom floor. As for the attempt to bypass teach-

ing by using computers, it is but another delusion. Like the now discarded “teaching machines,” they require from the teacher so much intelligent adaptation of the program to the rest of the work that they must be ranked with other time-wasting devices. Teaching is a person-to-person encounter; it is a form of conversation, even though at times silent on one side. Classroom technology consists of a piece of chalk and a blackboard eraser.

POWERPOINT AND SAINTE CHAPELLE

J. Robert Barth, S.J.

Technology, Yes. But ...

Technology will be as dull, or as creative, as the mind that makes it. Socrates, as far as we know, used no visual aids, but Moses under divine inspiration, we are assured used tablets of stone and a staff that parted the waters of the Red Sea. Both, most would admit, were teachers of high accomplishment. Medieval monks illuminated their manuscripts not only to make them works of art but also to illuminate the words of the texts they copied. The stained glass and sculpture of Chartres and the soaring towers of Notre Dame were not only objects of beauty but teaching tools. For it is not only our minds that must be educated, but our whole persons. We need, as William Blake insisted, to purge the gates of our senses, to open them to the infinity all around us. As the medieval philosophers understood so well, *nihil in intellectu nisi prius in sensibus* — nothing is in the mind without first being in the senses.

This is by no means to equate the wonders of PowerPoint with the glories of La Sainte Chapelle. It is to suggest, though, that even modern technology, in the hands of teacher of insight, can open our eyes to beauty and truth. Barzun’s piece of chalk, in the hands of an uninspiring pedagogue, may yield little more than a flow of cold data, and we have all suffered through interminable lists and outlines from overhead projectors. But that piece of chalk — or a piece of music, the reproduction of a great painting, or the facsimile of a precious manuscript in a carefully crafted PowerPoint presentation used by an imaginative and inspiring teacher — can open new worlds for students.

Barzun is right to warn us that technology can become an end in itself. However, the key is not technology or the lack of it, but imagination. Imagination, poets like Coleridge and Shelley teach us, is the faculty that sees beyond the appearances of things, that finds



Millennium Hall Residential College, Fordham University, Rose Hill Campus.

unity amid diversity, that allows us to see familiar things as if we are seeing them for the first time. It is imagination that also enables us to enter into the experience of one another; and if, as Barzun insists, a teacher must first understand a student’s ignorance, it is imagination that makes this possible. Then, whatever work of imagination helps to bring light into that darkness, whether it be mediated through a stained-glass window, a PowerPoint program, a piece of chalk and a blackboard, or simply the sound of a human voice will be a gift and a glory.

J. Robert Barth, S.J., is a professor of English and former academic dean at Boston College.

ED TECH AS FINE WINE

Raymond J. Clough

The request from *Conversations* that, as a technophile, teacher, and director of faculty development, I respond to Jacques Barzun's essay, "What Is a School? An Institution in Limbo" (Hudson Institute, 2002), was a daunting one. Add to that the challenge that I specifically address his assertions that "the attempt to bypass teaching by using computers is but another delusion" and that computers require of teachers "so much intelligent adaptation of the program to the rest of the work that they must be ranked with other time-wasting devices" (p. 16), and I was faced with an intimidating task. After all, how does a mere toiler in the vineyard dare take issue with a master vintner? Well, the short answer is because we both have the same goal — to produce better "wine."

Computers writ large (i.e. hardware and software) are only tools, and their mastery does take time — though less and less for younger faculty who have grown up with them. The time required, however, is well spent because Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI) enables us to meet the expectations and build on the interests and skills of today's Mac, PC, Xbox students by making learning "hands on," meaningful, challenging, realistic and electronic. The trick to not wasting time with CAI is to provide in-service training and tech-

nical assistance to faculty for designing effective "learning objects" (i.e., multimedia materials) based on sound pedagogical and "information literacy" principles—especially critical thinking.

Simulations, data crunching, PowerPoint presentations and more are routine in education today. Blended (i.e. computer enhanced) courses and asynchronous instruction increase teacher/learner contact far beyond three or four hours of "seat time" per week and can dramatically accelerate and deepen learning. Distance learning programs open windows to the world's storehouses of knowledge as well. Thus, to characterize the educational value of computers as "another delusion" and a "time-wasting device" is to misunderstand their power to "remove ignorance," which Barzun himself identifies as the fundamental purpose of education.

Yes, Dr. Barzun, chalk still has a place in the classroom and "one-on-one" dialog is undisputedly the best way to transmit learning (Nowadays many of us use smart boards and email!); but cavalierly dismissing the educational value of computers is like offering learners a glass of vin ordinaire instead of a magnum of Veuve Clicquot. To see what I mean, I recommend a taste of fine "wine" at www.merlot.org — a digital vineyard extraordinaire.

Raymond J. Clough, is associate professor of modern languages and director of faculty development and The Center for Teaching Excellence at Canisius College.



Athletes in action, Wheeling Jesuit University.

GET WITH IT!

Brian Young

Jacques Barzun presents us with the idea that when you juxtapose “classroom aids” (aka technology) with today’s classroom teaching the outcome is chaos. Moreover, Barzun takes a myopic view of today’s integrated learning systems and styles and suggests that “classroom technology consists of a piece of chalk and a blackboard eraser.” Chalk and blackboards have a place in teaching and learning, for many years they were central; but to suggest they are the only tools needed is preposterous.

Barzun’s argument has ancient historical roots. Long before the debate between “technology” or “no technology” in the classroom, there was the debate about the value of the written word versus learning only from those who spoke or professed. Great orators feared the written word as the education process moved away from the “great orator” model to reading from texts and learning from words written on a page. Many of the great scholars/orators, like the pre-Socratics, thought a student learning from written words was an educational tragedy.

Of course we know today that education and the strategies of teaching and learning rely heavily on the written word and published works of others, including those found in different media formats like HTML, MPEG, PPT, MP3, AVI and live streaming video. Technology in the classroom challenges “chalk and talk” teaching methods in the same way the written word challenged the great orators. Like the written word, technology will continue to find its place as a crucial tool for teachers.

Technology can bring world experts into the classroom. Through wireless access, video conferencing, and instant messaging we can bring authors, scholars, and global experts from any discipline into a classroom setting where students can engage and interact with the expert.

Other technologies in the classroom aid the teacher as well. Take for example the medical student who can watch a webcast and learn a new technique from a surgery that is being performed half way around the world. The student in rural western Nebraska, in a school district without many teachers, who can learn a foreign language via e-learning or video conferencing technologies from a faculty member in Boston. Technology in the class-



Photo by Saint Peter’s College student Kimberly Ha.

room aids in collaboration and brings global resources into the learning environment. Moreover, study after study has proven how effective technology in the classroom is on student learning (<http://www.educause.edu/pub/eq/eqm04/eqm0431.asp>).

My counter point to Barzun’s view will likely be a constant debate for years to come; even though technology has already permeated every classroom in the country (wireless access, cell phones, PDA’s and 3D graphing calculators). Therefore, I would offer some advice to those who think “chalk and talk” is the only way to teach: spend some time with an instructional technologist, get comfortable with technology, understand how students today learn, get some training, and enjoy this new pedagogy!

Brian Young is vice president for information technology at Creighton University.