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What Technology Can't Replace

By Michael Serazio

As legend has it, the Luddite rebellion of early 19th-century Britain was ignited by the intrusion of mechanized technology into the textile production process. Raging against the machines that they assumed would replace them, the Luddites raided factories and sabotaged machinery by night, in the hopes of salvaging the labor that represented their livelihood by day.

It was, of course, all for naught. The industrial revolution won that round – and a few others – but the Luddites at least bequeathed us a namesake pejorative still hurled at anyone daring to stand in the way of technological “progress.”

I write that not as a self-professed (or, for that matter, accused) Luddite, but as an open-minded skeptic about technology's impact on the state of higher education. Indeed, full disclosure: I have enthusiastically experimented with and adopted YouTube clips, Facebook course pages, and discussion blogs in every one of my classes. Yet, from the vantage point of Jesuit pedagogy, technology has yet to offer an adequate answer to a question that should always be at the forefront of our conversations: How much does the *whole person* really matter?

As many have noted, the experience of a lecture hall – usually a metaphor for college as a whole – has not changed all that much in, say, 500 years: Professor stands astride the podium; she pours forth her expertise; students are edified (or fall asleep). The endurance of that traditional format is either a virtue or vice, depending on how close your zip code is to Silicon Valley.

Against that petrified backdrop, enter the heroic innovators – those for whom disruption appears to be, always and ever, an inherent good. In their view, online learning offers a solution to the various crises of higher education. It strips down costs, accommodates adaptable scheduling, and allures a generation of digital natives already apparently incapable of prying themselves from their screens for even a 45-minute lecture. Call it the TED Talk-ification of college life – the intellectual medium of our time, as techno-utopians would have it.

The flipped classroom format offers one avenue: videotaped lectures watched as homework and homework tackled in class with the professor hovering and roving from group to group. The MOOC format of edX, Coursera, and Udacity offers another: massive open online courses that can enroll tens of thousands of “followers.” (Twitter's term, I would argue, offers a more apt label here than “students.”)

Now, an ethos of flexibility should certainly resonate with our Ignatian ideal of meeting students wherever they are: in a classroom or, I suppose, over an Ethernet cable into their dorm room. And few could find fault with the democratizing impulse that, theoretically, underpins many of these technological wonders. If a faculty member can spread knowledge to populations not privileged enough to afford the sticker shock of today's tuition prices, then that, too, has a worthy social justice rationale.

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Is online learning making good on those promises? As best as I can tell, the evidence to this point appears to be mixed and therefore inconclusive. Much has been made of the, well, massive attrition rate in MOOCs, and those who do succeed in finishing seem to be already pretty well educated (not to mention largely white, American, male, and fully employed). Others have noted that these online course innovations seem uniquely biased in favor of fields like science, engineering, and mathematics and less suitable for, say, history, philosophy, or English. In that sense, technology has a bit of a quantitative bias, as any bleary-eyed humanities professor who can't feed a stack of essays into Scantron will tell you.

But even if online learning does get better at spreading knowledge – which, I would wager, it will – can it ever match college's traditional strength in *cultivating wisdom*? Confronting that challenge requires us to answer the question of how much the whole person really matters to our work. Technology seems to suggest it does not and should not. Indeed, the ideology of technology is to *dis-aggregate* the whole person – to extend human faculties such that time and space are rendered irrelevant, as Marshall McLuhan long ago prophesized.

Take Minerva, for example – the all-digital undergraduate start-up profiled in a recent *Atlantic* cover story. It has cut out the bricks-and-mortar “frills” of a traditional campus, as all classes take place in and through the computer screen. On one hand, Minerva's ostensibly laser-like focus on curriculum is admirable, in a Spartan sort of way. (No rec-plex climbing wall or cafeteria sushi bar here!) On the other hand, in seeking to supplant the traditional liberal arts college experience – so central to our AJCU institutions – one can't help but wonder about the value of that experience that is lost.

Because college, at its best, is all-encompassing. It is an intellectual, social, spiritual, and physical transformation. Education happens in the lecture hall, yes – but it also happens on a theater stage, in a stadium, at a homeless shelter, during an internship, on a religious retreat, and in the middle of a study abroad. I remain unclear how Minerva, online classes, or technology in general can help cultivate wisdom across all of those fronts – and therefore cultivate the whole person that Jesuit education idealizes. Mark Twain once said, “Never let school get in the way of a good education.” I've always suspected Ignatius might agree with him on that. We need to be cautious not to let technology get in the way of a good education either.

For there is a crackle – an ineffable, unpredictable vibe – that a great class discussion radiates,

and it leaves its participants buzzing. We might be at the dawn of a posthuman era, as some have argued, but we still need to be face-to-face in the same room to best engineer and achieve that experience. Heaven knows contemporary technology increasingly finds us “alone together,” as Sherry Turkle put it. If the university can avoid bowing to those pressures to convert itself fully to a virtual reality, it may well preserve something frankly essential to our humanity: a sense of community.

That said, the Luddites lost and we might, too. I took refuge in academia from an earlier profession, journalism, which was ripped asunder by many of the same disruptive forces of technology and economics I see conspiring today. Just as it became “redundant” for every local newspaper to field a correspondent in Washington, so, too, might it soon become “redundant” to have every local college teaching the same standard intro sections, as some have forecast, when a one-size-fits-all, online solution presents itself to institutions looking to streamline overhead.

Are we, therefore, facing our own virtual obsolescence just like the Luddites? Only time will tell. But it won't just be faculty's loss if that day arrives. It could be our students' sense of wholeness, too. And that's worth fighting to preserve. ■

Tech Terms (for Fellow Luddites)

MOOC (massive open online courses) – web-based classes that can enroll tens of thousands of students from around the world into lecture hall-style faculty presentations

Flipped classroom – innovative pedagogical practice wherein students absorb recorded, standardized online content (for example, lectures) at home and do individualized coursework in class under the personalized supervision of faculty

TED Talk – popular series of 18-minute-long, YouTube-based “ideas” lectures on cultural and scientific topics

Minerva – digital undergraduate program start-up with minimal physical faculties that was the subject of a recent *Atlantic* cover story.