

4-1-2007

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Carrie R. Bell

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Recommended Citation

Bell, Carrie R. (2007) "Student Pieces: Introducing the Matrix Classroom," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 31, Article 13.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol31/iss1/13>

Introducing the Matrix Classroom

By Carrie R. Bell



In one of my favorite movies, *The Matrix* (Warner Brothers, 1999), characters “learn” when their heads are plugged into a computer which downloads information directly to their brains. Modern education, sadly, lags behind Hollywood in this regard. However, despite this small short-coming, the university experience is becoming more and more technological.

A prime example of the increased technologization of education can be found in the so-called “smart podiums” located in an increasing number of university classrooms. The premise is simple: combine all the technology (DVD player, computer, and VHS VCR con-

nected to a corresponding projector and screen) that a professor could possibly employ during class into one, easy-to-use package. And, in fact, I’ve seen multiple professors tactfully use smart podiums to enhance the flavors of their classes the way chefs carefully select a bottle of wine to enhance their cuisine.

Of course, the use of technology does not always go smoothly. Sometimes projectors are slow to warm up, wires get disconnected, or the network goes down. During a summer class I took, the Smart Podium would inexplicably announce, “The projector will shut off in five minutes.” The first time this occurred, the students jumped in surprise while the professor rushed to the podium to pre-empt the auto-shut-down. By the final week of class, the smart podium’s announcements had become old-hat, causing students to snicker and the professor to roll her eyes.

There are those who think technology makes education better, that it is some sort of wonder-drug for universities. Like penicillin before it, however, technology cannot solve everything. At the end of the day, no matter how many bells and whistles are attached, a class is only going to be as good as the professor teaching it.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, there are those who believe technology and its uses to be evil. Or, if not evil, at the very least something to be avoided. It’s true that technology can be used detrimentally, and that not every class lends itself to the use of a smart podium. But if technology were inherently evil, we would also have to shun the printing press. Now, this is just a hunch, but somehow I think going back to hand-copied manuscripts would be a step backward for education.

I, for one, am looking forward to the day when I can simply plug my brain into a computer, replacing the many, painful hours I have spent slugging through piles of barely intelligible words and sentences. Don’t get me

wrong, I fully appreciate the value that reading brings to education. Physically holding the text in front of you— seeing a mathematical formula laid out, going over a complex philosophical argument paragraph-by-paragraph and sentence-by-sentence, or sinking through the layers of metaphors and allusions in a literary work — cannot be replicated by technology.

But let’s be honest: we have all taken classes only because they were requirements. They were not fascinating, and even the most devoted students found the readings like smashing their heads repeatedly into a brick wall. It is at these dark moments that I have found myself yearning for the fictitious technology available in *The Matrix*.

I have no delusions that this technology, even if it could exist, would replace the four years (on average) it takes to get a Bachelor’s degree. It certainly could not replace what happens in the classroom. The nuance of a lecture, the spontaneity of a class discussion: these are not things that can be captured in a series of ones and zeros. Technology might be perfectly capable of storing and conveying information, but knowledge, it seems, is created in the classroom. That’s why we come to universities rather than get an education on our own at the public library. That is why professors have jobs.

Technology itself is neither good nor evil. It can be used to either enhance or detract from an educational experience. But the scary, terrifying reality is that our lives as students are in the very human hands of our professors. ■

Carrie R. Bell is a senior in the writing-intensive English program at Marquette University.