Talking Back: Technology is not all that Impersonal

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I have been invited to comment on William Evans’ article in Conversations (Spring 2005) on on-line and distance courses in the Jesuit University and I shall speak as an anthropologist rather than a philosopher. As I see it, the problem, and perhaps the solution to the conundrum of computer-mediated learning, can be discussed using Claude Levi-Strauss’s concept of binary opposites, a model of culture he derived, in part, from early computer technology. Perhaps the solution will emerge from the same source. Evans’s juxtaposes (1) personalized education with a real professor present in the classroom, with real students, with real interactions versus (2) absent or remote professors, whose presence is stimulated by cold computers, resulting in expressionless interactions and increasingly homogeneous course methodologies and technologies. Even the cover of the Spring 2005 issue of Conversations provides a photographic binary opposition worthy of The Lion and the Mouse. On the left we see a class with moods and values and energy. Humans engage in thoughtful interactions with expressions on faces, and nuance in posture, tone, position. On the right separated by the crisp and impenetrable graphic boundary, we see childless mothers, huddled wires, plastic caps, and a laptop with redundant mouse sitting on its touch pad. We are invited to interpret the cover: classes are lively dynamic groups of people who think hard about values energy while computers are insipid static soulless link.

I certainly agree with Evans that there is no substitute for human contact: my own experience is that I’m more effective in classrooms where I interact with students than the few times I have taught courses entirely mediated by computers. I do not, however, agree with the notion that a humanistic and personalized liberal arts education calls for the complete exclusion of

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Computer-mediated courses, including distance learning and on-line course instruction, nor is resistance to educational innovation. There are scholars in ancient Greece who thought writing and books would destroy education, which was based on memorization rather than retrieval of information from books. Computers are simply an extension of educational information technologies. Look at our cover again. Instead of a binary opposition, I see a very blurry boundary—books, writing, library classification systems are all products or ways of computing these days. Lights, seats, and even the vacancy signs that brought the buck to class are products of technology. Despite the importance of a professor's guidance, students must leave the classroom, read the text, view the ethnographic film, wander the library shelves, or roam the Library of Congress Card Catalogue using a $9.95 co-opted connection. They must eventually think for themselves, and the moment of enlightenment may come from a knowing look of the professor, from a close reading of a crucial text, or from a datum unearthed by a Google search.

In my experience, students are sometimes far better served by computer interactions with the professor, because private electronic interactions have alerted me to students' problems and deficiencies, as well as to achievements and recognition of depth understanding that would have gone unnoticed in the purely public classroom setting. More than once I have assigned on-line documents such as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, only to find out half an hour before the class that only 3 of 41 students actually opened the NAGPRA document.
let alone read it with some comprehension, and that only 2 created an executive summary revealing insight into the document itself and its challenges. Realizing that no one method of note-taking allowed me to adjust the classroom scenario and not only read faces but save them, too, I found that Focus makes two more important objections to using computer technology (and keep in mind I am using technology in its broadest sense). First, a computer cannot embody the discipline for the students that a professor can in person. Second, a professorial style can only be conveyed in person. Again, I quite agree that a computer cannot substitute for a person, but neither can a person substitute for a text, or an ethnographic film, or an impressionist painting. The question here is appropriate balance, not the outright ban of one sort of teaching medium or the other.

There are good teachers and poor teachers, good encounters and poor encounters in the classroom, good days and bad days when individuals in the classroom perform above or below their own averages. Style can indeed transcend human interpersonal relations. Witness that Franz Buea's ethnographic style is different than Mary Douglas' and the fact that both persons are now "reduced" to the technology of books and film clips. The collection of cultural materials in museums does not negate differences in style or nuance. It simply conveys them in a different way. The same is true when computers are employed in education. Contemporary scholars such as Joseph B. Walther at Cornell show that computer mediated communication is anything but simple and soulless, while scholars such as Jacques Ellul struggle with the question of morality and technology without suggesting a simplistic ban on innovation.

My department at Creighton uses BSCW (Basic Support for Cooperative Work), a data-sharing technology designed for scientific collaboration that is egalitarian in its structure and interactive possibilities. Creighton is occidental a BLACKBOARD school, and often this hierarchically structured software simply fails to fit the style of our department or the way we interact in our classrooms as well as outside of it. So we use something else. We still show up in classes, but much of how students interact outside of class involves this utility. Keep in mind that all students are expected to interact with course materials as well as instructors and other students. It is most efficacious if the students engage in this activity.