

Online Lecture Notes Rawatee Maharaj-Sharma

It had been a long time since I had had a conversation with my PhD. Supervisor, whom I consider to be very wise, intelligent, and insightful. He is now over sixty-two years old and is one of those teachers who only learnt about the wonders of computers and digital technology in his “old age,” as he puts it. He recently called me and we chatted for well over half an hour. As we talked he said that he had recently put “Optical Instrumentation” on the Web. [Optical Instrumentation is a graduate course he has taught for well over two decades.] This disclosure was surprising to me, as I had never envisaged “someone like him” putting a course on the Web. As our conversation continued I realized that even though he had posted the course on the Web, he did not seem very comfortable about the whole idea and that he was [still] grappling with some *unspoken* issues.

He then started talking about teaching and learning, and students’ role in this “refreshing enterprise,” suggesting that there is nothing ethically or morally wrong with having lecture notes on the Web, but that the problem [in his opinion] is that it does a disservice to students by reinforcing a totally false notion of what knowledge is. This he said “makes them [students] think that knowledge is something out there, residing in books, notes, videos, computers, and teachers ...and that students can access that knowledge by accessing the source.”

I remember that I myself once thought so. I believed that a clear set of lecture notes, which carefully laid out the content and gave sufficient examples in a detailed and logical sequence, followed by reinforcement questions, was what the students needed. Sufficient reading texts, course outlines, syllabi, hints, and homework assignments, I thought, would convince students not only that I knew what I was doing but would also provide them with the required material in microscopic detail so that they had no excuse to fail the test.

Several years later I came to realise that while students appreciated the detail and sequence, and seemed to love the collection of notes, and were able to get through most of the homework assignments, in fact, very little “deep learning” occurred via this method. It was clear that while students were gaining a lot of [new] knowledge, the important reconciliation of the new material with existing prior knowledge and understanding was not occurring in the learner’s brain.

Indeed, lecture notes are often laced with “inert ideas” that students merely receive in their minds, cram-off, and regurgitate at a later time. Students are given the abstract but are rarely taught how to distil the concrete everyday interpretations and applications from the definitions and formulae, and, like many in-class lectures, some online lectures/courses are also guilty of this flaw. Today, while there are many experts in the field of web page design who can suggest innovative ways to post courses and course material online in ways that will appeal to the learner, it is not uncommon to find online courses that are nothing

more than abstract notes and reinforcement assignments. In fact, many online courses provide very little in the form of stimulus material to promote curiosity and to provoke critical thinking. Regardless of this claim, many educators agree that online courses can have tremendous benefits for both teachers and learners. However, there are still many who argue that the whole business of teaching and learning is an intimate human enterprise, and that despite all the advances in technology and interactive web page design, learners always respond better to the personal educational touch.

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