2009

It Takes Discipline: Learning in a World Without Boundaries

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As Plato suggested, pedagogy is inextricably related to the *polis*. The learner and teacher are constituted by social, political, and economic bounds, and yet the twenty-first century *polis* is increasingly a world without boundaries. This is a perilous and exciting time to teach and learn. As agents of terror have shown, political boundaries are uncomfortably permeable. Economically, culturally, and religiously, globalization has reduced the power of nation-states and threatened erasure of their boundaries. Isolated identities—nationalistic, religious, linguistic, sexual— are under siege. Nothing is immune from alteration by these large-scale forces. Plato's insight is that the pressures and possibilities, which determine the larger context of life, reside in a condensed form in the classroom.

The primary learning challenge of the twenty-first century is to master this world without boundaries, especially as brokered by the Internet. The learning styles and challenges of students are increasingly shaped by the Internet's powerful qualification of boundaries. Students must confront the ease with which the Internet facilitates networking, makes information available, and increases the attractiveness of plagiarism. Twenty-first century pedagogy must search for the best ways to teach in the Internet Age.

This essay argues that old-fashioned and academic disciplines possess resources to frame Internet boundlessness and mine the world's resources. It concludes by suggesting that, for all that the Internet makes new,

existential challenges continue to undergird learning in the Internet Age.

Search one: old-fashioned discipline

Teachers must adjust instructional methods because Internet technologies have ushered in a new student culture. As Maryanne Wolfe (2007) suggests in her book *Proust and the Squid*, the brain processes Internet-available information differently from reading hard copy books and articles. While instructors must adapt, Luddite ambivalence about the Internet has its place. Pedagogical strategies to prevent Internet-based plagiarism have been treated previously in this journal (Anson 2003-2004), but good instruction will occasionally counsel unplugging the Internet. Whereas the Internet promotes the value of the wandering eye, and interconnections discovered by distracted surfing can be immensely valuable, students—and teachers—need to learn or relearn the value of lingering over classics and other significant resources. Discerning the greatness of a book, or the adequacy of an argument, requires enhanced sensibilities that come from the *disciplines* of reading, thinking, analyzing, and responding. Learners are accustomed to faster and faster connection speeds, but good reading requires processing words and sentences, resituating newly added ideas or narrative components in larger and larger and perhaps subtly altered contexts, and remaining alert to primary meanings and arguments. Encouraging students to read with appropriate patience and to think with sufficient depth has always been a challenge, but Internet power and the allure of easily accessible information can be distracting to the most committed learners. Overcoming distraction is perhaps the key element of old-fashioned discipline.

Such discipline furthers success in every type of career—and also serves as the basis of the examined life. The growing interconnection of the world suggests the importance of responding to the entire world's resources, and here the Internet is a profound resource.

Search two: bringing on the world

The Internet is an unsurpassed resource for helping students grapple with expanded realms of meaning. Even though most Internet searches are limited by region and language, despotic regimes can firewall entire countries, and the digital divide is cavernously wide, the Internet opens vistas unimaginable to previous generations of students. A student who is interested in Buddhism, for example, might spend an afternoon surfing sites related to Buddhist shrines, texts, and saints. He or she might read blogs

written by new Buddhists or question-and-answer websites written by Dharma masters. He or she might explore emerging forms of Buddhism, such as the cybersangha. The most compelling lecturer would be hard pressed to equal the combination of text, image, and sound offered by many of these sites. Should such a student decide to research Plato, quantum physics, Ibn Sena, or Al Qaeda, the Internet will oblige all of these requests, and more. Every directed search opens the possibility of unbounded inquiry in new directions. This wealth of possibilities again suggests the role to be played by discipline in the first sense. The easy accessibility of information might be used to cut down the time allotted to study, rather than allowing more to be learned in an equal amount of time (Healey 2006). To be good teachers in the Internet Age, we must develop strategies to help students maintain their focus, remain patient, and resist tangents.

Search three: academic discipline
Our academic disciplines ought to play a primary role in helping students master the world without boundaries. We must show them how to apply methods consistently, even when the object of inquiry is rapidly changing. The difference between random experience and studied analysis is academic discipline. Some disciplines, such as religious studies, are multidisciplinary, but this underscores the need for academic discipline. Whereas religious studies might use sociology, history, philosophy, literary analysis—and more—to engage in its analysis, ultimately religious studies analysis defines the objects of its enquiry and, in that act, constitutes itself as a discipline. Multidisciplinary work illustrates the need for academic discipline.

A few years ago I developed a course entitled *Internet Religion* that illustrates the significance of academic discipline. The course explores how and whether the Internet as a medium is shaping the message of religion and tests whether Marshall McLuhan's claim that the "medium is the message" is borne out by investigation. The investigation is primarily empirical—the class examines hundreds of websites, using a variety of strategies and methods—but the difference between raw experience and empirical data is the role played by theory, method, and discipline. In the beginning of the semester, students observe, "Hey, that's cool. The door on the picture opens when I hover my mouse pointer over it." By semester's end, such students are observing that "This website shows life to be a struggle between two forces; it uses images and claims to insist on a fundamental in-group, out-group distinction." To move from raw

experience to interpretive analysis requires the input of academic discipline. In this case, such a student needs to have grasped social identity theory and be able to practice socio-religious interpretation. By confining experience to the bounds of an academic discipline, empirical data are produced. So here discipline and boundary come back together in our pursuit of the Internet as a world of fluid or non-existent boundaries.

Search four: existential searching

Good teaching raises existential questions, the more challenging of which do not have empirical answers. The Internet Religion course pursues 'religion' on three levels. First, how are traditional religious communities using the Internet? Second, what new types of religious practice or religious community are emerging online? Third, in what ways do the secular concerns of the Internet point to religious questions? In the several times I have taught this course, the three levels are pursued with increasing interest. Students find comparing how Presbyterians, Mormons, and Roman Catholics use the Internet instructive. They find exploring new religious practices quite interesting. And they find considering the religious power of the Internet enriching, humorous, and powerful. From the Death Clock; to rate-my-this, rate-my-that sites; to dating, mating, and cheating sites; to social networking sites—nearly as a totality the Internet reverberates with psycho-spiritual meaning and potential. While a class in religious studies ought never seek to produce a religious change among students, there can be no question that such enquiry provokes existential questions. Good teaching in the Internet Age connects to this time-honored element of the learning process. Here Plato's *polis* is completed by his most compelling allegory: the life of wisdom as ascent from the cave of ignorance.

During a memorable session of the Internet Religion course, a student experienced existential shock when the normally humorous 'death clock' predicted he would live only another ten years. He called me to his computer workstation, clearly anxious, but attempting to mask his reaction with bravado. "Hey, Prof," he said with heavy affectation, "The death clock says I'll live only ten more years. Is this thing accurate?" I forget what I said in response. No matter, for in this instant the enduring power of boundaries (life-death), the Internet's seemingly boundless omniscience, the deliberately bounding role played by academic discipline, and authentic learning converged. That moment contained everything that has to be learned to master the Internet as a key learning *polis* of the twenty-first century.

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