

Are There Virtues In The Virtual University?

Some Words On Distance Learning

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Note: This is the text from a presentation that was originally delivered under the larger program title: "Is there a Class in this Text? Or How Far Away is Distance Learning?" and the presentation makes reference to this overarching title.

This time like all times is great if we but know what to do with it.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

I want to thank all of you for gathering here today — here in this place and for this purpose. Gathered here as we are is one way to point out or point toward one of the many themes I will reference today without being able to do any of them justice in the time we have allotted to us. But this makes a point of its own, viz., that these things, that is the thinking we must do about them, takes time and we would do well to consider time and speed with great care.

We are gathered here in the name of something let us call it the university or education. We learn from both Judaism and Christianity the importance of gathering together — of overcoming alienation by bringing bodies together in one place and at one time for something important or dare we say — when talking about education — divine, as might Emerson, for example. If we had the time we would consider the issue of mediation and ask if one can gather together in common or in community or in communication through or by way of advanced technological mediation.

Advanced technology — no doubt a phrase that grows old quickly and this leads me to admit a few things and to outline what I cannot do today. First, I plead guilty to the charge that I have no idea of which I speak here today. I have no graphs, no 'data,' no complex studies that prove anything. I begin — or am trying to begin — by saying that I know that the technological critique of technology will not do — that is to say, any problems with the technological delivery of distance learning will be solved in due time, these problems always are and hence the seduction of technology. This idea of the seduction of technology marks another theme we must sadly leave behind today. I do not have a class or economic critique, though indeed there is one, I shall concede, consequences non dato, that all students could have a home computer and access to the world wide web. I have none of these things, I do not even have a jeremiad against distance learning — I have only some questions, questions raised by the language used to frame this dis-

cussion, language that has moved our talking and our thinking along, perhaps too quickly and not always with sufficient backward thinking.

Another admission. La Rochfoucauld has made me realize that I am lazy and perhaps full of pride concerning the way I have been taught to do things. He says in one of his maxims that “readiness to believe the worst without adequate examination comes from pride and laziness: we want to find culprits but cannot be bothered to investigate the crimes.” As I have admitted that I do not know what I am doing, I offer these brief reflections as my beginning an investigation, because I am suspicious of distance learning and I want to interrogate it, treating it as if it were a suspect.

So, to begin this beginning again, I have nothing. I have no-thing or object to offer. And that is the way it should be. I have come only to pose questions and to make a number of allusions and for this I shall need your patience and your attention, and as you have already gathered here I have, at least in one sense, your presence here and now, both of which I consider requirements. The questions I would like to raise are what we call in class “16-week questions,” questions around which one could build an entire semester-long class, questions as the ones above about the process of mediation and about presence and about what and how things get re-presented.

I shall make a number of allusions to texts and thinkers whom I think can help us if we take the time to allow for them. Some of these thinkers are very old and perhaps I gather them here in my talk as my nod to asynchrony by way of anachronism. The text for which I asked in the session’s overarching title (which was a rather transparent play with Stanley Fish’s famous book title) if there is a class in it is the University’s “Defining the ‘Virtual University’” which I acquired from the world wide web and which I could have been said to have received from a distance. I want to question whether there is a class in the “traditional sense” in this text, that is to say is there room in the virtual university for classes, seen as a practice and as a gathering.

We must begin with the understanding that these new questions that we must address today are questions that are very old in Western thinking. I am thinking here of Plato’s Phaedrus in which he undertakes a critique of the newest technology of his day, writing, and subjects it to a critique speculating on the disastrous effects it will have on learning, memory, and consequently on the care of the soul. The Phaedrus teaches us that while advanced technologies have made distance learning possible, they raise questions that are not new, the questions we must address are not ones that ought to have taken us by surprise, they have been ours for some time now. With more time we could read Plato against new technology, but again we must leave and move on. (My friend Linda Wiener has reminded me that we ought also look at Plato’s Meno a text on virtue that has in it a strangely cast virtuality to the dialogue itself.)

We are all familiar with the allegory of the cave and the dangers Plato notes of believing in shadows, of believing in images, and in things that we could call, without too much violence, virtual. The shadows are virtual images of cutouts that are them-

selves only virtual. Perhaps we need not follow Plato in all the metaphysical details that secure what is outside the cave as real, to pause before the question of what is the real university in light of the virtual one. This is not an easy question, but it is a question. Furthermore, if we could answer it why would we sacrifice (this word is not, I think, too strong) the real for the virtual? What is to be gained, and gained by whom and to what end, and hence the question must be also what are the ends of the University.

Both senses of “end” in English need to be in play here: what is the end as *telos* of the university — what is its goal, but also we can say what would end, that is finish the university? Neil Postman when addressing the issue of technology suggests that our love of technology is often akin to blacksmiths applauding the arrival of the automobile. Are we seeking our end in distance education? In a kind of trembling I leave that question shivering in its polysemy.

We could also learn from Nietzsche about the world wide web linking this to his discussion of spiders and webs and how we get caught in them and how being in a web signals to the spider that we are there and ready for her. We could explore the idea of broadcasting courses and meditate on the destination and thus the destiny of the university when it is sent far and wide and on the overdetermined conditions that give destiny its trajectory and direction leaning here on texts by Althusser, Heidegger, or Freud, for example. So many ways I would have liked to have gone.

I shall settle for this: I want to know if we think there are virtues in the virtual university. “Virtue” and “virtually” are etymologically linked and both have to do with strength (and manliness, but I leave that, too, for another time) but whereas “virtue” has come to mean strength in the sense of being able to choose between the extremes of excess and deficiency, “virtual” has come to mean “almost entirely,” “for all practical purposes” and “functionally and effective but not formally of its kind.” I want to note here that concern for virtue is not a concern we should leave to Mr. Bennett, because virtue is from the Latin for what Aristotle called *excellence*, and we know that Aristotle belongs as much to Marx (and so to us) as he does to neo-liberals.

Is the university a series of practices that ought to be undertaken virtually, almost entirely? Would this be a virtue? What is left out when the University goes virtual? Is what is missing essential, or is what is missing only what lies outside “all practical purposes,” or is the only missing aspect of the university its non-essential form or formality? We would have to answer so many questions to know the answers to these.

What is missing if virtual universities are in fact virtual? I suggest that somebody is missing or some bodies are missing. As one who studies corporeality and the body I wonder what the flat surfaces of the screen mean for the bodies of students and professors, for the student body that is gathered “almost entirely” by the virtual university. “Virtual” also means, in its obsolete definition, “possessing the power of acting without the agency of matter.” Do student bodies matter and what does the absence of bodies do to the student body?

Many have said to me that not all subject matter belong in the virtual university. Might we ask why every class cannot be made “for all practical purposes” virtual, and if some cannot, then do we learn something about universities and education by the comparison of that which submits to becoming virtual and that which somehow resists virtuality? You see how these questions keep piling up and complicating things — complicating things that were not easy to begin with. Perhaps we could say that virtue is not easy or at least not yet easy.

Yet ease and convenience are two virtues of the virtual university according to the document “Defining the ‘Virtual University.’” But these two virtues are only asserted as virtues, that is without the benefit of argument as if it were obvious why these are good things in themselves. Are ease and convenience, in fact, virtues — even admitting that these are structural aspects of the virtual university? What if the university is difficult, challenging, and inconvenient? Much of what I have learned at the university has hurt, has torn away deeply held beliefs and forced me into that painful place of having to defend my prejudices and finally to leave many of them and thus forced me to leave some of what was once my self behind. Most important, perhaps, is that I did this under the gaze of the other in front of the other bodies that were/are part of my student body. Here we could make a long discourse on the face and gaze of the other and on the danger and perhaps false courage provided by the anonymity that advanced technological communication makes possible. For instance, here we could gather together texts by Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, and Kristeva to help us address these concerns.

What if the university is slow, plodding, careful, and part of this slowness needs to be seen, needs to see the other falter, hesitate, and recover, needs to see the slowness with which your professor considers the challenge raised by a member of the student body whose face cannot be ignored. What if the “popularity” (quoting this word from the text in question) of distance education is telling us that the mission of the university is to be unpopular. What if one’s busy personal schedule — this is citing the text in question again — may be a broader social problem to be addressed at university and not one that becomes the university’s problem in terms of meeting it and thus encouraging it through technological availability. Maybe the rhythm of the university should not try to meet the rhythm of the larger culture of which it is a part. Perhaps we need to consider what it would mean for the university to meet this problem by demanding more of those organizations and social structures that make the student body busy. They make them busy by demanding and taking the student body’s (student bodies) time — almost always a taking in the form of labor power (which brings us back to Marx and to the place from which we could begin making another long discourse). Ought not the university resist the speed of culture, ought not the university be the place to gather and reflect in the presence of others gathered in the name of something dictated by virtues that are at odds with the speed inducing aspects of our culture? Can the virtual university do this if it ought to be done?

Can the virtual university do this? This way of asking brings me to the other title of the overall session today: how far away is distance learning? The obvious sense is that this asks when will the virtual university be here, and the answer is that it is here now and to judge from the adds in the New York Times it is not only here but everywhere. But the sense I wish to exploit and this will conclude these words on distance education, is how far, that is how much is distance education a way or manner of education? How far does distance education go toward and meet up with (speaking too quickly) the traditional manners or ways of education? Is distance education far enough (of) a way? What would we have to know to know?

I have, I am sure, tried your patience well beyond the request I made of it earlier. I shall end by saying that I am hopeful I have made it clear that I do not know of what it is I speak because I have too many questions. The irony is not lost on me that I have only given a virtual talk, one that has affinities with what is called surfing in the vernacular of the world wide web, moving quickly from one topic to another and staying too briefly at each. Nonetheless, I delivered my talk to and at this destination, where we have gathered.