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Two Tin Cans and a String: Teaching Liberal Arts Online

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#1 Toolbox Basics

Remember that old-time kids’ “telephone” entertainment of stretching a string taut between two tin cans? Magically, voices sounded as if they were right next to each other despite the fact that the speakers were not visible to one another. There were a few limitations. For example, it was important to take turns; one person spoke while the other listened in a cumulative sequence of conversation or it didn’t work. And sooner or later, someone forgot to keep the string tight so the flow of conversation was interrupted. It was very simple; a tool that got the job done. Two tin cans and a string served the basic arrangement of all public discourse; listening and speaking in turn to build a cumulative exchange of information, shape ideas, formulate plans, or manage negotiations.

These communicative needs are still met if both parties are physically near enough to one another to hear each other’s voices, as would be the case for an onsite liberal arts classroom at a university. However, the requirement of having everyone involved in the discourse physically present isn’t always possible. For that, we needed tools with which to enhance our voices.

Enter the radically new and mysterious invention of writing and reading. First, clay tablets (rather bulky and prone to breakage) and later paper (scrolls to books) bore the marks of one person at a distance of time and/or space to represent the spoken voice. And most wonderful, these written symbols seen by a reader could be reconverted from symbolic markings into spoken language again for all present to hear at any time and in the same way; the written marks endured time and so were permanent records. The skills of reading and writing were highly prized public property. Until books could be printed in quantity, it was considered very rude of a reader to keep a piece of writing—even a personal letter—to himself in the presence of others. ¹

Writing has become one of those essential tools of communication to be used or misused according to the skills or purposes of the writer. And it has revolutionized all social, political and economic intra- and intercultural

¹When I conveyed letters from a student in the United States to his wife in Katmandu, Nepal in the early spring of 1971, the entire extended family of twenty-five gathered together and listened intently as the wife read them aloud.
exchanges, including education. So we take it for granted that in any given classroom there are many teachers—one physically present, while others teach through their writings in textbooks used in the class.

Later, the radical and mysterious technologies of photography, cinema, and television were added to the public discourse toolbox. These media placed human representations of communication across asynchronous time and distance that were accepted as “real” in very much the same way as synchronous encounters. When, around 1895, the Méliès brothers first projected the moving image of a train approaching on the white wall of a Paris café, patrons fled in terror. How often have we spoken of sitcom characters as if they were real people we’ve met face to face, or described the televised documentation of a news event as if we’d experienced it first-hand? Regardless of the medium, the visceral connection between an immediate physical presence and its symbolic representation still haunts our collective psyche. From “phone sex” to radios anthropomorphically designed to evoke the features of a human face, we “connect” to this kind of virtual experience as if it was an equitable exchange.

Now we have the equally radical and mysterious communication tool of the Internet. As with all new tools, one of the first things people manage to do with it is figure out how to make some money from it. There are beneficial uses and detrimentally destructive abuses of the new medium. But while the physical object of a book makes it easier to copyright its contents, regulate and market, the Internet bears some of the ephemeral immediacy of face to face conversation. As Issac Gilman effectively pointed out in his December 2010 Interface article titled, “Open Opportunities: The Impact of the Internet on Academic Libraries”, most people using the Internet from the beginning believe it should be free and available to all as a fundamental human right, just as if it was another form of face to face conversation.  

The tool of the Internet is facile, mutable and immediate. Out of the basic capacity of email (which some of us “old fogies” accustomed to writing letters and sending them through the US Postal Service loyally stick to despite a galaxy of other online formats) the same basic purpose is served at the speed of light. It still requires two or more people taking turns speaking and reading/ listening through a cumulative discourse. And more than that; the Internet not only places communicants in a two-way exchange, but also in a synchronous web of possible other relevant exchanges, all at the speed of light.

Oddly enough, this mode of communication is not all that different from the setup of a liberal arts classroom; teachers, students, and relevant written

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material available with which to not only exchange information, but (as is so dear to liberal arts curriculums) frame the methodologies of critical thinking in a public forum. Someone speaks, and there follows a cascade of relevant considerations based on that communication. A wonderful set of tools skillfully and effectively employed produces the satisfaction and investment in learning. The Internet is no different in that regard; it's just another set of tools we can learn to use, and bring its benefits (while respecting its limitations) into the service of education.