Teaching the Intangible

David Alan Grier and Erin Dian Dumbacher

How far is too far when applying Internet and connection technologies to our world?

The good news: more students than ever have access to a graduate-level education thanks to the Internet. The bad news: they might be missing out on intangible educational experiences.

//EDD// It wasn’t always this way. In the last decade, the tools of distance instruction have become a substantial part of graduate education. Students can log into a lecture in whatever their particular state of (dis)array happens to be, and the professor is none the wiser.

Take Chris (not his real handle), who in the past year has worked in the US, Asia, and Africa while pursuing a master’s degree from a London university. He juggles life as both a full-time business consultant and a student, working through his coursework online at night. Chris says he misses the camaraderie of being around his fellow students, but he had that experience as an undergraduate.

To interact with other students, he logs into the school’s social networking site, which he would have done even if he sat in the same classroom as his peers.

//DAG// Having spent the bulk of our careers on the opposite sides of the classroom, Erin and I have slightly different views on distance education. To me, technology is not the cause but the effect. The idea precedes the act.

In a distant time, higher education was founded on the idea of developing the whole person—the spiritual, moral, athletic, social, and intellectual aspects of character. With the idea of the whole person came the notion that education was done best on an isolated campus.

But then educators pulled the pieces apart. They dropped spiritual education long ago. The moral became the ethical. Athletic education became the business of college sports. Finally, we’ve chipped away at social education, claiming that the only responsibility of education is to impart knowledge and roll back the musty fog of ignorance. Having reached that point, the principle question becomes, “How cheaply can we disseminate knowledge?”

Currently, many educators seem to believe that the technology of distance education will reduce that cost. But knowledge is only one part of adult life. The athletic, social, moral, and even spiritual aspects still have their place. We tend to learn those aspects through observation and interaction—activities not done that well using a Web browser and an open chat room.

//EDD// I could respond that chat rooms are “so 2001” but the point is that students socialize through social media: tagged photos, status updates, texts and tweets. If social networking sites are the proverbial university yards, text messages are the new notes on the dorm room door.

Students with spouses, full-time employment, disabilities, or a dependent are more likely to enroll in distance education than their peers. Still, the increase in graduate degree seekers from distance education seems to be coming from people who feel that they simply don’t need the other parts of graduate education.

Without physical barriers to joining a class, some experts say the US can increase its rate of awarding postsecondary degrees. Students, parents, educators, and mentors are left to decide which life lessons must come with a degree.

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