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TALKING BACK

Technology is not all that Impersonal

By Raymond A. Bucko, S.J.

I have been invited to comment on William Evans' article in *Conversations* (Spring 2005) on on-line and distance courses in the Jesuit University and I shall speak as an anthropologist rather than a philosopher. As I see it, the problem, and perhaps the solution to the conundrum of computer mediated learning, can be discussed using Claude Levi-Strauss' concept of binary opposites, a model of culture he derived, in part, from early computer technology. Perhaps the solution will emerge from the same source.

Evan's juxtaposes (1) personalized education with a real professor present in

the classroom, with real students, with real interactions versus (2) absent or remote professors, whose presence is simulated by cold computers, resulting in expressionless interactions and increasingly homogeneous course methodologies and technologies. Even the cover of the Spring 2005 issue of *Conversations* provides a photographic binary opposition worthy of *The Raw and the Cooked*: On the left we see a class with moods and values and energy. Humans engage in thoughtful interactions with expressions on faces, and nuance in posture, tone, position. On the right separated by the crisp and impenetrable graphic boundary we see childless moth-

erboards, bundled wires, plastic caps, and a laptop with redundant mouse sitting on its touchpad. We are invited to interpret the cover: classes are lively dynamic groups of people who think hard about values energy while computers are inexpressive static soulless junk.

I certainly agree with Evans that there is no substitute for human contact: my own experience is that I'm more effective in classrooms where I interact with students than the few times I have taught courses entirely mediated by computers. I do not, however, agree with the notion that a humanistic and personalized liberal arts education calls for the complete exclusion of



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computer-mediated courses, including distance learning and on-line course

Technology is not new to instruction, nor is resistance to educational innovation. There

The computer is as much a technological tool for self expression as is a brush or pen or chisel.

were scholars in ancient Greece who thought writing and books would destroy education, which was based in memorization rather than retrieval of information from books. Computers are simply an

extension of educational information technologies. Look at our cover again. Instead of a binary opposition, I see a very fuzzy boundary – books, writing, library classification systems are all produced on or with computers these days. Lights, seats, and even the unseen cars that brought the students to class are products of technology. Despite the importance of a professor's guidance, students must leave the classroom, read the text, view the ethnographic film, wander the library shelves, or roam the Library of Congress Card Catalogue using a z39.50 compliant connection. They must eventually think for themselves, and the moment of enlightenment may come from a knowing look of the

professor, from a close reading of a crucial text, or from a datum unearthed by a Google search.

In my experience, students are sometimes far better served by computer interactions with the professor, because private electronic interactions have alerted me to students' problems and deficiencies, as well as to achievements and recognition of depth understanding that would have gone unnoticed in the purely public classroom setting. More than once I have assigned on-line documents such as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, only to find out half an hour before the class that only 3 of 41 students actually opened the NAGPRA document,



Students collaborate at Rockhurst University.

let alone read it with some comprehension, and that only 2 created an executive summary revealing insight into the document itself and its challenges. Realizing that no one “opened a book” allowed me to adjust the classroom scenario and not only read faces but save them, too!

Evans makes two more important objections to using computer technology (and keep in mind I am using technology in its broadest sense). First, a computer cannot embody the discipline for the students that a professor can in person. Second, professorial style can only be conveyed in person. Again, I quite agree that a computer cannot substitute for a person, but neither can a person substitute for a text, or an ethnographic film, or an impressionist painting. The question here is appropriate balance, not the outright ban of one sort of teaching medium or the other.

There are good teachers and poor teachers, good encounters and poor encounters in the classroom, good days and bad days when individuals in the classroom perform above or below their own averages. Style can indeed transcend human interpersonal relations. Witness that Franz Boas’ ethnographic style is different than Mary Douglas’ and the fact that both persons are now “reduced” to the technology of books and film clips. The collection of cultural materials in museum collections does not negate differences in style or nuance. It simply conveys them in a different way. The same is true when computers are employed in education. Contemporary scholars such as Joseph B. Walther at Cornell show that computer mediated communication is anything but simple

and soul-less, while scholars such as Jacques Ellul struggle with the question of morality and technology without suggesting a simplistic ban on innovation.

My department at Creighton uses BSCW (Basic Support for Cooperative Work), a data-sharing technology designed for scientific collaboration that is egalitarian in its structure and interactive possibilities. Creighton is decidedly a BLACKBOARD school, and often this hierarchically structured software simply fails to fit the style of our department or the way we interact in our classrooms as well as outside of it. So we use something else. We still show up in classes, but much of how students interact outside of class involves this utility. Keep in mind that all students are expected to interact with course material far longer than they are expected to interact with professors! In my own classrooms, students may either speak in class or address issues through the BSCW. Students who never talk in class sometimes blossom electronically, and I can then bring them out in the classroom because I’ve gotten to know how they think on-line.

Self-expression is key to a liberal arts education, and the computer is as much a technological tool for self-expression as is the brush or pen or chisel. A novel written with a word processor and printed out

electronically is no less a novel than one that was typed or written in manuscript. Heaps of computer components don’t replace professors, as the cover of *Conversations* invites us to believe. Professors, not the computers themselves, conduct on-line courses. Indeed, we use a variety of technologies with varying degrees of success in any classroom setting. Ultimately students must do the learning, though professors encourage and guide that learning.

No matter how humane and personalized a university program is, students will not acquire a liberal arts education without becoming technologically literate. Throughout their lives, they will need to update their skills as technologies continue to change. It was ever thus. No one fears that books will replace faculty (although some people can be self-taught with books). I certainly do not fear that computer hardware will replace me. I do have confidence, earned during long years of computer use, that this latest educational technology, like books, lights, shelves, reading, eyeglasses, cars, and even parking spaces, can enhance learning, not only through content delivery but also by challenging us to formulate values and morals and beliefs and duties through our own reflective interactions.

Please retake the picture on the front of *Conversations* – this time add a computer to the table where august professor stands and remove the spurious center line – computers are not the only thing, but one of many things we use to enhance and mediate our teaching. We need to continually evaluate these media and methods in our roles as professors, administrators, and staff at Jesuit institutions.