Creativity and the Joy of Learning

The following excerpt is based on an interview conducted by Gerry Bayne, EDUCAUSE multimedia producer, at the EDUCAUSE 2010 Annual Meeting in October 2010. To listen to the full podcast, go to <http://www.educause.edu/er/GroomCampbell>.

Gerry Bayne: Many higher education institutions are putting courses online for free, leading to a sort of democratization of education, similar to the changes we’re seeing in the music and video fields. These movements are threatening to decimate the traditional business models. What do you see happening in higher education? How is higher education going to be affected by this democratization of information and knowledge?

Jim Groom: I think to some degree, it’s potentially true that higher education will follow suit with journalism and what we’re seeing with the music industry and the video industry and the movie industry. We’re seeing new models emerging, but I don’t know if these models are necessarily going to replace the old ones. We have OER. We have the Peer-to-Peer University. We have the University of Everything. We have the Open University, which is trying to frame out new things. But I don’t think that content delivered through the web is a replacement for a relationship and for education as we’ve known it. We can think of computers as a mechanism for or a transaction of delivery, but at the heart of that idea is a neo-liberal interpretation of a kind of decimation of the workforce that is academia right now.

What I think is crazy is that academics don’t even realize it. They aren’t even engaging the argument that needs to happen. I heard a statistic recently—which we could and should fact-check—that 35 percent of faculty in the United States are tenured. This means that 65 percent are part-time, underpaid workers.

We’re going to have a decimated higher ed system just based on that alone. When we start grafting technology on top of that to replace the existing 35 percent of tenured faculty, all we’ll be left with is workforce training. All we’ll have is a very dumbed-down relationship in which the question of vision in online education becomes irrelevant. We’re just training people for work and accreditation.

Gardner Campbell: There’s a cruel irony here, in many ways. The industrial model of education has paved the way for its own demise, because knowledge has been thought of as a thing that’s transferred from knower to knower. As we understand now, cognition is a much more delicate, complex, and interesting thing than just: “I have it. I shoveled it. You take it into your hopper, and we’re done.”

Higher education has thought we can actually sustain and scale this enterprise model of learning. If the class has 500 people in it, why not 1,000? Why not 1,500? Why not 2,000? We’ll stream it live on TV outside of the lecture hall. But that’s not what true education is. Education can’t be delivered. Education is an experience.

What we do know is that the Internet is ideal for allowing a shared experience. We know that as a platform for communication and as a place where intimate bonds can be formed, the Internet is a fantastic medium—much better than television, much better than radio, much better than anything we’ve had in the past. The Internet scales, but not if we think of the Internet as a mode of delivering content. It has to be a platform where relationships can be formed, can be fostered, and can be encouraged in the joy of learning. I think that if current tenured professors got their heads around the way the Internet works, we’d be able to get back to our roots in a really interesting way. We would find a way for those intimate experiences that characterize the best of learning to be propagated not just by the professors but also by the students in rich kinds of contact with each other.

I tell my students this: “The thing that you should remember most fondly about the class you’re taking right now is each other—not me, maybe not even the subject matter.” I hope that sticks with them. I hope they’ve learned that. The thing they should take with them is the memory of what it was like to be in the presence of other colleagues.

Face-to-face is a wonderful way to do this, but it’s not the only way. We know how to do this on the Internet; we simply have to get our heads around the idea. If we can’t, we are going to see a different kind of computer-aided instruction emerge: radical disaggregation, fee-for-hire (service), and a decline in the kind of professionalism that matters—not in the sense of
living a cushy lifestyle, but in the sense of true authority, true expertise that fosters a genuine community of learning. It's not too late. A year or two from now, it might be.

Groom: That's why I think the erroneous conflation of content with education has replaced creativity. Creativity should be conflated with education, and it's not. In fact, as we push toward this disaggregated model of the technologically controlled delivery mechanism, we're moving further and further from any relationship between education and creativity. Creativity has to happen within an audience. And as we've seen through social media over the last ten years, the audience is built-in: people are intrinsically interested in all sorts of things.

It's ridiculous to ghettoize the idea of social media and the Internet in higher education. Higher education should be on the forefront. It should be promoting the hell out of what it's doing on the Internet. But it's hiding, putting its head in the sand.

Campbell: The ARPANET, the progenitor of the Internet, was modeled within and after the distributed, collaborative nature of higher education. And now higher education can't understand the thing that was modeled on its own best practices. That, to me, is nearly incomprehensible.

Just as you're saying, this idea of finding the audience, of not ghettoizing social media—there's simply too much talk out there: “Well, maybe I need to put my class on Facebook, because that's where the kids are.” The real key here is that the professorate—the people who are tenured, who are professional, who have the expertise and the experience in teaching and learning to make this happen—they need to be digital citizens themselves. They need to be modeling this behavior—instead of saying what I often hear: “Well, I think blogging is good for the students. I don't have time for that.”

Or: “Oh, I understand Twitter is a big deal. How can I use that in my class?” Asked if they know what Twitter is and if they understand how it works, the response usually is: “Oh, no, no, no. I don't have time for that.”

Social media are messy. You have to filter things. You have to learn a new way of being, just like you have to learn a new way of driving to drive on the interstate. If you choose not to do that, fine. But then don't complain when things have moved down the road and your chance to be heard and to be a vital participant in the discussion is gone. You made a choice. You decided not to learn how to type, because that was for secretaries. You decided not to learn about social media, because that was for kids.

I know people don't mean to be condescending, but let's flip this into a medium that we all take for granted now. What if professors came in and said: “I want you all to read The Scarlet Letter. I'm really tired of it. I'm not going to read it again, because I actually don't think it's a very good book. But I think you should read it. So, go read it.” The message comes through loud and clear: “Eat your spinach. I'm an old person. I don't have to eat spinach anymore.”

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