

The Electronic Myth of Sisyphus, by Doug Mann

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Our electronic times are out of joint. The bodies and minds of both educators and students have been snatched by the growing wave of virtual culture. Every day thousands of professors, TAs and students wake up to a growing list of e-mail demands imposed on them by friends, colleagues and superiors. Each stroke of the electronic pen makes our virtual burden that much heavier, to the point where some are so weighed down that they feel like a virtual Sisyphus hauling a hundred tiny e-rocks up the hill each day, only to have them magically reappear at the bottom the following day. The gods must be angry.

It's a given that university life is becoming more and more virtual, more and more based on electrical impulses and keyboards, less on face-to-face dialogue. This is a theme of Heather Menzies' brand new book *No Time: Stress and the Crisis of Modern Life*. Menzies argues that in education we are moving away from an embodied presence to a virtual pseudo-reality. Menzies feels that as the Internet compresses time and space to an eternal Now, our social institutions "are losing their integrity" and our society is "losing touch with what's real and what really matters." In the context of higher education, it's dialogue between educators and students that matters. Electronic communication is snatching this away, turning students' minds into electronic pods fed by virtual information tubes.

What are the results of this electronic body and mind snatching? For one, I've noticed a growing inability of students to speak coherently and rationally with professors (except when they're arguing about marks). This is especially the case with shy students, who seem more and more to be hiding behind the icons on their XP desktop. It's perhaps not entirely their fault: McLuhan had it right back in the groovy 1960s that media alter our sense ratios, amputating some parts of our minds, enhancing others. Ironically, this seems much less of a problem in programs full of ardent techno-geeks like the MIT program here at Western, for which I salute them. In any case, this means that we're educating a whole generation of young people who have had part of their ability to speak in public and to interact with authority figures amputated. If the birds aren't kicked out of the nest, they'll never learn to fly.

Secondly, I've noticed in my decade-long career as a teacher a growing incivility in student/professor and student/TA interactions. This is partly the result of the total triumph of capitalism in the West – Francis Fukuyama's end of history – with its attendant rampant individualism. But even more it's the result of e-mail and the Web. It's far easier to attack a TA or professor for a grade or to demand an essay extension by e-mail, where there's no body language involved or direct reactions to one's rudeness. Electronic communication seems to surround one with an invisible force field, protecting the sender against reprisals. Yet the effects of electronic rudeness are the same as its embodied form, even enhanced, given the fact that the e-mail's recipient can mull over the hostile intent of the e-mail while mentally correcting its grammatical errors. In short, the use of e-mail as a standard form of communication has an inherent tendency to erode the power of civil discourse. To quote Johnny Storm, "flame on!"

Thirdly, it's crystal clear that the move towards the wired university is part of an overall attempt to model education on the principles of the service industry. It's part of the McDonaldisation of education. The whole system of higher education, from glossy brochures luring high school students, siren-like, to a given university to class evaluations where all questions can be reduced to the single query, "is the professor cool?", is silently but steadily shifting to the service industry way of doing things. Students now express their collective narcissism by demanding the instant gratification of e-mailed marks, notes for missed classes, and information they could easily look up themselves like exam dates and rooms. They can't wait a few days or weeks for the results of essays or exams. George Ritzer frowns as he hears a ghostly laugh and an "I told you so!" from the grave of Christopher Lasch.

Fourthly, more and more student research is being done on the Web. This means that fewer and fewer students are reading good books and not as good (but still better than Web pages) academic journals. As a result, many are getting very muddled pictures of history, politics, literature and society. It's hard to convince students that "Joe's Web Page on Weber" isn't as legitimate source for understanding social theory as a textbook published by Oxford University Press – they use it as an essay source anyways. Some have told me they find it impossible to read and understand texts written before the twentieth century. Further, a large portion of the students who graduate from universities each year are functionally illiterate. My test: can the student in question write a page of grammatically correct English on the subject of their choice using language significantly more sophisticated than "See Dick and Jane. See Dick and Jane run up the hill. See Dick and Jane hiding in the bushes", etc. Partly because of Net trash talk that has eroded our basic literary skills, fewer and fewer can do this. Quo vadis?

Yet, brothers and sisters, we are all guilty to some degree. And we can do something about it. Lines have to be drawn to restore the university to a place for dialogue, not MSNing and flaming. I propose the following bill of rights be adopted by educators as a way of taming the electronic beast that threatens to turn our lives into a series of emoticons:

Electronic Bill of Rights for Educators and Students

1. The use of e-mail as a form of communication is a privilege, not a right. Speaking and writing are still the primary forms of communication.
2. Since e-mail has built within it the opportunity for misunderstanding, rudeness and deception, the recipient of an offensive e-mail has the full right to blacklist its sender or ignore all future electronic communications from them.
3. It should never be assumed that an educator will e-mail or post on a web site marks, course notes, or course lectures. It is the responsibility of students to attend class to get these notes, or to get them from a fellow student in the case they miss a class. The electronic communication of marks, notes, or lectures is at the discretion of the educator, and should be seen as a favour done for students, not as their right.

4. Educators and students agree to attempt to maintain a minimum of civility in their electronic discourse, and to not rely on it for the communication of important information except where they have no other choice. Request for extensions on work should be done in person or on the telephone.

5. Kind words and friendly congratulations are always welcome, even by e-mail. Yet students must realize that having information obtainable through other channels e-mailed to them is work, not play, and interferes with more important academic labours.

Let's hope such a bill could reduce the Sisyphean labours. Bye 4 now, and LOL! ☺

Doug Mann is an adjunct professor at UWO and King's College. He does not welcome e-mailed replies to this article, unless accompanied by smiley faces and dancing cats.