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Robert D. Wilson

California State University, San Bernardino

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A contrarian's twenty questions

Robert D. Wilson
California State University

Teaching is not a lost art, but the regard for it is a lost tradition.¹

One might begin to think the art of the university is being lost also. Since the traditional university has focused on education as distinct from training, we might consider if this movement toward Web-based courses is consistent with that tradition. On the other hand, this may signal a fundamental shift in the role of universities. Perhaps we should be concerned most about the most efficient and effective methods of delivery of course content. If this is indeed the case, it is ironic that such a shift will embrace the criticisms we level at institutions such as the University of Phoenix.

I note that several advertisements have helped form some of these questions. And too, cause me to wonder about the purpose of the university. Specifically, the advertisement sponsored by RealEducation, Microsoft® and ©Prentice-Hall, Inc., suggests that others too see a different purpose for the university. The advertisement announces a series of ". . . Executive Briefings across the U. S. where the participants will learn how to . . . put all of your courses online . . ." and "Explore the cost of effectiveness of outsourcing the delivery of your campus and your courses." At least we can agree that capital outlay for physical plant certainly would be reduced.

Business has relied on mainframe-based courseware for about twenty years. There it makes sense to provide training for your employees in those skills necessary for their job. Indeed, the market for training courses in such fields as banking, insurance and the telephone companies is growing significantly. Whether or not that is the objective of the university is a different question. Therefore, before committing to this new technology, I thought it might be helpful to find out if we can answer the following 20 questions. The questions include some comments and additional questions that indicate why I think it is important for us to answer them.

1. *How many of your students have a computer at home?*

There is a tendency to assume the ubiquity of the computer. We need to develop some concrete numbers if we ultimately expect all students to enroll in one or more "online" courses. What if some number of your students can only access the Web-based course from the campus? Is that a problem or inconsistent with providing online courses?

¹ Jacques Barzun, *Newsweek* (New York, 5 Dec. 1955).

2. ***Of those students who have computers at home, how many have a connection to the Internet?***

Here again, when we find that students do in fact have a computer at home, we make our second assumption--they are connected to the Internet. Again, shouldn't we have some data that tell us how many of our students can take advantage of this opportunity?

3. ***Of those students who have an Internet connection, how is the connection made?***

What do you suppose we assume here? Obviously, we do not assume that they have T1 lines coming into their home but we might lean toward ISDN or at the least some flavor of 56k-modem technology. Why is an accurate assessment of the type of connection important? We know that the twitch generation needs some enticement and interactivity or the length of their stay on a page diminishes rapidly. Further, anecdotal information suggests that the more entertaining faculty are, the better received they are (i.e., higher evaluations). If proven, then it follows that our Web pages had better be entertaining; whether they are educational is another matter. Therefore, you may want to create dynamic, interactive pages. In addition, your topic may profit from some animation and/or sound. Even on static pages, you will probably want something that visually grabs the viewer's attention. Bandwidth is the issue here for the students and the developers. While providing entertainment and transferring knowledge are not mutually exclusive endeavors, it is likely that one will predominate.

4. ***How many of you have ever used IRC software and/or participated in an online chat group?***

Depending of course on the amount of traffic, the number of participants, the type of connection, and the moderator, a typical conversation often evolves something like this.

Moderator: Who can tell me

#1: Who is signed up for this course anyway?

Moderator: the answer to problem 13?

#3: How should we answer your question?

#10: Am I connected?

#2: This is totally bogus I think we should drop

Moderator: Keep in mind that

#1: Hey #14, are you online or still hungover?

5. ***What is the computer proficiency level of the anticipated students who will enroll in Web-based courses?***

Will we need to provide training for students in order for them to enroll in a Web-based course or do they already have the requisite skills? Do we need to test them before they are permitted to enroll? My concern is that we assume that students have somehow acquired

sufficient computer skills so that these types of courses will be of benefit to them. I suspect great disparity among students in this area.

6. *What do students who have taken Web-based courses think about them?*

As far as I am able to determine, there is only anecdotal data regarding this question. What this means is that you will receive credit however you answer the question. More to the point, do students determine the content of the curriculum or the manner in which that content is presented? Depending on how you answer that, the question should raise some disturbing issues.

7. *Who is going to develop your Web-based course?*

Are you proficient with HTML, DHTML? Do you use Cascading Style Sheets, frames and do you write your own CGI scripts? Are your students going to be able to retrieve information from your course pages? Irrespective of how you answer those and other related questions, you should know that a number of new authoring tools is being introduced. Of course, I might wonder which of our faculty will face the same issues as do students posed in question 5.

What this question really asks is whether you are going to become a professional, or at least proficient, author. Readers of this article probably won't be too concerned about learning these tools. Consider, however, your colleagues in other departments who are not as computer-literate as you. Do you think you might answer the question differently now?

If you need help with this question and the next one, see the comments about the briefings.

8. *Who is going to maintain your Web-based courses?*

Think about the pages that you have created. How current are they and how often do you modify them? Multiply the amount of effort needed to develop and maintain a 10 to 15 week course and you see the need to answer this question.

9. *Should there be any type of standardization in the presentation of Web-based courses?*

So that a clamor is not raised about abridgement of 'academic freedom', understand that the question deals with layout and navigation issues, not content. Do you think there should be some consistency among the courses offered in a department in terms of how students interact with the pages, logging in and out, responding to questions, taking exams? Should there be some overall strategy in place before we simply start throwing up pages on the net?

10. *Should there be any enrollment limit, i.e., class size, for Web-based courses?*

Once again, issues of bandwidth, server reliability, complexity of the page content (in terms of graphics, sound, animation, and interactivity) should probably be identified before students enroll and log on.

11. *What courses are suited for conversion to the Web?*

If the objective is training, then identifying courses may not be too difficult. That is provided that we have determined the essential skills we are trying to afford our students.

12. *Are there any courses that are not suitable for conversion to the Web?*

Personally, I would really like to find out what people think those courses might be and why and if there are too many of them.

13. *What is an appropriate mix of in-class and Web-based instruction?*

This question is posed simply because I believe it is something that needs addressing.

14. *How do you propose to ensure participation?*

If we have problems drawing students into discourse in the classroom, do we believe that the anonymity provided by the Internet will mitigate their reluctance? Will simply logging on suffice or will the participants have to actually do something? Actually, will participation even be necessary.

15. *What is the difference between education and training? Information and knowledge?*

My guess is that we all know the differences. I just wonder which terms apply to the traditional model and which to the online model.

16. *What is lost in the translation of traditional methods to Web-based methods?*

Can e-mail really be substituted for the face-to-face interaction between you and your students? Do you suppose that students will gain more insight by joining an on-line chat than through participation in classroom discussions?

17. *If you and I teach the same course, can I use your Web-based creation?*

If you have developed a Web-based course in business statistics and one of your colleagues would like to use it, what is your response?

18. *Who determines the curricular content for Web-based courses?*

This question, I believe, needs serious consideration. There appears to be significant input from students as to what is important for them to study. We find that where courses are too rigorous, faculty evaluations are generally poor. The effect of this is either dilution of content or the reduction of the standards defining what the grade A means. The pursuit of the grade has supplanted the pursuit of knowledge in many instances.

19. *What is the difference in educational philosophy between the University of Phoenix and Web-based courses?*

It seems that colleges and universities are so concerned about losing students to institutions built on the fast food business model that the objectives of a university education will be modified to fit that model.

20. *What is the purpose of the university?*

I have seen numerous articles stating that the student is our customer. If this is true, then should it not be the case that they determine what is needed to be an educated person? We seem to permit that when we reduce the rigor of a class or engage in some degree of grade inflation. My personal belief is that society is our customer. Our responsibility is to ensure that we help produce individuals who can advance the knowledge and values of that society. If, on the other hand, the purpose is simply to turn out individuals who can perform certain tasks, then perhaps we need to attend one of the briefings.