The Future of Higher Education

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I have posted a link below to a TEDx lecture by Michele Pistone at Villanova. Her YouTube video lasts eighteen minutes, but I think it is worth watching. In fact, here is the link so you can go watch it right now before you read my thoughts on it: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsiQ6-JTOWM

Welcome back from YouTube! My first reaction: a sense of fear that I am missing the boat, that the future will come next week or next year and render me obsolete if I do not get on board, get online. My second reaction: a sense that I have heard this message before, couched a bit differently, but saying essentially the same thing—that if I do not embrace this or that technology, I will not be able to continue as a teacher. I will be a dinosaur, if I am not one already!

Even though I am heading toward the end of my academic career rather than nearer the beginning, and thus probably personally immune to the sweeping changes that Pistone is predicting, I still have an interest and stake in the issue, since I will care about and stay interested in the role of higher education even after I eventually retire. And even though I am decidedly “old school,” I have tried to learn new technologies and incorporate them into my teaching. If this brave new world is indeed coming, I think even someone of my era can adapt. Pistone is certainly correct that higher education still clings to an older model. And she is certainly correct that change will come. I hope I am not just being a stick-in-the-mud when I lament how much will be lost, and when I argue that much of what we do cannot be replicated online.

The feeling that I have when I walk into my classroom and look around at my students, some eager, some bored, but all there, with me, physically, in the room. The feeling I have when I rouse myself up to get them roused up, once again. The puzzled look on a student’s face that tells me she does not understand, so I intuitively explain the point again, without her having to ask. The look on her face when she gets it. The buzz in the classroom as students work in groups to answer a question or problem I pose. The silence in the classroom as the students write a paragraph. The sound of their laughter at one of my stupid jokes. The profound, awed feeling we all share as I read a moving passage from a novel or poem. The excitement I feel surging through me as I explain the way metaphor works, that it is not just a trick of language, but the way language exposes our deepest thoughts and our hidden inner feelings. The thrill I feel as the students share that excitement. The sound of desks moving, of pages turning, of pen scratching on paper. The sight of students in their student fashion of the day, the human smell of a crowd gathered communally in a room. The quick, disapproving look I give to a student who is misbehaving or losing attention—and the student’s silent response to shape up and join back in. The shy student who lingers after class to ask a question about the last issue we discussed, or about the paper that is
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due next week. The student I pass on the sidewalk whose name I have forgotten from two years before, but the greeting and smile we share, just as we share the memory of that class and what we learned together. The birds singing in the trees, the old, beautiful trees, survivors of a century’s parade of students, teachers—and academic trends and innovations. This future that Michele Pistone predicts may or may not all come to pass. I know that much of it will, and I will try to take the best of it and make myself a better teacher. But no matter the technological platform, there is so much of value that will be lost, so much so that I suspect I will not be the only troglodyte who does not give in fully. There is something about actual human contact that no technology can ever replace.

Did you watch her video, and did you notice this irony? She is predicting a brave new world of online education, but apart from the fact that you and I accessed it on the internet, from a video, Michele Pistone is just as “old school” as I say I am—and even more so. She is lecturing, something I rarely do in my teaching, preferring to have students do most of the talking and thinking. Further, she is lecturing in what amounts to a classroom, in front of actual students, who are with her physically in the room. Is her brave new world merely the old world, replicated exactly, only the medium of delivery and access having changed? Meet the new boss, same as the old boss. Yet I know new technologies already exist that will let us teach in ways that can reach more people and teach them deeply and profoundly, and I will try to embrace the best of what comes and keep myself and my teaching fresh. But a part of me knows the inestimable value of much of the past, and I will hold onto that as long as I can.

Academic Responsibility ---- Faculty Governance

Last spring, we adopted new guidelines that grew out of the Faculty Roles and Rewards Taskforce, a document entitled “Faculty Roles”; I would like to take this space for a few weeks to start a discussion about some aspects of one part of that document, academic responsibility. I wrote previously about final exams and office hours. This week: participation in faculty governance. The Faculty Roles document cites one academic responsibility as “engagement in faculty meetings at all levels.” That means we are expected to attend, and engage ourselves in, departmental, divisional, college, and university faculty meetings.

Participating fully in faculty governance is a basic part of our university citizenship. How many meetings of Faculty Conference or your college’s Faculty Assembly have you been to when the first order of business was to vote to suspend the rules because of a lack of a quorum? What a sad commentary on our attendance, or lack of attendance. Maybe at a few of those meetings, those present should not
agree to conduct business. When curricular items cannot go forward because they have not been voted on, that would certainly get some people’s attention. I will not sit here and say that I am not an offender in this regard. I have missed Faculty Conference, Arts and Science Faculty Assembly, and University College Faculty Assembly on more than one occasion. Sometimes that Friday meeting at 2:00 pm is the only other thing I have scheduled for the day, and I rationalize to myself that attending is not worth the 70-mile roundtrip. But when I do not attend, important issues are decided without my voice and vote, policies and procedures are adopted without my input or oversight, and most importantly, curriculum is passed or rejected without my consent. On those days when I have abdicated my duty by not being present, I have shirked my citizenship duties as a member of the Winthrop community. “One person will not be missed,” I might say to myself. “It’s all just a bunch of parliamentary rigmarole,” another voice inside my head says.

“What difference do I make?” I say as I do something else that Friday afternoon, or whenever the meeting is. And even as I am saying those things, I know that they are just rationalizations. The better part of me resolves to be a better citizen, to attend and engage in these meetings unless I truly have to miss for a valid reason. Consider this the better part of me talking to the better part of you—and in hopes that this conversation about academic responsibility will continue.

Jo Koster and I invite you to join XXITE (Twenty-first Century Teaching Excellence)—or if you have already joined, to check it out again as it grows and develops. Maybe you have not been there in a long time—if not, you will see many changes in look and content. For example, XXITE now has groups dedicated to HMXP and CRTW, with those of us who teach those courses sharing ideas and materials. Talk to Jo about setting up your own interest group. Jo is particularly interested in recruiting a few people to blog regularly about their teaching.

Jo set up this interactive site to give Winthrop faculty a virtual gathering space to share ideas about teaching and technology. You’ll find blogs and discussion forums on various topics—and we urge you to add your own ideas. Visit again at http://wuxite.ning.com/ or email Jo Koster for an invitation to join: kosterj@winthrop.edu. The TLC website also has links to navigate your way there or to join: http://www2.winthrop.edu/tlc/

XXITE 2.0 ------ The Virtual Gathering Place for WU (The Reboot!)

Thought for The Week

“For the majority of us, the past is a regret, the future an experiment.”

--Mark Twain
A New Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The Teaching and Learning Center is offering a new service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me at (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

Tomorrow's Professor

Here is a link to a recent article at Tomorrow's Professor, "The Future of Higher Education is Online," the issue I discuss above:

http://cgi.stanford.edu/~dept-ctl/cgi-bin/tomprof/posting.php?ID=1175

You can subscribe to Tomorrow's Professor and receive interesting articles about teaching and academia every week:

http://cgi.stanford.edu/~dept-ctl/cgi-bin/tomprof/postings.php

Here is a clean link to Michele Pistone's complete video:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsiQ6-JTOWM