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Teaching Naked: Part One

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Teaching Naked: Part One

Calm down! “Teaching naked” does not mean what you think! It is the title of a recent book that has become much-discussed in the teaching and learning world. The full title is Teaching Naked: How Moving Technology Out of Your College Classroom Will Improve Student Learning, by José Antonio Bowen (Jossey-Bass, 2012). Bowen is a dean in the school of arts at Southern Methodist University, as well as a leading scholar and teacher of jazz and jazz history. And from the evidence of his book, he is both a master teacher and a master of technology. I am about halfway through reading his book, and I can certainly see what all the buzz is about.

For several decades, we have been bombarded with calls to incorporate technology into our teaching and our classrooms. Experts and studies have told us that cutting-edge technology will increase student learning and make our jobs easier, more effective, and more engaging. We seem to be at a crossroads in higher education: a move toward online learning, MOOCs (massive open online courses), and for-profit institutions, in direct competition with more traditional universities like Winthrop. Some have predicted the end of college as we have known it for millennia, and the warnings to evolve and get on the technology bandwagon or go the way of the pterodactyl are numerous.

Bowen offers a different solution, one that incorporates technology, but enhances actual time in class for teachers and students. He begins with a paradox: technology does indeed increase engagement and learning, but he argues “that it is most powerfully used outside of class as a way to increase naked, nontechnological interaction with students inside the classroom” (Bowen x). Thus, “naked teaching.”

His book has three parts: in Part One, he surveys “The New Digital Landscape”; in Part Two, the heart of the book, he covers “Designing 21st Century Courses”; and in Part Three, he addresses “Strategies for Universities of the Future.” I want to review and discuss his book in two parts, since he has so much to cover, and since his ideas strike me as extremely valuable and practical, as well as intriguing and exciting.

The main thrust of Bowen’s argument addresses a problem many of us have discussed: how to get students to engage with the material of the course before they come to class. I often feel that I am the only person in the room who has done the day’s assignment. Increasingly, students refuse to do the reading and work that we require before they come to class. Bowen sees technology as the answer—but technology that the students engage with before we meet them in class.
He stresses “e-communication” as a way to engage students and to free up class time: email, Facebook, Twitter, Skype, and virtual classrooms, among others. All of these are available to us at Winthrop, since Blackboard has both chat and virtual classroom features. We all use email to communicate with our students, but Bowen suggests using Twitter for most messages, saving email for longer, more substantive communication. I have resisted Twitter so far—this is one Bird who does not tweet—but his ideas about the ways Twitter can reach and engage students is making me reconsider. I have talked to several people who share my experience that students do not seem to check their email regularly anymore. Email, like answering machines or even calling, is something old folks like their parents do. It is not uncommon for a student to tell me, “Oh, I don’t think I’ve checked my email for about five days.” Bowen suggests tweeting students a discussion question or problem before class—then beginning with that question or problem.

I have tried the chat features in Blackboard for online office hours, with some success, but I have never used Skype for that purpose, as Bowen suggests. I intend to give that a try: have you noticed that fewer and fewer students show up for office hours anymore?

His other ideas about using e-communication include freeing up class time by giving instructions electronically; introducing readings through email; providing links to YouTube videos that students watch before class; and making podcasts/vodcasts. I have used podcasts increasingly in the last few years, with much success: instead of spending ten or twenty minutes of class time to introduce and explain paper assignments, I make a podcast and post it to Blackboard. Students report that they get so much out of these podcasts. Even though they are getting the same information I was giving before, with a podcast, they get it on demand, when they want it, and when they finally have decided to tackle that assignment (invariably at three in the morning, when I am blissfully unavailable to them). A problem Bowen does not address: persuading students to actually listen to these pearls of wisdom.

A key for me, throughout my teaching career, has been getting students to prepare, fully, before they come to class. That has led to my emphasis on critical reading, which I have written about before (and we have both a handout on “How To Read Critically” and a Screencast on teaching that handout on the TLC Resources page). Bowen’s central chapters address ways to engage students through technology. I will continue my overview of his book and his ideas in the next Weekly Reader, after we get back from a much-needed Spring Break. Have a happy and safe one, everyone, and I hope you come back energized for the scurry to the end of yet another academic year. Aloha!
XXITE 2.0 ------ The Virtual Gathering Place for WU (The Reboot!)

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://wuxxite.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/

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.

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Go2Knowledge is a website that offers a variety of video presentations on faculty and staff professional development. You will find presentations by nationally-known experts in seven categories: At-Risk Populations, Campus Safety, Organizational Development, Student Success, Teaching and Learning, Technology, and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a one-year subscription to this service.

People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don’t have the time or they can’t at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop

See you there!

Thought for The Week

“If you pick up a starving dog and make him prosperous, he will not bite you. This is the principal difference between a dog and a man.”

--Mark Twain

An ongoing publication of Winthrop University’s Teaching and Learning Center. Past issues are now archived on our webpage: http://www2.winthrop.edu/tlc/mainresources.html