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Teaching Philosophy

“The current explosion of digital technology not only is changing the way we live and communicate but is rapidly and profoundly altering our brains. Daily exposure to high technology--computers, smart phones, video games, search engines like Google and Yahoo--stimulates brain cell alteration and neurotransmitter release, gradually strengthening new neural pathways in our brains while weakening old ones. Because of the current technological revolution, our brains are evolving right now--at a speed like never before.”

Gary Small, *iBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind*

Students are evolving. The student 2.0 is an altogether different animal than the student 1.0. And our classrooms are ecosystems, an environment all their own, where we each must decide how to engage this new species of student. But the walls of our classrooms have been breached. The front of the classroom lies in ruin, and the teacher standing behind a lectern has become an anachronism. The entire system has suffered a swift and certain decay. Now, we teeter at a slowly disintegrating threshold, one foot in a physical world and the other in a virtual one. I feel some brief nostalgia but scabble eagerly, hopefully from the rubble.

Our students are no longer just bodies in desks; they are no longer vessels. They have become compilations, amalgams, a concatenation of web sites. They are the people in front of us, but also their avatars in Second Life and the World of Warcraft and the profiles they create on FaceBook and MySpace. They speak with mouths, but also with fingers tapping briskly at the keys of their smart phones. When they want to “reach out and touch someone,” they use VOIP, AIM, and Twitter. Shouldn’t student-centered learning address itself, as fully as possible, to this new breed of student? Shouldn’t we understand our students as more than just inert flesh?

Shouldn’t we, ourselves, evolve into teachers 2.0? After all, the expert is dead, murdered by the all-knowing Wikipedia. Students now hold an encyclopedic wealth of information literally in their hands, available to them at the press of a button or the swipe of a finger across a haptic touchscreen. The teacher is no longer just a depository and depositor of knowledge. Our job has become altogether more complex. Now, we are in a position akin to that of a juggler, provoking, reflecting, interpreting, a deft act of balance and patience. Too much of our teacherly voice, and the learning shuts down, degrading into a stilted game of bounce the idea off the professor; not enough, and it atrophies. The teacher 2.0 must shift the focus from individual learners to the community of learners, drawing new boundaries that reflect a much larger hybrid classroom. Now, our work in the world must be done also online.

I saw the first glimmer of this transformation, this reconstruction, when I noticed that students were no longer coming unannounced to office hours. As teachers, our office has become a virtual space, where the phrase “by appointment” is now a quaint archaism. We are available *always*, by way of e-mail, Twitter, Facebook, iChat, a dialogue continuously ongoing. There is no end to the conversations we have with students, so we have little need for appointments in the way we once did. I include this quotation from Thomas P. Kasulis on the

front page of the online syllabus for every course I teach: “A class is also a *process*, an independent organism with its own goal and dynamics. It is always something more than what even the most imaginative lesson plan can predict.” Here, Kasulis captures the dynamic nature of the contemporary classroom, suggesting each of our courses will necessarily have a life of its own no matter how certain we are in advance of the parameters.

For many teachers, all of this leads to a pedagogy that is even more fundamentally disembodied. In the classroom 1.0, the teacher lectures to a roomful of mute brains and eyeballs, the students’ physicality relegated to a wagging hand, a mere medium between the drone of the expert and the scrawl in their notebooks. Now, shall we forget these bodies altogether, turning instead to their virtual doubles? No. I would argue that, in the classroom 2.0, we must turn simultaneously in two directions. As teachers, we must engage our students at the level of 1s and 0s but also at the level of flesh. Even as the classroom moves more and more online, we must make efforts to make learning ecstatic again. In our land-based classes, we might eliminate paper syllabi and begin to accept all of our students’ writing assignments online, but we must also remind ourselves and our students that their work has (and will always have) a distinctly physical character. While the Kindle and the iPhone certainly offer compelling alternatives, the material object of a book or a film will never be fully extinct. Books have an odor, a certain weight in our hands, a tactile pleasure at the turn of a page. The film strip has an audible clack as it moves through the projector, and the emulsion dissolves sweetly before our eyes. And, even if these mediums *are* rendered mostly intangible, books and films will always have a physical impact on *us*, causing us to recoil, sigh, bristle, and scream.

And student work has the potential for all these same qualities. It has heft and gravity, meaning and substance. Its production requires their bodies, or at least requires them to *have* bodies. The best academic and creative work is rooted in experience--the experience of a world, a book, a film, a self. The best readers and viewers let this world take root inside them, and they engage it, intellectually, emotionally, viscerally. Close-analysis is like eating, something lively and voracious, something that drips and reels. It isn’t (and can’t be) virtual. And yet, somewhat paradoxically, in the classroom 2.0, we must find a way for this kind of analysis to happen online, even as we also find ways to reengage our students in the physical work of a face-to-face classroom. The so-called “live classroom” can be neither just here nor just there. It has to be *both* simultaneously. We must bring our subjects to life for both our students and their digital counterparts. Learning must fire every neuron--must touch students at the highest levels of consciousness *and* at the cellular level. We must *look* in a way that only bodies can do, the sort of looking that breaks its subject and object to bits and melds them permanently together. No matter where it happens, this is what learning must do. It must evolve--and revolt.