

Evergreen Goes Online, With Some Discomfort

By Roberto Sanchez

Can a college that features personal student-instructor contact adapt to the myriad online applications that are finding their way into every facet of higher education?

The Evergreen State College, which prides itself on its small seminars taught by teams of teachers, is going through a crisis of conscience as it moves into the 21st century world of distance education. Over the past two years, Evergreen quietly has been experimenting with Web pages, electronic bulletin boards and other computer technologies to expand the seminar experience for its students.

But last summer, Evergreen took a step further, offering its first fully online class. And this month, the college began offering its first telecourse - a class on labor economics taught via live television to students at its Tacoma campus from the Washington State University campus in Pullman.

The telecourse, in particular, has become the focus of a growing debate at Evergreen over how technology should be used to teach, and whether distance learning has a place in a college where "seminar" is used as a verb, and where the top core value is good teaching and the "close interaction between faculty and students."

"We seem to be riding in the passenger seat of a vehicle driven by technology, and we don't know where we are going," said Bill Arney, a professor of sociology.

Arney is one of several professors who worry Evergreen is compromising its teaching mission to get a handhold in an increasingly competitive educational market. They say the college is bowing to pressure from legislators who believe distance education is a cheaper way to reach more students.

They also worry that the college could go the way of some community colleges, relying on technology and part-time instructors to cut costs, at the expense of quality.

College administrators, however, say Evergreen is only testing new technologies, to see what can make good professors into even better teachers.

"Evergreen may be in a position to add to all the experiments going on in the state in distance education," said Lee Lyttle, an academic dean at Evergreen. "We are still undecided. We are still probing the place of distance education at Evergreen."

Some, like Joye Hardiman, director of Evergreen's Tacoma campus, think distance education could give Evergreen access to classes that it couldn't otherwise offer. Her campus, for example, is too small to offer a regular class on economics, and the WSU telecourse helped fill that gap.

The issue of how to deal with technology and distance learning has caused so much soul-searching at Evergreen that President Jane Jervis took a month off last year just to work out her thoughts on paper.

The essay, titled "Computer technology at Evergreen: It's Not Easy Being Cybergreen," compares the digital revolution of the 1990s to the invention of the movable-type printing press in 1454.

"We are . . . something like where folks were in 1500 with respect to printing technology," she wrote. "We may have an inkling that big changes are afoot but don't really know where those changes will lead. We may lament the good old days."

Jervis concluded that to keep up with the times, Evergreen needs to embrace computers to improve administration and student services. As for education, she believes the school needs to experiment with technology only to improve the educational experience for its students. Evergreen also can use those experiments as academic research, publishing and sharing the results with colleagues.

"We know quite a bit about teaching. We are getting to know how technology works, and we are trying to understand how to put these two together," Jervis said.

Some of Jervis' recommendations already are happening. Last summer, Professor Jose Gomez taught a political philosophy class entirely online, the first such class at Evergreen.

Students met each other in person only once, to get acquainted and take digital pictures of each other for their Web pages. All other class discussions took place through e-mail, message boards and chat rooms. Gomez's goal was to see if the kind of exploration that happens in a face-to-face seminar could take place in a virtual community.

Gomez said the message boards worked very well, allowing even shy students to voice opinions and take apart issues from the course readings. Chat rooms, on the other hand, were not a good way to carry on a seminar, and he doesn't see himself using them again.

Though the class worked, he had some concerns about the effectiveness of his experiment.

"I would never do this during the regular year," he said. Regular classes at Evergreen, he said, are 16-credit, multidisciplinary programs that are too complicated to try fully online. But the summer classes are smaller, four-credit courses that are easier to manage.

Arney, the sociology professor, said the issue is whether Evergreen wants to remain a teaching college, or follow the national trend in higher education to become a place where people train for skills.

"If the state wants well-trained workers, moderately informed, then do it by satellite," he said. "If you think college is about thinking and reasoning, that has to be done face-to-face."

Charles Pailthorp, a professor of philosophy, said he has no problem with experimentation in technology. But one of his concerns is that some technologies may have less to do with teaching than with political pressures.

The state has invested heavily on the K-20 network, a system of fiber-optic lines and routers that will eventually connect every public and private school and college in the state. Many legislators are now pressuring colleges to use it, particularly to teach distance classes, in the hopes that such classes will save money and reach many of the 80,000 additional students who will seek college in the next 20 years.

"We are all under the gun," Pailthorp said. "But this is not being driven by students, I can tell you that. I don't have students on the campus who are clamoring to use this technology."

Students at Tacoma's telecourse have a different view. Renee Munoz, a 40-year-old taking the telecourse at Tacoma, said the technology made it possible for her to take a class on economics without having to leave Tacoma. Munoz works part time and carries a full school load.

She agreed that her distance class hasn't been as intimate as a face-to-face seminar. However, Evergreen has made sure that some of the crucial elements of the school's style are still present. Students get evaluations, not grades. Class discussions still work as a seminar, online or in person.

"There is a difference. But I definitely think they haven't hindered anything," Munoz said.

Bill Bruner, dean of libraries at Evergreen, said the college is still not sold on the telecourse, but it is willing to experiment with that and other distance learning techniques.

"We are trying to see how the technology fits with the power of our education," Bruner said.

Despite their differences, professors said they have faith that Evergreen will stay true to its roots as a place of discovery and learning, where assumptions will be challenged.

"Evergreen is about experimentation, innovation. Even when some of my colleagues question me about this (online experiment), that's what Evergreen is about, too," Gomez said. Roberto Sanchez's phone message number is 206-464-8522. His e-mail address is: rsanchez@seattletimes.com

As Educators Rush to Embrace Technology, a Coterie of Skeptics Seeks to Be Heard

By Colleen Cordes

While he was editor of the Harvard Education Letter, Edward Miller concluded that academe had a new sacred cow -- the role of computers in education.

At an unusually critical conference here last month on that very topic, Mr. Miller recalled how "things really hit the fan" when he aired his reservations about the rush toward new technology for teaching.

That was in 1996, just after President Clinton had called for every classroom to be hooked up to the Internet. Mr. Miller told The New York Times that such a goal was low on his own list of education priorities, and that the research evidence on the usefulness of technology in improving schools was "not very encouraging."

To him, what he said seemed "rather mild and judicious." But it generated what he described as an "almost hysterical reaction" among some administrators and faculty members at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, which publishes the newsletter.

The school had been wooing some corporate executives in hopes of getting major gifts, Mr. Miller said, and apparently the potential donors were angered by his words. A senior professor blasted him in an e-mail message sent to the deans and other senior faculty members. To his knowledge, he said, no one came to his defense.

"I was accused by various people of trying to stab the school in the back," said Mr. Miller, who added that his departure from the publication later that year was nevertheless amicable.

His experience at a leading university and his own education research, he said, have convinced him that basic questions about the impact of computers on students have rarely been asked, let alone systematically studied.

Elsewhere, Mr. Miller's views might sound unconventional. But they were right in line with what many participants had to say at last month's conference, "The Computer in Education: Seeking the Human Essentials," held at Teachers College of Columbia University.

Unswayed by the rush to technology around them, they spent three days sharing unusually skeptical ideas about the actual impact of computer policies on schools and colleges. Many said they were seeking a more balanced approach, rather than suggesting that computers be eliminated.

Not everyone agreed that the conference achieved a good balance, and at least one member of the audience leveled a charge of "Ludditism" at the skeptics. In any event, those who were most enthusiastic about the use of new technologies in education found

themselves cast in an uncommon role -- the minority.

The critics of current technology policies said they were concerned about:

- * The reluctance of policy makers, education administrators, and researchers to consider the drawbacks of information technologies at the same time they're considering the benefits.

- * The lack of a carefully thought-out pedagogy that respects the changing developmental needs of students at different ages.

- * A feeling that business agendas and parents' fears about their children's job prospects -- rather than compelling evidence that computers will improve education -- are driving the push to computerize all levels of education.

- * A tendency, exacerbated by computers, to focus on developing children's logical-thinking skills too early, often at the expense of budding capacities in areas that are least machine-like, such as imagination, creativity, intuitive thinking, and the contribution of emotions to cognition.

- * The potential for computers to do more harm than good if introduced too early in childhood -- "too early" being, for some critics, any time until the age of 12, if not later.

"The qualities we value in adults may not be best developed by trying to impose them on children at an ever earlier age," said Douglas Sloan, a professor of history and education at Teachers College, who organized the conference to explore how computers can "truly serve the fullness of the human being."

Others, however, suggested that many participants were too negative.

Alan C. Kay, a vice-president for research and development at the Walt Disney Company, argued that advanced technologies can make it easier for students to visualize and learn difficult concepts, especially involving symbols. But Dr. Kay, a former fellow at Apple Computer, had his own complaints about what schools are doing with computers. He compared the "music" that many children are making on computers in school to piano variations of "Chopsticks."

"On close examination, kids are doing nothing of real importance on computers, and they'd be much better off doing something else," he said.

He acknowledged that he and other researchers had naively -- and wrongly -- assumed that their best ideas for educational technologies would be widely adopted. In a rational society, he said, educators would introduce computers at an appropriate age. Still, he said he was optimistic that, given time, more-creative and sensible uses of technologies will prevail.

Gregory C. Simon, until recently the top aide for domestic policy to Vice-President Gore, challenged some of the critics' bleaker assessments. He agreed with others that

students need only months, not years, to learn to operate computers.

But schools, he argued, also have to show students, at an appropriate age, the educational value of computers, so students don't assume these powerful tools are just for games. "The computer, used appropriately, is an indispensable, irreplaceable window on the world," he said.

Much of the discussion at the gathering related to pre-college education. But participants suggested that in higher education, too, the uses of technologies should be thought through more carefully.

Hubert L. Dreyfus, a professor of philosophy at the University of California at Berkeley, said relying on the Internet would actually discourage the passionate commitment that he saw at the heart of advanced learning in any field. The risk-free anonymity of the Internet, he said, makes it a good medium for slander, innuendo, endless gossip, and, ultimately, boredom. "Without some way of telling the relevant from the irrelevant and the significant from the insignificant, everything becomes equally interesting and equally boring."

But studies show, he added, that learners never achieve mastery of a skill unless they care deeply about achieving it; failure causes pain, and success elation. The "nihilistic pull of the new network culture" doesn't prohibit such personal commitment but does inhibit it, he argued.

Teachers with their own passionate commitment to learning "can pass on their passion to their students," and model their mastery of a subject -- best done in the close apprenticeship of classroom or laboratory, not in cyberspace. The best teachers are strongly committed to their students, he added.

Some took exception to his critique of computer networks. Dr. Kay said he had had a long-distance "apprenticeship" with another scientist for some time before actually meeting him. Mr. Simon pointed to citizens' use of the Internet to promote a new treaty to ban land mines.

Still, many echoed Dr. Dreyfus' contention that the teacher-student relationship is education's core. Computers can do little, at best, to strengthen that bond -- and, at worst, can weaken it, some suggested.

Lowell Monke, who teaches advanced computer-technology classes for students in Des Moines's five public high schools, is writing a dissertation on the impact of computers on school culture. In Des Moines, he said, teachers talk much less than before about their students' capacities, and much more about the capacities of the district's new technologies.

"The more students rely on the ever-increasing skills of the machinery," he said, "the more time and effort they end up investing in and learning how to use the technical skills necessary to get performance out of the machine -- and the more they begin to think in machine-like ways."

"Today," Mr. Monke added, "we give our students powerful external resources in lieu of drawing on and nurturing their inner ones. It's not insight that is important, it's outcomes."

Langdon Winner, a professor of political science at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, said in an interview that he used Web pages and e-mail to communicate with his students, but that he considered these educational tools a "very minor thing."

Basic teaching skills, he said, "involve building a relationship between human beings, and, in that light, sometimes networked computing can help out. But a lot of the time it's just completely peripheral."

"The most valuable thing I can do for my students is to get to know them as people, as individuals."

Computers, some speakers argued, capture and enhance one kind of human thinking -- based on calculation and logic -- that is powerful but limited. They do nothing to enhance moral intuition, imagination, emotional thinking, and a disciplined will, the critics said. The intensive use of computers with young children can actually stunt those qualities, some suggested, adding that they are all the more important if students are to be taught to manipulate powerful new technologies that can be used in constructive or destructive ways.

"I look at some of these kids," Mr. Monke said in an interview, "and I wonder what they're going to do with all of this power, because their moral, ethical development is pretty minor at this point."

And many speakers offered examples of how many students and researchers now think of the mind as a computer. In addition to popular fantasies about cyborgs -- human-robot hybrids -- that have been fueled by Star Trek, Dr. Winner noted, some artificial-intelligence researchers foresee a "post-human" future, in which the "pathetic shell" of the human body has been shed and the mind "downloaded" into a superior, robotic form. "I find myself more and more surrounded by young people who find this an alluring vision of what humans could become," he said.

In a dinner discussion, Joseph Weizenbaum, a professor emeritus of computer science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, called such enthusiasm disturbing. He recalled speaking with students who are unable to imagine human experiences that cannot be directly and completely expressed in words. Whatever can be captured in words, their thinking goes, can at least theoretically be programmed into a machine, he said.

Some researchers at leading institutions in artificial-intelligence studies convey to students an image of the human being as "a mediocre product of mediocre engineering," he said, their point being "that we can do better than that."

Dr. Weizenbaum, who is Jewish, and whose family left Nazi Germany in 1936, said he was troubled by what he sees as a parallel to the Holocaust: Eliminating a whole people was Hitler's "final solution" to "the Jewish problem," he said. The vision of some researchers seems to be a "post-biological" age, in which the elimination of humans in favor of a superior form of artificial, intelligent life would be the "final solution to the human problem."

For his part, Stephen L. Talbott, who edits an Internet newsletter related to education, suggested that the computer's limitations are a "picture of what we might become." He urged schools to provide many more hands-on, personal experiences of nature to help ground children in the natural world, as a counterbalance.

As for the future of higher education, Rensselaer's Dr. Winner poked fun at what he sees as a flood of uncritical rhetoric about the impact of new information technologies, not least the recently unveiled "wearable" computers.

Today, he said in an interview, students wear T-shirts bearing the emblem of their alma mater. "In the future, your T-shirt will simply be your alma mater."