

Trapped in the Virtual Classroom

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To what extent are the uniquely human elements of our lives the result of spontaneous or unplanned experience?

I was asked to address the Yale Political Union on the topic “Resolved: Embrace Online Education.” I agreed to speak in the negative. Let me start with a proposition: the great social calamity of our time is that people are being replaced by machines. This is happening and it will go on happening. But we may want to stop or slow the process when we have a chance, in order to ask a large question. To what extent are the uniquely human elements of our lives, things not reproducible by mechanical or technical substitutes, the result of *spontaneous or unplanned experience*? Such experience, whatever we think of it, is made possible by the arts of give-and-take that we learn in the physical presence of human beings.

American society is still on the near side of robotification. People who can't conjure up the relevant sympathy in the presence of other people are still felt to need various kinds of remedial help: they are autistic or sociopathic, it may be said—those are two of a range of clinical terms. Less clinically we may say that such people lack a certain affective range. However efficiently they perform their tasks, we don't yet think well of those who in their everyday lives maximize efficiency and minimize considerate, responsive, and unrehearsed interaction, whether they neglect such things from physiological incapacity or a prudential fear of squandering their energy on emotions that are not formally necessary.

This prejudice continues to be widely shared. But the consensus is visibly weaker than it was a decade ago. As people are replaced by machines—in Britain, they call such people “redundant”—the survivors who remain in prosperous employment are being asked to become more machinelike. This fits with the idea that all the valuable human skills and varieties of knowledge are things that can be assimilated in a machinelike way. We can know the quantity of information involved, and we can program it to be poured into the receiving persons as a kind of “input” that eventually yields the desired “product.” Even in this short summary, however, I have introduced an assumption that you may want to stand back and question. Is it really the case that all knowledge is a form of information? Are there some kinds of learning or mental activity that are not connected with, or properly describable as, knowledge?

When H.L. Mencken, an avowed atheist, was asked if he believed in baptism, he replied “Believe in it? I’ve seen it done!” For thirty-eight years, I’ve been a teacher of a discipline of interpretation that is fostered in university departments of literature, philosophy, the history of ideas, and to some extent psychology and political science, a discipline that might best be described as an art that can be taught; and if someone asks, “Do you believe in it?,” I can’t do better than “Believe in it? I’ve seen it done.” The discipline I have in mind is not a religious ritual but an educational practice that can seem to the uninitiated as monkish as some aspects of an alien religion.

This discipline can’t be called a science as a natural scientist would understand the term. It is not progressive. It has few formulas worth memorizing. It doesn’t show its glory in “research programs,” airtight systems of classification, or pathbreaking discoveries that refute a previous century’s scientific orthodoxy. Yet the discipline does have perceptible boundaries and teachable methods of confirmation or falsification, based in large part on the relationship of evidence to assertion, and on the common sense and insight of qualified judges. It imparts a fund of practical wisdom that grows over time and alters its emphasis with the disposition and character of the practitioner.

I will come back to the value of intellectual arts that can be taught, and why such arts are best learned in the presence of actual and not “virtual” teachers. But first let us consider the background assumption I mentioned that accounts for much of the enthusiasm about large-scale online classes, called “massive open online courses,” or MOOCs—classes without the classroom and without the physical student and teacher, working with a set curriculum and transmitting a single format to a virtual classroom of millions. I want to stress that this assumption is only a tendency and not an inevitable part of the argument one might make for digital teaching.

Still, as we look at the movement in its current phase, we ought to ask a series of related questions. Does this movement cooperate with a pressure to make human life ever more machinelike? In the process of approval and acceptance, are we being asked to conceive of knowledge itself as mainly constituted by information? And does knowledge come to be seen therefore as a social good that can be disseminated and assimilated in a uniform and mechanical way, so that finally the amount of good accomplished is to be judged by criteria of efficient satisfaction: by testing, for example, and a regimen of judging test scores?

I don’t see how the answers can be in doubt. The MOOC movement cooperates with the tendency of mechanization, indeed it strengthens the tendency, and by its promise of utility, efficiency, uniformity, and the expedited delivery of uniform goods, it discourages more complex thinking about the content and aims of education.

What explains the enthusiasm that the movement has excited among many clever people and even among experienced educators? Populism is oddly mixed, here, with entrepreneurial ambition. The hope is that more people will learn more things at a lower overall price. Many teachers will be fired in the process, of course, many schools will be reduced, defunded, and abandoned, but we will end up with a more information-filled and educationally satisfied citizenry. Perhaps this hope is to some extent realistic. But I can't help observing that in this business of the mechanization of the classroom, the cause of cultural democracy finds itself in a curious handshake with cost-cutting technology. The promise is to sell fewer and better products to more consumers, and to make large profits for a small number of companies. Well, America is already a business civilization. Do we want to make education itself more like a business?

A word about the physical classroom. I'm going to suppose that everyone who reads this has taken a course in a physical classroom that turned out to be good and memorable. Also, that we've all had courses that were disappointing because they were ill-conceived or badly taught, or because we chose wrong. Can one describe what it's like to be in a classroom that is working well? It isn't like any other conversation or any other human encounter. When you listen to the exchange of well-formulated thoughts in a discussion of a complex work of art or thought—a human document concerning human actions—you learn a good deal that can't be quantified, packaged, or transmitted by an efficient impersonal medium, no matter how up-to-date, no matter how well engineered. The expression on the face of someone making an unexpected point with considerable urgency reads differently in the presence of that person than it would if the person were a face on a screen that you might or might not look at.

There is also the look, well known to teachers, of the participant who is almost ready to say something interesting or surprising. You learn to notice that look in a classroom. It is harder to see on a screen. Again, say that in a complicated discussion a speaker's sentence trails off midway—a common thing in the sort of intellectual discipline I'm talking about. Sometimes it indicates a half-baked idea that is well lost. At other times it may mark the beginning of a perception that ought to be encouraged and followed up.

Every student and teacher knows the sort of signal I'm talking about. In fact, you don't see it only or mainly in classrooms. It can happen in any conversation that pursues a serious thought or perception; things suddenly get intense and you can't be sure how. Does it occur in exactly the same way, and with the same intimacy and intensity, in a group cell-phone conversation or Skype interview? Though some people will say the phone or the screen is just as good or almost as good, I suspect more of us drift with that answer without really believing it. We go along not from instinct or inclination but

because this seems the inevitable direction of progress. And if we don't go with the flow of progress, we will be called—what exactly? Perhaps we will be called Luddites.

Who were the Luddites? They were so named, in the second decade of the nineteenth century, because in their violent attacks on the emerging system of industrial capitalism, they traced their loyalty to King Ludd, a legendary friend of the people, rather than to King George III. The Luddites adopted a consistent tactic: they attempted to degrade or destroy the new technology that was degrading and destroying their lives. Thus they broke the frames of power-driven looms that were rendering the manufacture of textile products ever more efficient and cheaper and often uglier. For the new factory system had another effect besides convenience and efficiency in the production of goods; and as it happens, this was an effect we can still see all around. The new system split up families. It did so because the products of cottage industry, admirable though they might be for the artisanal virtues, could no longer compete with the factory goods. So parents and children went to work in the factories—often in separate factories miles apart—while the unlucky were left without any work at all. Part of the story of this economic catastrophe was told by Karl Polanyi in *The Great Transformation*.

As Polanyi suggested in that book of 1944, and as we can now confirm, the process of displacement has never altogether stopped. It offers a model of progress by which a few greatly prosper, many are put out of work and stranded at the margins of society, the general quality of life grows better by some criteria and worse by others, and the distances between people grow longer and harder to cross. The Luddites were reckless, no doubt, but the harm they inflicted can hardly be compared to the irreparable damage done to generations of children working in factories. Nor can we compare the destruction of the social environment wrought by the Luddites to the destruction of the natural environment achieved by coal-mining in the twentieth century and promised by fracking in the twenty-first—both of them technologies necessary for progress, or so we are told.

The utilitarian dream of the MOOC education in some ways suggests the opposite of the catastrophe of displacement that I described by analogy with the early factory system. After all, nobody will be driven from home by taking organic chemistry taught online by a teacher who spoke the words many months earlier in front of a camera thousands of miles away. You can take a course like that at home. That is precisely its attraction. No: under this new regime of teaching and learning, the displacement would not occur at home but in the workplace of education. Teachers stand to lose their jobs to the teaching programs supplied by the experts. The losses, for the most part, won't be felt by scholars at the large and prestigious universities and the better-known liberal arts colleges, but at less well known colleges and institutions throughout the literate world.

It would be a sign of humility regarding the educational inheritance if some of the MOOC outfits pledged *not* to market their products to schools that already employ teachers in the subjects covered by an online course. Schools that don't have teachers of the relevant subjects and don't have a reasonable chance of hiring them are a different matter. So are corporations that want to teach their employees a skill that is methodical and formulaic. Nor should one deny the benefit that online courses bring to freelance students of all ages who would never be able to find instruction of a similar kind anywhere in their neighborhood. A virtual course is better than no course; and who will pretend that the disadvantages of online instruction aren't outweighed by the good of having a shot at learning where none existed before? It is the next step of the pitch that ought to trouble us.

The authoritative MOOC on any subject aspires to be accepted as a uniform convenience. And yet, we lose something when we shut out the human contact whose elimination makes for the convenience. Might it not turn out to be antiseptic—deadening, even—to complete a two-year or a four-year-long succession of educational requirements in the frictionless setting of the virtual classroom? And if we think of uniformity as a gain—millions of pupils imbibing a familiar doctrine from the same learned authority—what shall we say of the consequent loss of variety? Good teaching has more than one master, one method, and one style.

In the age of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, it is not a foregone conclusion that our society will continue to support teaching at all levels as one of the honorable professions, a respected calling on a par with medicine and law. The support will continue only if—against the allure of the most seductive of technologies—we remind ourselves how much the contact between teacher and student can matter in the physical classroom. I can't see what is risked by this conservative approach. Without embracing online education, we can still choose to take the help it offers.

Let us use it and not let it use us. Given the choice, who would watch on their laptop a discussion of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* or Joyce's *Ulysses*, or the films of Keaton or Chaplin shrunk to the knuckle-breadth of a smart phone? Or suppose (as is sure to happen) online psychotherapy is marketed soon for persons suffering from anxiety or depression. Will it be quite the same without the actual person in the actual room? If our intuitions tell us that something is missed in such encounters, if the online therapist, like the online professor, fails to capture a certain human dimension, we ought to ask what else is missing from the picture of progress that we are being urged to follow simply because it calls itself by the name of progress.

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