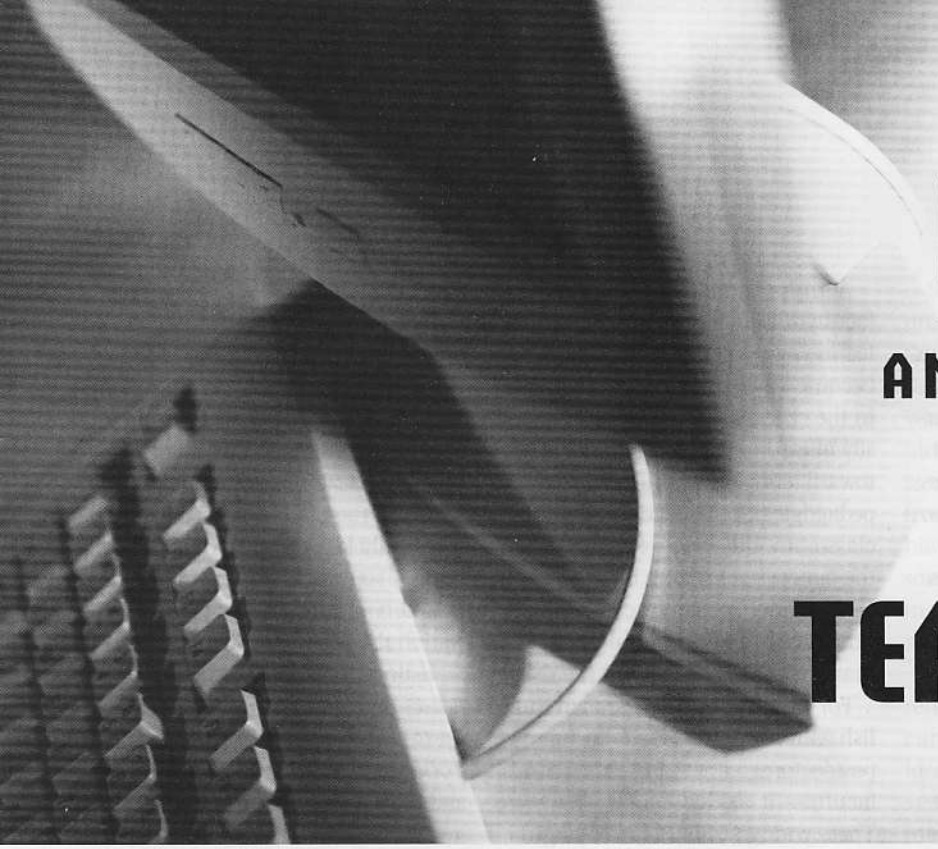

PLEASURE AND DANGER IN ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING

BY JULIE K. CHISHOLM

Trends in teaching technology are dividing tenured and untenured faculty and threatening academic freedom.

These days, most newly hired faculty are, like me, appointed on a part- or full-time non-tenure-track basis. The AAUP has reported that between 1975 and 2003, full-time tenure-track positions increased by only about 16 percent, while full-time non-tenure-track positions grew by 178 percent, and part-time appointment rose by 189 percent.[1] In 2003, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that 44 percent of faculty at all institutional types worked part time.

This new contingent workforce raises serious issues of labor politics on campus. Yet tenure eligibility is not necessarily the most important aspect of the generation gap separating newly hired non-tenure-track faculty and the tenured professors with whom we teach. Our association with pedagogical technology, especially online instruction, divides us to an even greater degree. Contingent faculty and teaching assistants are far more likely to be involved in aggressive distance education initiatives that limit faculty agency and operate on a market model. Even though tenured faculty may participate less often in these initiatives, the way many colleges and universities are introducing new educational technologies threatens the control of all faculty members over their pedagogy. It's thus time to bridge the technology gap and work together to take charge of online educational technologies at our institutions.

Generation Gap

I came to technology and pedagogy at an interesting moment: when computers in classrooms were widespread but course-management systems such as WebCT and Blackboard hadn't yet gotten a foothold. It was a fertile, if short-lived, period. From 2002 to 2004, as a postdoctoral fellow in computers and writing at a large public research university, I trained teaching assistants in WebCT and coaxed faculty into teaching in our writing center's state-of-the-art computer classrooms.

I noticed that my colleagues' attitudes toward technology depended on where they were in the age-career spectrum. Tenured faculty (generally those over forty) seemed genuinely interested in technology, but they also depended heavily (dare I say too heavily?) on my help. Few wanted to teach exclusively online; most aimed to use computers in their classrooms and make course Web projects. Every semester, one or two taught courses such as "The Real Middle Ages" or "Human Resource Management" in our lab classrooms, which was terrific.

When I left my position, however, few of my faculty "partners" continued their course projects. They just didn't have much incentive. They had established themselves as experts in their fields (English, history, and even hotel and restaurant management) long ago and were at the top of the academic food chain; they had the luxury of time but didn't want to reinvent their careers or put in the long hours that teaching with technology requires.

Interestingly enough, I didn't work with one faculty member on the tenure track during my postdoctoral fellowship. Although my tenure-track colleagues (who were mostly in their late thirties) often had the most innovative ideas about teaching in a computer

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classroom, they couldn't seem to commit to long-term projects. It's simple to see why. As Neal Strudler, associate professor of educational computing and technology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, points out in a 2003 issue of the *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, "Designing and implementing technology-based learning activities in school can be likened to learning to fly an airplane while it's being built." When so much time and energy are spent hanging onto the controls, you can easily forget your destination.

Moreover, developing courses for computer classrooms can put other aspects of a faculty job (a book on sexual politics in Emily Dickinson's poetry, for example) on hold, a dangerous risk for those trying to get retained or promoted. A survey by Stanford University education professor Larry Cuban and graduate students Heather Kirkpatrick and Craig Peck published in 2001 in the *American Educational Research Journal* reported that teachers just don't have the time to research and evaluate software and do their jobs at the same time. As a result, we've witnessed the advent of the "instructional designer," a person who consults with and trains faculty. But often, the products the instructional designers recommend aren't appropriate, or the training takes place on the wrong day or during the wrong part of the semester. Cuban's survey findings imply that even focused technology training often leaves a bad taste in teachers' mouths.

At my previous institution, even faculty who had been hired with technology experience hesitated to become too involved with technology in the classroom because our university offered no formal reward (credit toward tenure or promotion) for pedagogical forays into the wired classroom. Ultimately, for those on the tenure track, being innovative with technology can be complex, time-consuming, and thankless. For many, it's simply not worth the risk.

For the teaching assistants in English with whom I worked during my postdoctoral fellowship—tomorrow's faculty—it was a different story. These young teachers (mostly aged twenty-two to twenty-eight) knew they would face stiff competition in a tough job market. Most were going outside their fields (literature and creative writing) to work with technology because they knew it would give them an edge if and when they were interviewed. We were told repeatedly in graduate school how powerful a specialization in computers and writing could be. The efforts of the teaching assistants had less to do with love for technology than with the need to survive. They were WebCT's first guinea pigs at my institution, and they received lots of freebies, including loaner laptops, high-speed Internet connections at home, and, for some, hefty stipends from the educational technology and outreach department. The conditions: go 100 percent online, use WebCT, and deliver your courses asynchronously (correspondence-school style). In other words, stay out of the classroom.

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Product Delivery

It soon became clear to me that if this arrangement continued at my university, teaching in a computer classroom—my specialty—would eventually lose out to 100 percent online, 100 percent asynchronously taught courses. According to a National Center for Education Statistics survey titled *Distance Education at Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions: 2000–2001*, 56 percent of all two- and four-year Title IV, degree-granting institutions offered distance education courses; among them, 90 percent offered the courses asynchronously over the Internet. (Under the Higher Education Act, Title IV refers to institutions eligible to grant federal student financial aid.) These have been the fastest-growing courses in the first decade of the new millennium. So why is this happening so quickly?

Our school newspapers tell us that "generation Z" is here, and universities are scrambling to make room for it. The NCES predicts that enrollment in the current decade will increase by 16 percent compared with the 1990s. Although there is not enough physical space, even for parking, to accommodate these new students, I have not seen any evidence that generations X, Y, or Z prefer an online college education; in fact, I've seen the opposite. Students have protested the online movement at the University of California, Los Angeles, and the University of British Columbia (where WebCT was born).

In addition to grappling with the flood of incoming students, universities feel increasing pressure to compete with 100 percent online or for-profit schools like the University of Phoenix. In a May 1999 article pub-

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lished on CNN.com, reporter Vicky Phillips noted that the University of Phoenix had surpassed New York University as the largest private institution of higher education in the country. Hallmarks of schools like the University of Phoenix include asynchronously taught courses, standardized curricula, no humanities courses, no tenure system, and little job security (teachers can be fired for low evaluations). Indeed, even the terminology these schools use comes straight from the private sector. Students become "clients" or "consumers." Faculty are "content providers." Teaching is "course delivery." Knowledge, to the for-profit online university, is a product—not a process—that simply needs to be transmitted to the student. How this transmission occurs, and who hits the "send" button, is not terribly relevant. What is de-emphasized? The contribution of faculty. That is how the University of Phoenix makes its money. After all, faculty salaries account for a large part of a traditional university's overhead. The for-profit online university saves because everyone is an adjunct and teaches standardized courses.

Not that I distrust all things online. As philosopher Andrew Feenberg wrote in the winter 1999 issue of *Crosstalk,* a publication of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, I "find myself in the paradoxical position of defending my own understanding of distance learning against both its foes on the faculty and its advocates in the administration." In 2002, I taught an online course using a system that permits instructors and students to interact in real time. Our avatars could wave and chat; we could surf the Internet and build things together. I felt that it was innovative. But students had to be at their computers on certain days and at certain times, just like in a traditional course. In addition, only twenty students could enroll in my course because having more would have made quality discussion impossible. In other words, my online course had many of the limitations of a traditional, face-to-face classroom. Therefore, it wasn't "viable" for my school to repeat the course, even though the students enjoyed it.

I dislike the way many online courses are taught at traditional universities today: 100 percent asynchronously, using course-management systems or intranets such as WebCT. These systems create an exploitative working environment for the instructor. First, teachers can lose their intellectual property when they upload course materials to course-management programs. In a 2000 article published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Eyal Press and Jennifer Washburn reveal that many teachers who develop courses on WebCT and similar systems lose the rights to their material after they post it, thereby enabling the vendor or the university to sell the material to an online school or to hire an adjunct to "redeliver" the same material for considerably less money. Many universities have rewritten their faculty handbooks or intellectual property agreements so that the university or the course-management system owns the course material. Their doing so is part of a larger effort to turn faculty work into a currency that retains its value long after a teacher graduates or is laid off.

Second, faculty who knowingly or unknowingly give up ownership of their course materials contribute to the erosion of intellectual freedom. When your course material is distributed to others as part of a "standardized curriculum initiative," their freedom is compromised. Those who have taught an online course using someone else's textbook and course materials know what I am talking about.

Yet another downside of the current approach to online teaching occurs when faculty agree to lock their ideas behind a course-management system's private, password-protected intranet. Instructors can be observed by anyone with an administrator password, cannot collaborate, and are barred from (easily) presenting their innovations to the public. Faculty who use commercial course-management software become almost invisible, which is exactly the point. This invisibility contributes to the illusion that the twenty-first-century instructor is a generic, easily replaceable part in a larger Automated Education Machine. Insert coin, select required cognate. This scenario is an intimidating combination of the Panopticon and the banking model of education.

Senior faculty who have job security can usually choose not to teach asynchronously if they so desire, but younger teachers are especially vulnerable to the trap, especially when their job descriptions include the phrase "teaching online courses." The situation will only get worse as

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senior faculty members retire (more than 20 percent of U.S. faculty are expected to do so during the current decade, according to *American Demographics*) and more PhDs are hired on a contingent basis.

Pushing Back

So what can today's faculty do to prevent this systematic devaluation of the teaching profession?

Unite. Tenured faculty members must act to ensure that untenured faculty, adjuncts, and teaching assistants are not exploited by aggressive distance education initiatives that limit faculty agency. Make it possible for junior faculty to experiment with different technologies without the fear of losing their jobs. Monitor the effects of online technologies on instructors, especially contingent teachers. Instructors should control online teaching: regulate your school's policies on online instruction through faculty collective bargaining agreements. There have been victories. After a strike in 1998, York University's faculty members reclaimed their online intellectual property rights.

Be informed. Know your rights. The AAUP's *Statement on Copyright,* which everyone should read, reminds us that prevailing academic practice treats the faculty member as the default copyright owner of course materials created independently for traditional academic purposes. Let's keep it that way by copyrighting our work. Read faculty handbooks and intellectual property statements with care. And if you're going online, watch what you sign! Any statement equating your course material to "works for hire" is a red flag.

Help to devalue the currency of online course materials by making yours freely available to the public. Just because your university system spent $5 million on WebCT doesn't mean you have to use it. Teachers can make their own course Web sites. Rather than give your rights away, get your hands a little dirty learning how to use the requisite technology. Investigate older technologies and freeware. Almost all of the course tools WebCT and its equivalents provide already exist on newer computers or can be downloaded for free on the Internet, including syllabus and course templates and discussion boards. Even free Web hosting is out there.

Be active. In his *Crosstalk* article, Feenberg notes that "just as drivers are not consulted about how to build the roads, so faculty were not much involved in designing the educational superhighway." Faculty must participate in decisions about new educational technologies. After all, we're the ones who will use them. And we can't let an antitechnology bias prevail, especially in traditionally nontechnical fields like the liberal arts. Ignorance is permission—and the future is already here.

Not all online teaching is bad. But we must investigate the value of 100 percent asynchronously taught courses in order to counter the knowledge-as-content paradigm. The times ahead are dark. As Kit Sims Taylor, an economist at Bellevue Community College, wrote in the 1998 article "Higher Education: From Craft-Production to Capitalist Enterprise":

> We cannot even define, let alone measure, the output of higher education. All we can measure are inputs: credit hours taught, faculty-student ratios. . . . If we define a goal very narrowly, such as teaching keyboard skills, we can measure the output. But we call that training, not education. Unfortunately, those who do not understand the difference between education and training believe that output can be measured. It is no accident that the movement toward computer-mediated education is coming at the same time as state legislatures are mandating measurable "outcomes assessment" as a condition of funding for higher education.

We must put an end to the exploitation of the demographic splits between tenured and untenured faculty by the companies behind course-management systems and by the administrators who are converts to the market model of university management. To challenge the new paradigm, we must study technology-based instruction so that we can come to see technology as more than just a "delivery medium." But who is going to do so? The distance education director trying to justify why her university continues to pour money into a course-management system with skyrocketing overheads and an alarmingly high attrition rate? The instructional designer whose salary is funded by WebCT? Senior professors who have never used WebCT? Junior faculty members trying to establish themselves in their fields? The adjuncts making $11,000 a year?

Until all faculty take an interest in the impact of technology on pedagogy, online teaching will continue to evolve according to a market model. And if you think its doing so will not affect your department or your teaching, you're either very optimistic indeed or very close to retirement.

Note

1. These statistics are available on the AAUP Web site (www.aaup.org) in a fact sheet titled "Trends in Faculty Status."