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"To Seek A Newer World": Honors in Virtual Reality

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Abstract: Honors education was never intended to be a virtual offering; it takes intimate, three-dimensional, communal, and intellectual interaction among faculty and students to tackle wicked problems. The COVID-19 crisis forced honors educators into an extreme reboot, extracting courses from comfortable working spaces and relocating them to strange new platforms for remote, computer-mediated instruction. For many faculty, the 2020 pandemic introduced online instruction for the first time. Toward this end, many novices were able to brilliantly reimagine and re-engineer their courses while others struggled. In this essay, the author points out that higher education has always adapted new technologies, asserting that many aspects of online, asynchronous teaching serve honors programs well. Faculty wishing to provide an online honors experience as rich and nuanced as the traditional model must understand that online teaching has its own added value, far more sophisticated than merely face-to-face instruction delivered remotely. The author argues that honors programs should be crucibles for innovation, not archives of the obsolete, and asks honors faculty to invite students into these brave, new, virtual worlds.

Honors education was never intended to be virtual. It was never imagined on a flat screen but across a conference table in a meeting room that doubles as a classroom, or in a crime lab or gaming lab (not a computer lab with plastic partitions), or in a park with partners. It is not supposed to be solitary; it depends on team building and community building and is nourished by intellectual interaction that is intimate and three-dimensional. It depends

on collegial relationships between faculty and students that enable them to tackle wicked problems and address controversial topics together. But after 2020, higher education will never be the same. Neither will honors.

The apocalyptic COVID-19 pandemic forced college and university faculty to pivot and reboot violently in order to extract higher education from its comfortable working space and relocate it to an entirely new environment, a strange new world of remote, computer-mediated instruction. Suddenly we and our students all became refugees, virtual prisoners trapped in our own homes. We found ourselves suffering from transplant shock, starved for the familiar, incapacitated by PTSD, and very likely lost in cyberspace. This displacement was especially wrenching for honors programs, which depend on small, in-person classes and tiny seminars; service learning, much of it experiential; study abroad; and other high-impact educational practices, all of which had to be suspended in favor of lectures and student presentations delivered via Zoom™ and online discussion, both synchronous and asynchronous.

Small wonder that so much of the online instruction produced during this crisis was awkward and inadequate. An MRE is fine if it is the only food you have, but it could never be confused with a four-star dining experience. Out of concern for public health and safety and to ensure that students could graduate without delay, faculty throughout the United States worked diligently to be flexible in delivering their course content through remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, both faculty and students felt undernourished. Students were subjected to online learning when they hadn't signed up for it. Professors worried that, if they could not read the room and feel the interpersonal dynamics, they would be unable to tell if they were getting through. Honors faculty and students felt the distance acutely, and for both it was magnified exponentially, in part, because of grade anxiety. Honors students know how to get good grades in familiar settings, but this new setting robbed them of many tools in their academic toolkits. They had no idea what their expectations should be for courses that started out face-to-face and then suddenly went online. They worried whether any expectations they might have or any assumptions they might make would be either valid or reliable. Their teachers felt the same way.

All this longing for the familiar begs the question of whether the teaching and learning that went on during the "plague" semester were actually inferior—so inferior as to cause universities to offer students a pass/fail option almost from the beginning while holding onto the tuition money. So far, it is too early for us to have collected a robust body of data that will tell us whether students learned less or did not perform as well following the sudden switch to remote

learning in the spring of 2020 or in the two semesters that have followed. At the University of Baltimore, our students were able to meet for class discussions on Zoom™ and in threaded discussion on Sakai, producing remarkable group and individual projects in electronic form. Most did not select the Credit/No Credit option but chose to receive grades even though many found themselves suddenly unemployed (a major distraction from schoolwork) or working overtime in essential occupations while taking fulltime care of children who were not in school and, often, living with elderly relatives who were at risk. That our students learned anything at all was a tribute to their persistence given the stress and anxiety of quarantine, economic disaster, and social unrest that all college students experienced throughout 2020.

The pandemic crisis gave many faculty their first experience ever with online instruction. Many who had never tried it before were able to reimagine and re-engineer their courses brilliantly when required to call upon the invention born of necessity. After all, most university faculty are smart and unusually creative, and getting a PhD really does teach grace under pressure. Others made the minimum technical concessions necessary to continue to do what they were already doing, such as taping and broadcasting lectures, and produced what was essentially distance learning. Because we now have software that allows professors to broadcast live, in real time, and allows instantaneous video feedback from students, distance learning is a technological relic that feels hollow and unsatisfying: a professor who lectures on video to an empty room is bound to feel like a cellist playing to an empty concert hall or a basketball player shooting critical free throws with no fans cheering and booing. Like athletes playing their games to grandstands filled with paper cutouts, many faculty felt justifiably confirmed in their conviction that all online teaching is a watered-down and unsatisfying version of live classroom teaching: unsalted pretzels with Lite beer.

Few honors classes consist of formal lectures in cavernous halls. Most are more like conference presentations: face-to-face briefings with simultaneous Q & A. Even though some faculty may be in their element giving oral presentations, with or without media assistance, and listening to themselves talk for an hour about a subject they love, this is not usually the environment most conducive to learning for students. During an in-person lecture, many students, like many bright employees in a large, boring meeting, are quietly reading on their phones, daydreaming, or thinking about something other than the lecture material. Honors students especially—like most faculty—enjoy the gift of attention surplus. We can require them to attend classes and events, but we cannot make them listen, any more than we can make them listen to a

graduation speech or the homily at a worship service, neither of which translates as well to the screen as a livestreamed wedding or political rally.

Perhaps the pandemic has provided just the push that is needed to get faculty to rethink the in-person lecture model. University faculty, iconoclasts that they so often are, should recognize that just because something has always been done a certain way does not mean a new way might not be better. We have adjusted the lecture model to new technologies before. We learned how to show slides in art and biology classes so students would not have to make do with textbook drawings. We learned to show films so that people could see drama in performance rather than just reading the text from a printed page and trying to imagine actors acting. We learned to access audio and video content directly on the internet. Years ago, when I was teaching Yeats's "No Second Troy," a student asked me, "What did Maud Gonne look like, really?" I read aloud the lines about her that had provoked the question:

> With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
> That is not natural in an age like this,
> Being high and solitary and most stern?

Then I said, "Let's look," and typed "Maud Gonne" into Google Images. In an instant we could see both photographs and paintings of the real Maud in 1916. Before the internet, I would have had to postpone answering the question until I could bring pictures to the next class, a week later, by which time the teaching moment would have been long past.

We have brought the internet into the classroom. Perhaps it is now time to take the classroom onto the internet. Instead of competing with Khan Academy, we should embrace its lessons as starting points for a flipped experience and spend class time, with the professor's expert guidance, pushing beyond the basic narrative of any academic topic with questions and answers. We have long asked students to read textbooks before class and spent our class time interrogating them, but here is no better way to learn about the civil rights movement than watching the extraordinary PBS documentary *Eyes on the Prize* and accessing archived news footage from Birmingham, Selma, and Memphis on *YouTube.* Why should I create and tape lectures on European painting when I can get Sister Wendy Beckett to teach it for me from beyond the grave, courtesy of the BBC? None of these learning experiences require that all participants assemble in the same room to watch the videos together at the same time on the same screen. They can watch them at a time when they can best concentrate on learning and then gather later in cyberspace to discuss them. No brick or mortar is required.
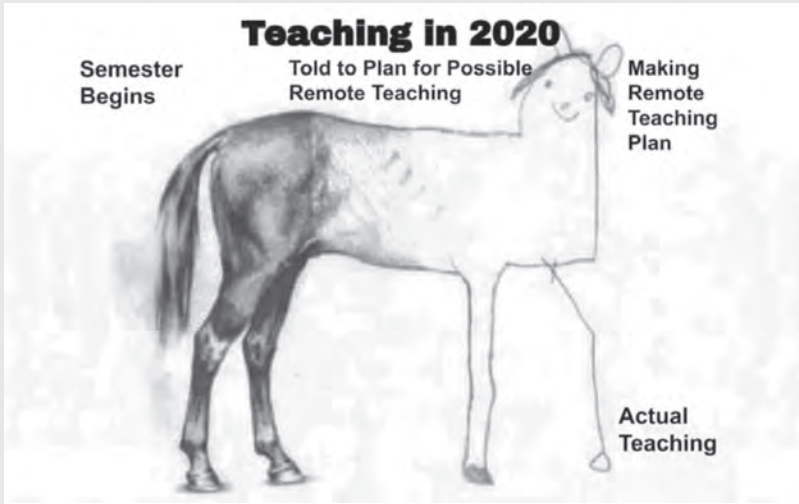
In the spring semester of 2020, both students and faculty were surprised to discover ways that online teaching is superior to the live classroom experience. To properly reach twenty-first-century students, who spend most of their waking hours in digital environments, we need to give serious attention to introducing mixed modalities into one-dimensional delivery paradigms, and we need to prepare students for a global work environment that will be heavily computer-mediated. Thomas Watson was right: it is time for the "wild ducks" of academia to take charge (IBM Inc.). However, many college professors who have taught themselves to teach by giving oral lectures or PowerPoint presentations to live audiences are now suffering from neophobia. As soon as universities began to respond to the pandemic by proposing investment in technologies that could make online instruction more widespread, the counterinsurgency began. Social media posts appeared urging faculty not to do their best at teaching online lest they be asked to do more of it. Faculty also discovered that online teaching is highly labor-intensive: if you don't put time into learning how to use online tools effectively, it will be inferior, and the self-fulfilling prophecy will come to pass.

There is no reason yet to assume that the spring semester of 2020 was a lost semester or that for universities to invest in better online learning opportunities would constitute throwing good money after bad. Innovation always brings some failures, false starts, red herrings, and dead ends. Still, the *charrette* effect of pressure from exigence is known to spur extraordinary creativity. Caesarean sections were tried because the alternative was death for both the mother and the baby. Field medicine has long given us rough models for repairing the human body that were tried only because there was no other choice but that were later perfected in the lab. The COVID-19 pandemic has given faculty no other choice than to experiment with instructional strategies outside their comfort zone and to try new tools that can now be perfected.
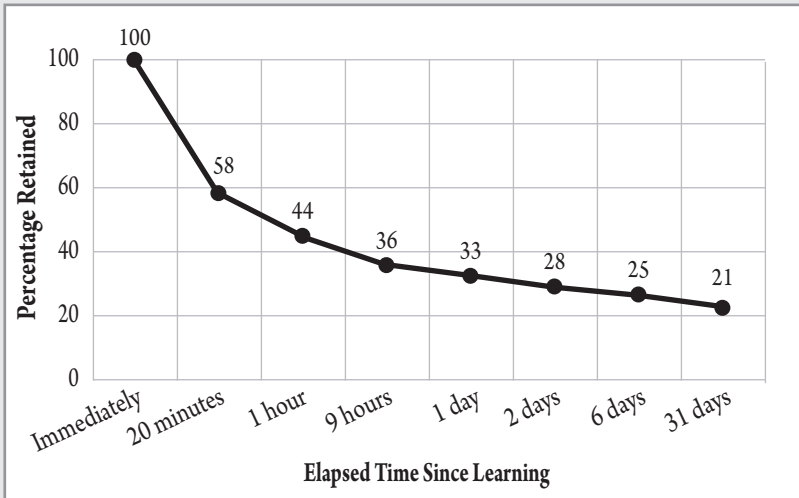
Lectures are becoming increasingly ineffective at reaching listeners whose attention span is limited and who are the beneficiaries of a world of distractions not available in the nineteenth century. A public lecture with a Q & A to follow will lose its momentum at about an hour and a half—perhaps sooner. Studies on attention, the Pomodoro Technique, conference planning models, and our anecdotal experience with Zoom™ have all taught us that a fifty-minute to eighty-minute lecture does not typically hold the attention of listeners or help them remember what they have learned. A hundred years of research on Ebbinghaus's forgetting curve tells us consistently that people forget about 50 percent of what they hear within an hour, 75 percent within 24 hours, and 90 percent within a week.

A great advantage of online teaching over real-time lecturing with Q & A is that live lectures and discussion are necessarily linear and time-constrained. People can talk only one at a time so that everyone in the room can hear and maybe listen. An hour or two is not long enough for everyone who has something to say to say it—even the professor. In discussion, students must take

Meme of an Unfinished Horse Drawing Believed to Have First Been Shared by Reddit User marsel_zdr in 2018

Teaching in 2020

Semester Begins

Told to Plan for Possible Remote Teaching

Making Remote Teaching Plan

Actual Teaching

The Original Ebbinghaus Forgetting Curve from 1885

Percentage Retained

100

58

44

36

33

28

25

21

Immediately | 20 minutes | 1 hour | 9 hours | 1 day | 2 days | 6 days | 31 days

Elapsed Time Since Learning

turns, and the first one to the answer gets all the points. Extroverts have an advantage; introverts are disadvantaged. There is no time to carefully compose a question or a response before the moment has passed, and anyone who thinks of a question or a comment after class has no mechanism for sharing it.

All these limitations magically disappear if the synchronous class meetings are embedded into an asynchronous 24/7 learning environment in the form of a threaded discussion on a learning platform. Taped lectures can be posted; discussions can continue after class; people who were absent can catch up. Everyone can add material to the site between classes, and the class can exist in a virtual space that includes the time between lectures as well as the lecture time itself. Students can put "go slower" or "go faster" right into the chat so the professor does not have to guess what they already know and what they are learning for the first time. Students who need more than one or two repetitions for learning do not have to stop the professor and ask to hear the point over again because they know they can replay the tape later. They can ask questions in an asynchronous thread if asking on the chat would slow down the whole class unnecessarily. If the professor has to be absent, the class can be delayed or postponed or recaptured asynchronously. Instead of a narrow window of time that is open only once or twice a week, an online class can be an MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game), a persistent open world where people drop in and out and catch each other up in order to arrive at the end of the game together. Everyone can work simultaneously or collaboratively—no lines to hold the conch shell and no conversation between the professor and one or two highly engaged students.

Asynchronous discussion is particularly valuable in honors classes. Students have time to compose their posts thoughtfully, with depth. Rather than jumping into a live class discussion extemporaneously just to say something or to get a toe in quickly, they can develop an idea with supporting evidence. A written post will take longer to write but less time for classmates to read and absorb. Honors students who enjoy an intense academic conversation around a conference table or in an honors lounge have already begun to complain that professors are assigning more work in online classes (NCHC, "Honors in the Time of Corona"), but probably what they mean is that the discussion in online classes is more time-consuming because it must be written. Professors who teach online already know that online teaching is labor-intensive, and the same is true for students, who will have to adjust their time management strategies to accommodate written academic conversations.

Colleges could learn from America's houses of worship, which have found during the pandemic that services delivered as Zoom™ meetings, either

taped or live, can be quite effective, especially with the chat feature that allows people to talk to one another and to the celebrants during the service. Technology that allows students to chat with one another and pose questions to the professor on a screen has been around for a while and can make face-to-face classes much more involving. This model of an interactive instructional space translates easily to Zoom™. Online meeting technology allows students either to attend a lecture in person or view it remotely, so it helps students who are homebound, reduces absenteeism, eliminates parking problems, and enables the instructor to deliver the lecture only once and still reach everyone. Medical schools have been using this strategy to deliver lecture material for some years now. Nothing online need be ephemeral; it can all be taped and replayed as the exam approaches. Class participation is all in print or on tape and therefore recoverable when grading time rolls around. And there is no issue with classroom management: it isn't necessary to ask students not to disturb others by talking; everyone is in on the side conversations, creating a three-dimensional lattice of information exchange.

Online classes are particularly easy to flip because, in a flipped classroom, students do most of their work asynchronously and come together synchronously only for brainstorming, Q & A, and group discussion. There is also no need to use class time for tests, and student presentations can be conducted as webinars.

One thing that Zoom™ meetings have taught us is that people seem to be better behaved in an online meeting than in a live one. They have to raise their hands or risk being muted. They cannot talk to one another behind people's backs or talk over other people. On the other hand, students in a Zoom™ class can indulge in behaviors that might be considered rude in person. They can wear comfortable clothes, eat and drink, take a break and come back, talk among themselves, or check something in the lecture on their computers while it is taking place. They can raise their hands electronically, participate in table discussions electronically via breakout rooms, or make a comment in the chat without interrupting.

The pandemic forced most organizations to cease conducting business by putting groups of people together in the same room at the same time. Now, many are rethinking whether they will ever go back to the old practice since it is too expensive and the resulting synergy is not adequate to justify the cost. The higher education industry should also consider that the traditional paradigm of the class as a real-time briefing with Q & A, delivered in person to a group of eager listeners, is a luxury that colleges and universities may no longer be able to afford. Skyrocketing costs make higher education less and

less accessible to anyone but upper- and-middle-class students, which means fewer members of minority groups, working adults, and the economically disadvantaged. For faculty to provide an online experience that is just as rich and nuanced as the conventional model, perhaps even more so, they need to believe that online delivery can be just as good, perhaps even better, and understand that online teaching is not just face-to-face instruction delivered remotely.

Honors programs should be crucibles for innovation, not archives of the obsolete. If their professors invite their students to journey with them into what John Zubizaretta has already called a "brave new world," then honors students will follow even if they are risk-averse:

> Undoubtedly, the sudden demand to 'go remote' has upended much of what we have always done well in honors and why and how we have done it. The need to adapt has been difficult, but it has also opened up new opportunities, new avenues for rethinking and redesigning our pedagogical approaches. For instance, perhaps now honors is ready to reconsider the notion that honors and 'distance learning' are antithetical propositions. Having been compelled to adapt to remote teaching, learning, and program management in order to continue to challenge, encourage, support, and reward our students (and faculty), perhaps now we can reimagine how the honors experience can be sustained and even enhanced by technology. Brave new world. Honors in the time of Corona . . . and after. . . . (Zubizaretta 2)

We cannot be risk-averse ourselves nor shelter in place within familiar practices and technologies. If faculty, especially honors faculty, see all online instruction as inferior, it will be. However, Zubizaretta writes:

> COVID-19 has prompted pervasive changes to honors and all of higher education. For many faculty and students around the world, the imposed shifts have diminished the intimate bond between teaching and learning. For others, the 'new normal' has created unexpected opportunities to reflect, experiment, take risks, reprioritize, find different avenues for communication, build intentional communities, accept provocative challenges, and redesign pedagogies—qualities, after all, that we celebrate in honors and in all good teaching and learning. (Zubizarretta 11)

Now is a time for leadership, and honors can be this leader. We have written this mandate into our own sixteen characteristics:

13. The program serves as a laboratory within which faculty feel welcome to experiment with new subjects, approaches, and pedagogies. When proven successful, such efforts in curriculum and pedagogical development can serve as prototypes for initiatives that can become institutionalized across the campus. (National Collegiate Honors Council)

Now is the time to "seek a newer world" (Tennyson).

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