

Teaching Philosophy in Cyberspace

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Review

Summary

The paper reports on a project - PHICYBER - of using the internet in teaching philosophy. Technology has made its appearance felt in the classroom but we are only beginning to deal with the use of technology in creating 'virtual classrooms' or 'learning environments'. Computers obviously dictate the form of these classrooms but also heavily influence course content. PHICYBER was launched in 1994 and grew from having 21 participants in the USA only, to having 111 participants from 11 countries, in just two years. The technology used was e-mail listserver. The listserver enables student to have access to the tutor and to other students. A virtual library was also made available to students. This was web-based and comprised of both materials specifically placed on the web and links to other philosophy web resources.

The teaching method used was weekly to set topic and problem for the class. The class were then to discuss this, aided by assigned readings made available through the virtual library. Discussion between class members was facilitated by the listserver. This meant that the discussion was in writing, that students contributing to the discussion enjoyed a certain anonymity and that the discussion was archivable. A consequence of this is that students felt less intimidated but also more inclined to think through and self-censor their contributions. Students' contributions showed an effort both to make themselves clear to others in content and intention and to maintain civility in the discussion.

The advantages of this mode of teaching are fairly obvious but worth making explicit. First, the electronic library provided a wealth of material to which students, otherwise, might well not have had access. Secondly, location and transport problems can in very many cases be an obstacle to accessing education. Electronic provision both eliminates the need to have to travel [except as far as a computer terminal] and, since it is asynchronous, copes with completely flexibility with students' varied schedules. Thirdly, since the electronic course is available more widely to students from different cultural, geographic and economic backgrounds these create an enriching diversity of experience which can be brought to bear on many issues. Fourthly, asynchronous written communication encourages students to focus and to be thoughtful. Finally students adapt well to the medium and the results of their learning experience are, in general, positive.

The disadvantages are again fairly obvious but worth making explicit. The lack of face to face contact is a lack of a way of communicating with and simulating students. Access to electronic technology is, we should still remind ourselves, not unrestricted and those without it are obviously excluded. Since students can access the listserver at any time there is a threat that teaching loads will explode.

Barnette makes these recommendations. The philosophical profession needs to be aware of the possibilities and present experience of on-line teaching. Collaboration in and discussion of the way forward should be encouraged and suitable systems of quality control need to be put in place. Tutors and course designers should formulate clear and precise student learning outcomes and they should be able to assess their achievement of these goals. The level of a course needs to be weighed carefully in the context in which it is intended to be used. Students need to be kept involved so they need to be engaged in the activity of learning but also need to be reassured about what they should be achieving and about their progress towards these ends.

Comment

Barnette's claims that the virtual classroom affects both the form and content of teaching. Nothing in his account addresses the claim about content. The claim about form is only partially made good, indeed the description of PHICYBER makes it appear to be as close a recreation on the web of the traditional philosophy seminar as one could hope. So don't read the paper for exciting ideas about how one might launch a virtual philosophy course. However, were one in the business of doing the latter the paper does offer a sensible account of how one might get started, of what the possibilities are and of what issues to keep in mind when developing the course. At the end of his paper Barnette makes one suggestion which I think is important and worth emphasising. He asks us to see web-based learning as a supplement to traditional modes of learning. In this I think he is exactly right. Very few universities will be able to set aside the time and finances to develop distance degrees from scratch. Rather electronic modes of course delivery will develop in response to an increased need to cope flexibly with students' varied educational requirements. And so it should be. One shouldn't think that there are two mutually exclusive groups: traditional and the distant students.

Created on: May 24th 2007

Updated on: June 4th 2007