



Will the Ivory Tower Survive the Electronic Village?

They say that it is harder to change a university than it is to move a cemetery, and there is over two centuries of evidence to back up that assertion. Recently, at a gathering of corporate and university leaders, a Fortune 500 CEO tweaked the assembled presidents about their reluctance to change. One of the presidents retorted that “our stability means that there was a university long before your company existed and will be a university long after your company is gone.” Who is right? Will the advent of ubiquitous access to learning and communication technologies change the university? Will it replace the university? Or, will the World Wide Web just be another technology that changes the way we work and live while having negligible impact on higher education? After all, television came and went with only minor effect. The automobile changed our living, working and dating patterns but had almost no effect on our learning patterns.

The bets are being placed now. New approaches to universities, like the University of Phoenix, the Mind Extension University, and now the Western Governors University, aim to change the status quo, with profit the motivating factor behind the first two, and taxpayer savings the motive for the last. Existing universities are not going to throw in the towel without a fight. Notable examples of universities that have responded include the University of Maine System, which created the first public virtual university from the Augusta Campus; the use of

interactive networked multimedia studio courses to replace the large enrollment lectures (and many other courses) at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute; the Kent State University project that teaches classes statewide live over the network using desktop videoconferencing coupled with collaborative software sharing, and the introduction of asynchronous educational methods at a variety of campuses under the sponsorship of the Sloan Foundation.

Apart from the usual value of sending away 18-year-olds to allow them to grow socially while allowing their parents some relief, universities have much to offer the new learning environments. The oft-expressed fears that the one great teacher of economics, psychology or physics will teach all the classes in the respective discipline or that a Web site could somehow replace an educated professor, profoundly misunderstands the way people learn. Learning is about a “conversation” amidst resources. Distributed cognition on the World Wide Web will provide unprecedented access to resources on a network where every student and every instructor is an important resource. I’m betting that universities will change, and we already are seeing the results. If the last few decades have been marked by universities all trying to hew to the same mold of the comprehensive research university, the next few will see a remarkable differentiation based upon the core strengths of each. It may be the end of “teaching,” but it is far from the end of learning at the university. ER

— J.M.W.