A New Professoriate for the New Millennium

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Abstract

As we rapidly approach the next millennium, the academy, anchored in traditional values and practices, will undergo profound changes and, so too, will its teachers. The emergence of instructional technology and burgeoning distance education programs will impact virtually every educational institution and their faculties at every level. Long seen as content experts imparting information and ideas to students in classrooms, there is an increased expectation that faculty share that role with other learning resources. This transformation is resulting in a fundamental shift in the primary role of the educator, from one who professes to one who facilitates the learning activities of students, increasingly done at a distance. This paper examines why and how these changes are occurring, what the academy might soon look like, and what those in the teaching profession must do to continue in meaningful roles.

As we rapidly approach the next millennium, the role of educators at all levels of instruction is undergoing profound changes. While much attention is given to instructional technology, we have not yet fully discerned how technology will, and already is, impacting learning, and thus dramatically affecting teaching. Since this is how many professionals earn their living, how they gain a certain measure of personal satisfaction and collegial recognition, and presumably want to continue to do so, it would seem prudent to examine and understand how and why this phenomenon is occurring and what teachers might do to acclimate themselves to this new academic milieu.

Contributing to no small extent to the dramatic transformation of the teaching-learning environment are the students themselves. They are products of a digital age, indeed are in the midst of a digital tsunami and, at an increasingly younger age, are exposed to the interactive format of multi-media that is replacing the more passive relationship with television. Thus, they are more active participants in the shift from broadcast to interactive learning than are most of their faculty, many of whom come from an era of entertainment and education that now may seem embarrassingly archaic. Today students prefer to discover than to be taught, to create a customized curriculum rather than accept one that is prescriptive in content, format and delivery.

Not all wish to embrace these trends that are inexorably effecting the teaching profession, but we must not, indeed can not, avoid them.   Faculty will need to be constantly adapting to new ways of interacting in new roles, with new students, at new institutions, and utilizing new teaching resources. They may have to be more peripatetic and will be required to evolve their practice to remain current and competitive during their careers.   Curriculum vitae increasingly reflect greater diversity in what, where, and how teachers have practiced their trade in changing venues with varying constituencies using diverse instructional methods. Previously, faculty backgrounds often showed some movement from one institution to another, but the functions performed remained relatively the same despite different affiliations. Now, we are witnessing a trend from teaching primarily in a lecture mode to classroom-based, homogeneous students in a fixed location for some time, to working with larger numbers spread over a wide geographic area, and utilizing varied instructional methods, often at more than one institution concurrently. A progression from rather conventional to increasingly non- traditional means and venues is a career migration pattern that likely will become more common and more rapid with each generation of faculty.

There are many in the academy who simply dismiss any of these notions of future scenarios as faddish fantasy. The skeptics question why there is so much attention given to recent developments when, in fact, significant historical changes have been occurring all along with relatively little real impact on how the academy functions. They cite the invention of the printing press, the automobile, television, the industrial revolution, and note that, if anything, these innovations have contributed to the expansion of the academic enterprise and the need for a well educated citizenry.

Certainly, we can identify important developments in education and recognize how these have fueled this industry, particularly the popularization of higher education via the Morrell Act and the creation of public institutions, the GI Bill, the emergence of community colleges and professional graduate schools. These events resulted in a larger and more heterogeneous cadre of students at all levels that led to more and bigger schools and campuses with enrollments of 40,000 plus at some post-secondary institutions with 150 or more buildings. Immigration and post-war population growth, combined with improved access and financial aid programs created exponential enrollment increases that generated thousands of new teaching jobs.

What exactly is different about what we are witnessing today that could so fundamentally change the profession? Will the Internet, interactive video, multi media, desktop software, and wireless communication really transform the content and delivery of higher education as quickly and as broadly as many futurists claim? They contend that there is relatively little time for much more discussion for those school and colleges which have not yet begun to assess technology's role. They tell us that this technology is driving the restructuring of academe and will force educators to realign and redesign the teaching-learning environment dramatically. Institutions which do not address these critical issues now, they say, will likely be among the several dozen colleges that are predicted to go out of business in the next two decades. The ones that survive are those that will incorporate

technology to broaden their course delivery base, and thus attract more students, be able to retain faculty, and be in a better position to compete with for profit companies and institutions which are not only attracting students no competitors had previously, but also are aggressively going after students from other institutions which can't or won't modify the way they do business, or even ask themselves the right questions regarding their future.

And the questions to be addressed are not simple ones. This is not merely a matter of inquiring about what brand of software to purchase and how many classrooms should be wired next year? Instead, much more provocative questions must be asked that encompass fundamental issues. These include:
- how many faculty will be needed?
- will the notion of classrooms and campuses survive?
- is the present structure of the institution viable?
- what is the role of the institution in view of new providers?
- will students and teachers need to meet anymore?

The changing context of the education workplace, especially higher education, no longer makes it possible to ignore these questions. First, there are workplace trends that require retraining of the present workforce since the shelf life of many technical degrees is now less than five years. Second, changing demographics: five million working adults are currently enrolled part time in higher education courses and probably another five million would like to enroll but can't . These lifelong learners, plus the projected growth of traditional age college students will add twenty million FTEs in the next few years seeking a degree, continuing education, new skills and credentials certifying their competency (Dolence and Norris 1995). Today, students want convenience, credits and credentials. What is important to them, particularly busy and ambitious adult learners, is career enhancement, not college experience. They want information moved to them, rather than them having to move to it.

These factors are making new demands on the academy and specifically on its teaching personnel. There is a push to get more scholar for the dollar, and pressure to control tuition inflation; there is an expectation that teachers demonstrate measurable improvement in knowledge and skill development; and there is a more competitive environment, not only among educational institutions themselves, but also with business entities both locally and globally. It is this confluence of competition, cost, technology and need that is driving change in the professoriate's historically placid environment.

A few selected statistics should dramatize the transformation occurring in academe. Forty percent of post secondary students today are working adults over 30 studying part time; the number will be 60% by the year 2,000. The percentage of courses being taught with electronic media doubled from 1994 to 1995, and it is now commonly used in 1 of 5 classrooms. Today, over half of students and faculty make continuing use of information technology including the Internet and the WWW. E-mail is now used in approximately one third of all college courses. In 1990, about 100 institutions had academic offerings incorporating some form of distance education delivery with classroom instruction; by

1995, seventy-five more were offering degrees entirely on line (National Center for Educational Statistics 1997).

The National Center for Education Statistics also released a report (1997) on Distance Education Courses Offered by Higher Education Institutions reveals some rather startling figures on twelve hundred institutions surveyed in fall, 1995. In that year. approximately 60% of public institutions responding offered distance education courses, and 12% of the private institutions did. Out of a total population of 750,000 students enrolled in distance education courses in 1994-5, approximately 5500 students received degrees or completed certificate programs by enrolling exclusively in distance education courses. By fall, 1998, at least 85% of all institutions with enrollments of 3,000 or more were offering distance education courses. This activity is not limited to fringe institutions with reputations for engaging in avant garde educational practices. The initial resistance to distance education has dissipated even among some of the elite halls of academe such as Yale, Duke, Stanford, Harvard, Cornell, and Chicago which are all getting very serious about distance education. And, of course, we are now seeing the emergence of new and entirely on-line regional entities such as Western Governors' University and the Southern Region Electronic Campus.

The attention and activity taking place in the arena of instructional technology and distance education at this time is remarkable. There are now several prestigious journals, including an electronic one focused entirely on distance education that are contributing significant research and literature, as well as improved practice to this burgeoning field. And it seems that practically every educational conference today tries to include technology as one of its themes; indeed, many meetings address only distance education issues. Ten years ago, The Chronicle of Higher Education occasionally ran an article related to distance education. Now it has a section on "Instructional Technology" with several articles every week. Education Week also features many articles debating the merits and evils of computers in the classroom. Other professional publications such as T.H.E. Journal are devoted exclusively to instructional technology.

And yet, despite all this attention to the brave new world of out-of-classroom learning, we often seem to be still tinkering around the edges of the academic enterprise, dealing with whatever educational topics are currently in vogue. While many are certainly worthwhile matters to consider, we have tended to largely ignore many of the larger issues that are inexorably affecting the broader context in which educators function. For example, we are relatively uninformed about what has been going on in business and industry, but we can't afford to remain ignorant any longer. The dominance of several technology-based industries, collectively known as digital commerce, with enormous wealth and influence, notably computers, communications, media and entertainment, and now electronic publishing, are being referred to as what authors Stan Davis and Jim Botkin call "The Monster Under the Bed". But its not staying under the bed any longer. It is aggressively challenging the academy's previous monopoly as the purveyor of information and knowledge, and is going to force us to more boldly rethink our place and purpose, not just in philosophical terms, but in very pragmatic ways as well.

We will see a major shift occurring in the next 10 to 15 years in the composition and structure of our educational institutions. There will be fewer residential colleges, although many will remain to provide younger students with the traditional trappings of a campus experience. There will be an expanding continuing education and training sector, delivered primarily by employers and for profit companies such as Sylvan Learning Systems. In fact, these outfits are already working under contract with many schools and colleges to provide remedial instruction to college aspirants or to degree candidates who are not adequately prepared to do post secondary level work. Another major component is the expanding global electronic campus whereby students can access learning opportunities via computer from home, work, dorm, community, or other location, whenever it is most convenient.

 This notion of education on demand, rather than when the registrar schedules classes, has contributed a new buzz word to our educational lexicon: asynchronous learning, meaning that learning activities can occur without having to be synchronized with a scheduled instructional event.   We can now categorize students as those who go to school when we open the doors for them, and those who go to school on line without having to go through the doors at all. An increasingly popular alternative venue to school is the home, as evidenced by the growing number of students being schooled at home , especially with easy access to information via Internet and electronic data bases that now make libraries even more quiet habitats than they have ever been due to diminishing on-site usage of their resources.

Many among the professoriate are unaware of how many elements of this new teaching/learning model are actually already in place in their own institution, and which now constitute the newest and fastest growing programs within the academy. Several such enterprises are already serving as prototypes of new offerings at some point along the continuum from low tech to higher tech academic programs. Students who are enrolled in degree programs may spend little or no time on campus, satisfy course requirements through self directed study supported by campus based faculty (mostly adjuncts) via correspondence, e-mail, fax, telephone, or other media. Instructional materials are frequently developed primarily under contract with an outside for- profit company, as is the recruitment of students and the distribution of study materials. Some of these arrangements no doubt strike campus-based faculty as a bit unorthodox, since they are skeptical that such programs compare favorably with other more conventional programs in terms of academic integrity, learning outcomes, and student satisfaction.

This approach, and variants of it at hundreds of institutions around the world, is being referred to as the Virtual Campus (it also gets labeled as distance ed, distal ed, distributive ed, digital ed, mediated ed, external ed, etc.). Whatever it is called, its going to look, feel and be quite different from what faculty have been accustomed to. It will be characterized by a move away from a campus-centric model of higher education to a consumer-centric model. It s going to cause a desegregation of curricula, moving from an emphasis on longer term programs of study to modularized packages of instruction, much of which can be self taught and self paced.   This, in turn, is leading to disintermediation, meaning that

students seeking service and information can get it increasingly through automated systems not necessarily requiring human mediation. For example, college business offices, rather than expanding, really ought to be able to service more students with less staff. The point is, university infrastructures won't necessarily disappear, but they'll be utilized in different ways. The implication of this for faculty should be quite obvious since they also function, in effect, as intermediaries between students and knowledge, and if some new, more cost effective medium is available, it will likely be introduced into the workplace. This will inevitably lead to restructuring and reassignments for many employees, including faculty.

Alternative configurations to more familiar institutional arrangements are fascinating to consider. We now can envision a not too distant future where the geographic hegemony of higher education will be eliminated because students simply won't need to come to a campus to learn, and where the profession of professing will be less critical to the very raison d'etre of higher learning. For centuries, faculty have controlled the place, the time, the content, the delivery, and the quality of education. Indeed, this is what has defined the professoriate and given it whatever authority it has exercised within the academy. As universities move into the digital age, will this unique role in knowledge delivery be demeaned? Rather than enjoying the most prestigious title within the academic workplace, will faculty roles be viewed as utilitarian, and valued at perhaps the same level as an assistant librarian who helps students locate an electronic data base? Many feel this is already happening.

Make no mistake; academia as we know it is vulnerable to profound culture shock and what has been observed or experienced thus far is only the beginning. The biggest mistake would be to dismiss all of this as a passing phase, and not recognize that it has already insinuated itself into the academic mainstream. In fact, the boundaries and distinctions between traditional and so-called non traditional education can no longer be clearly demarcated, and faculty will be expected to act out their roles comfortably and effectively in both milieu.

Before teachers get themselves into an irreversible funk over this and develop an incurable case of "fin de millennium" malaise, they should recognize a subtle but not small point: their core competency should not be seen as simply transferring knowledge, but rather orchestrating knowledge that leads to understanding.. True, faculty no longer hold the monopoly on information and ideas, as they are but one of numerous resources now available by which students can learn. And they must accept the fact that students can have many useful learning interactions without necessarily involving a teacher in a classroom. Students interact with each other, with their medium of choice, and with their practice environment. In short, much valid learning already takes place among self directed students without much, if any, dependence on faculty. So the teaching profession might as well get used to it.

 It is ultimately the role of mentor, facilitator, and guide through the transformative process of learning that should give meaning to what teachers do. This is not a role that is easily

replaced or replicated, no matter how sophisticated the technology may be. It is not what happens between students and a teacher in a classroom which defines the quality of education. The true challenge for those who serve as the brokers in the knowledge axis, is to create the conditions for continuous conversation, or what Dewey called "productive inquiry", that does not require the teacher's personal intervention or further involvement in the student's successful and continuous growth once skills for true life long learning have been imparted.

But if the academy is destined to change in order to better respond to new circumstances, can we be assured that there is a pivotal role for faculty to continue to play? To consider the future role of faculty, we need to be clear about what learners really need and what is non-essential that can be jettisoned. At the higher education level, these issues were recently examined by EDUCOM, a consortium of businesses and universities which convened in 1996 and produced an important white paper. It stated that students today need access to authentic communities of learning, they need resources to help them learn, and they need accepted credentialing as verification of their learning (Twigg and Oblinger 1996). This, in its essence, means they need faculty, facilities and an institutional affiliation. Currently, all these components are typically aggregated and self contained on a campus.

 Distance education has made it possible, however, for students to be separated from the classroom or campus, yet still get what they need. And because working adult students tend to have little allegiance to a particular institution and are more interested in the credential, then smaller certifying bodies might replace larger permanent institutions. These entities could set their own standards, evolve to meet particular student needs, and add or subtract faculty as needed. Faculty could be widely dispersed along with their students rather than location bound at a costly physical plant. A student's academic career would no longer be linked to a particular place, time, or pre-established infrastructure, but based on a network of flexible arrangements shaped largely by the student in consultation with a credentialing body and its faculty. Few faculty would come to a single campus-based office on a regular schedule. Instead, they might hold faculty appointments with several credentialing bodies in widely dispersed locations around the globe and conduct more individualized mentoring sessions live or on line rather than teach in pre-determined congregate settings (Brown and Duguid 1996).

What else would faculty do in this new era of digital education? Many of the very same things they do now. Sure, they will have to adjust from transmitting information in person to students sitting dutifully in classrooms, to monitoring and evaluating the work of distant learners that they may never personally meet, and they'll have to pay more attention to process and less to the content that has distinguished them as resident experts in some rather esoteric subject areas. Faculty will also have to plan how to share the teaching load with technology, and become familiar with new regulations governing intellectual property and fair usage.

One of the most important things faculty must do to find a comfortable division of labor between themselves and the new bells and whistles of the 21st century is to finally disabuse themselves of some of the prevalent myths regarding out-of-classroom learning. Many say its fine for other disciplines, but just won't work in their own field. Yet the growing body of research informs us that effective teaching and learning at a distance has been demonstrated in almost every subject area. Some decry what seems to them to be the impersonal aspect of non-classroom learning. But the literature tells us that distance education students who evaluate their courses almost always express strong satisfaction for the personal attention and assistance they received from their faculty mentors. Concern is expressed that pre-packaged instructional materials being used independently will result in students becoming overly reliant on stock answers, and discourage critical thinking and self directed learning, but in fact, they generally spend more time researching additional sources than do their classroom-based counterparts.

  Another myth which faculty must overcome is the tendency to equate the immense repertoire of new instructional resources with the Internet or the "talking head" image of courses offered via TV. Because these may be the tools most familiar to them and they recognize some of their obvious limitations as teaching aids, they overlook newer, more effective instructional technologies now available to them and to learners. The Internet is just an electronic vehicle for accessing and transmitting information. It is utilized by teachers and learners as a quick and convenient conduit for data, but it does have limitations compared to the much more sophisticated paraphernalia now available. And TV lectures have been augmented by two-way interactive video and other dynamic multi-media approaches.

There is yet another myth that faculty should get beyond if they wish to effectively incorporate technology as a medium of instruction. For a generation, distance educators felt that, to prove the efficacy of out-of-classroom teaching, they had to emulate what typically goes on in a classroom. Now, we are finally recognizing that the task is not to replicate what occurs in the classroom, but rather to create the conditions and dynamics that will optimize the teaching / learning process most appropriate to that particular situation. What you do with students 500 miles away, and how you do it should not necessarily be the same as what would take place inside a classroom which, after all, is just a venue and isn't an essential ingredient for effective interaction to occur.

As educators acquire more experience with technology, they tend to be less skeptical about its uses and more creative with its possible applications. As this occurs, they must insinuate themselves into planning taking place at their institution so that they can influence the discussion and the decisions. Too often, those organizing such efforts invite the technocrats, but seldom include faculty unless they have a reputation as computer geeks. As a consequence, pedagogical issues are frequently and ironically left out of conversations about melding technology and teaching. Ultimately, it is the opportunity for meaningful involvement, professional rewards and institutional support that are key factors in promoting faculty receptivity and contributions from them to new technology based initiatives. The notion that there is minimal need for strong teachers in such efforts must be

dispelled, for it is precisely in the design and delivery of these new learning activities at all levels where participation of competent and committed faculty is most critical to preserve those educational principles we believe in and aspire to continue promulgating.

Technology is just a medium; it is the professional educator who must define its application for the purpose of achieving worthwhile educational ends. Many school systems and post-secondary institutions are now at a critical juncture. Considerable resources are being invested in enhancing and expanding technology infrastructure; academic programs are being designed to accommodate new interests; and new markets are being identified. At the same time, meetings are being convened and committees formed to engage in strategic academic planning, or at least to talk about it whether or not it is actually done. It appears to be an exciting enterprise, but are we, in fact, asking the right questions about our future? Is the faculty playing a meaningful role in these deliberations? In view of institutional directions being set now, will faculty be doing the same things ten years from now? Will they want to be where they presently are ten years from now? In short, does the professorate want to wait for the future or does it want to make its future? The changing environment which we have described should make the answer to such questions quite obvious. If not, then the teaching profession will likely undergo even more profound changes, becoming as vestigial as the lectern is likely to be as we enter the next millennium.

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