

AALS Distance Learning Panel -- Jan. 8

This past summer my university, Cornell, established a new Office of Distance Learning headed by a former college dean and assembled an Advisory Committee on Distance Learning to counsel that new office and the provost on that subject. By virtue of my vast experience in the field (1 year) I was appointed to that group.

The first lesson I learned from attending its meetings is that the phrase "distance learning" is very much like a Rorschach blot -- flash it in front of a person involved in higher education and the responses reveal far more about the individual than the object. Like so many buzz phrases it is used in ways that suggest a far greater consensus about meaning or definition than any close scrutiny will support.

Because of that spread of meanings and perceptions about "distance learning" it is useful, I think, to begin this brief description and discussion of my ongoing multi-campus course with several clear disclaimers -- statements of what it is not
what features that many may associate with or find most exciting about distance learning it does not attempt.

I should begin with what I have observed to be the biggest disappointment for the university administrators who established and disproportionately populate Cornell's committee. Following a presentation on my course and another now underway in the field of clothing design -- our provost said with commendable candor, "interesting pedagogically but where is market and revenue potential." The enthusiasm with which those responsible for the present and future financial health of higher education have seized on "distance learning" has everything to do with markets and market share and little to do with improving education. There are no students on this distance learning committee, which at Cornell says a lot. The driving ambition is find new markets and new revenue selling new educational products -- which translates short term into discussion of continuing professional and enrichment education, and management, labor relations, and engineering programs for the corporate sectors. The urgency of the present situation is that crowds of institutions are rushing after that gold and some are also turning the same technology on the existing sectors of educational competition. A provost's nightmare I suppose is that his or her university will fail in the race for new markets and will simultaneously experience an erosion of revenue or student quality or both as distant competitors use new technology to poach on its traditional turf.

While my experience may in content, resources, technology, and approach be suggestive for law school initiatives of this "fresh market" sort -- that is not at all the sort of distance education I've been doing.

Another sharp vision of the field to which my course bears no relation is dramatically represented by the "distance learning" facility now nearing completion in one of Cornell's colleges. It is quite simply a lecture hall of potentially limitless capacity -- thanks built in video equipment and potential broad band width connections to other spaces in the world where students can be assembled to hear and see what one or more faculty present. The vision is, I fear, the worst sort of harnessing new technology (and large gobs of expensive technology to boot) to a stale paradigm. My course, by contrast, focuses tightly on the interactive or dialogic model long practiced in law schools and attempts to build effective exchange between teacher and students and among students using inexpensive widely available computer equipment and network connection.

One last effort to frame my experimental course by contrast. One of the few other faculty members of this university committee argues forcefully that the principal leverage of new distance learning enabling technologies lies in their capacity to deliver on demand, individualized, self-paced, asynchronous instruction (the polar opposite of the lecture hall without walls). Some of CALI exercises come close to his paradigm -- a sequence of highly interactive modules delivered on disk or on the Net, supported by readings and other forms of exposition, and followed at appropriate intervals by performance assessment. The teacher and teaching is mostly, if not entirely, in the materials -- very little exchange, if any, takes place live between faculty and students or among students. My experiment has not been nearly so bold and has held very firmly to the ambition to build the course on actual exchange (some asynchronous, some real time).

[end of video clip]