ONLINE EDUCATION: COMING WITH AGE

e-Scape: Technology in Teaching

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Abstract: This address incorporates a personal look at five unfounded misgivings and concerns about teaching online. Foremost among these issues is meaningful contact with students in an online environment. The presentation will identify scripting as the central element in designing an online course and consider a specific post-online follow up. The session will conclude with a synopsis of the experience of some other senior professors who took the challenge to redesign a course for online purposes.

Learning objectives for the session

1.   To recognize the potential for meaningful and effective
      professor/student contact in an online environment.

2.   To identify scripting as the significant design element in reworking
      course materials for a successful online course experience and the reason why.

ONLINE EDUCATION: COMING WITH AGE

In the fall semester of 2008, I was asked by my Department Chair and the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Science to mount the first online course in Communication Studies working from the undergraduate course in the analysis of Propaganda. I had been teaching this course on a yearly basis for fourty years, exclusively in a classroom setting or seminar session in the Department.

I was given over a year and a half to prepare the Propaganda course for an online offering. I retired from full-time teaching in the Fall Semester of 2010 and since that time I have been teaching the Propaganda course (COMS 361) online three times a year.

As my time for retirement approached I had several misgivings and concerns about teaching online:

(1) Would the students be able to comprehend the material equally well, as demonstrated by term papers and final exams?

(2) Would I lose the ability to present lectures and have to rely on pages and pages of text or my "talking head" on video?

(3) Would I be able to continue and develop the course in a meaningful way as I had over four decades?

(4) Would not the effect of personal contact and exchange in the classroom setting and in seminars entirely recede?

(5) Would the student experience of the course, as well as my own, be one of isolation?

In order to address these concerns, I designed a series of bi-weekly reports from the students enrolled in my last class offering of Propaganda in the Fall term of 2009. I handed out five questionnaires covering materials in class and in their readings asking the students to tell me (a) which class materials seemed appropriate to an online presentation of the course in their opinion and (b) which course materials seemed to be disadvantaged by an online version of the course. The major negative constant within over 200 replies was an assumed lack of personal contact between students, between students and professor, and in class discussions, especially the seminar sessions.

Now, having taught this course online on five occasions I can honestly say that my doubts and concerns, as well as those of the test group of students, had more to do with my ignorance of the approach than any real consequence of online teaching.

I immediately faced an unexpected constraint. In my classroom teaching I used materials supporting the course content which, in most cases, was copyrighted but permissible to use in the confines of the classroom. This I could no longer do in the onlone version and the cost for copyright permission was exorbitant. I undertook a search for non-copyright materials such as images and propaganda posters and did so with the assistance of a research assistant prior to the launching of the course.

But this option covered minimal materials needed for the thrust of the course. I hit upon the idea of interviewing dozens of experts in the field, academics and practitioners as well as people who lived under various regimes of propaganda. I was most fortunate to have the colleagues and experts whom I asked agree to do so.

But this breakthrough came with its own challenge. In the classroom experience I had organized the course material around several generic and weekly themes: War Propaganda, Nationalism, Brainwashing/Education, Comparative Propaganda on a single issue and, of course, smaller group seminars. My reliance on copyright materials along with no option, I thought, for seminars forced me to rethink how I had offered the course over four decades. In addition, how was I to integrate the interviews for online inclusion in a compelling fashion without relegating the interviewees to only one topic or lesson with which they were familiar?

I found myself turning to some introductory comments I gave at the start of each semester the course was offered. Over the years I developed certain characteristics of propaganda which emerged from my decades of teaching. The purpose was not to develop a series of methods to be a propagandist but to signal those elements upon which propaganda is based and by which propaganda can be recognized in order to counteract it. These characteristics were based upon long-term effects of propaganda and not just catchy, fleeting formulae.

I used a mnemonic device wherein each characteristic has a synonym which began with the letter "T". So, for example, all propaganda is organized, or TOTAL; all successful propaganda rests upon action, or TASK; all propaganda is based upon some sort of conflict, or "THREAT"; all propaganda needs to be credible, or "TRUST," etc.

Given this progress, I still was not successful in putting things into practice. I had redesigned the concept of the course but when working with my instructional designer I was still approaching the task in the same manner which was familiar to me over the years. I would submit material in the manner to which I was accustomed in the class: general ideas to address in a lecture format, sort of guidelines for what I had to say in lectures. After several months I slowly began to understand, thanks to my instructional designer, that I had to be working on the level of minute detail: almost sentence by sentence, image by image, interview quote by interview quote, for each lesson page, the totality of which would form only one lesson out of thirteen.

What I began doing was scripting the course. A script is a comprehensive, detailed set of instructions for all elements of any film: type of shot, action, dialogue, direction, etc, for any one scene. By designing the propaganda course in this manner for an online version, I had the ability to overview the elements in terms of the whole while focusing on the very specific element needed for a particular point in the lesson.

Let's take a look at how this becomes apparent by walking through Lesson 4 on TIME.

All lessons begin with an **introduction** on tape, an overview of options for study and a list of the title for each of the pages in the lesson which encapsulate the pedagogical essence of the page. In the **introduction** I introduce the notion of **TIME** and Propaganda, both **TIMELY** (immediate issue addressed) and simultaneously **TIMELESS** (propaganda based on cultural roots, tradition and history). Each introductory statement gives me the chance to introduce the reading for the Lesson: Marlin`s Chapter II on the History of Propaganda. (Plittersdorf-Baden: couple & Nazi cards)

Slide 1 lists the **titles/topics** of each of the lesson pages, in this case 16 and an index of the three interviews for this lesson.

Slide 2 opens a discussion of the necessity of knowing **history** when confronting propaganda. In the video I speak of a student who did not know what the Crusades were following the attacks of 9-11. This page also introduces the topic of **War** which was an original series of lectures in the course offered in class.

Slide 3 presents a text of **Goebbles`** thoughts on the importance of TIME. Here we present a Canadian propaganda film during World War II, **Train Busters**, which the students view in concert with Goebbles` principles.

Slide 4 The previous film introduces the notion of an **Information Cascade** in propaganda whereby we are confronted with a barrage of non-stop messages whose effect is preventing us from having time to consider what we are viewing or hearing. (Note comment on a different chapter from the course text which addresses ethics in this context.)

Slide 5 addresses the point that **election campaigns** are not propaganda since posters for candidates are not continuous over time which, in contrast, propaganda campaigns are, according to Jacques Ellul. The video here outlines Ellul`s views.

Slide 6 allows us to segue into a development of Ellul`s concepts in which he speaks of **landmarks**. ``Lacking landmarks, we follow currents,`` he says. Paradoxically effective propaganda is based on Timelessness yet effective propaganda necessitates a fully **surface level** of opinion which allows propaganda to take root in the minds of people.

At this point, in reviewing these six slides we can see how the approach to scripting content works out. From Slide 2 through to slide 6 we have been able to address some fundamental issues in propaganda by relating each slide page with what precedes it and with what follow it. This is the essence of scripting. It is the antithesis to extemporaneous or formal lecture presentations.

Slide 7 Propaganda makes use of `landmarks of history`` to address current issues. Classicist, Don Taddeo, speaks to the students about the similar use of terms in war exhortation across two centuries by Demosthenes and Cicero. Demosthenes rallied people in Athens against Philip of Macedonia. Two hundred years later Cicero, attacking Mark Anthony, entitled his speeches The Philippics referring to his predecessor`s propaganda pronouncements. As noted they both used very similar terms to achieve the same ends.

Slide 8 Dr. James Leith, one of the two most recent interviewees, is a Professor Emeritus of History, Queens University. One of his areas of specializations is Propaganda leading up to the post Revolutionary period in France in the late 18th century and in modern China. Leith complements Taddeo`s views in that he speaks to the limits of effective propaganda in history.

Slide 9 War Posters: WWII and the **Middle East.** Effective use of Imagery.

Slide 10 James Leith common approaches in 18th century press and today`s social media. (Robert Danton.)

Slides 11 & 12 Emblematic Books. Ancient **precursors** to propaganda in that they **instructed people in how to act**, they used similar images for different contexts as propaganda does, and they **integrated the audience as both receiver of the message and actor of the message.** Slide 11 also serves to introduce the next slide which speaks to the lasting power of **symbols**. (Dr. David Graham)

Slide 13 Power of Symbols. MP3 Illustrates use of a sequence of posters managed by the student with comments by the professor in audio format (MP3).

Slide 14 The Enemy Destroys My Culture. Most powerful poster encapsulating the integration of symbols with an economy of assertion.

Slide 15 Musée Carnavalet Overview of two centuries of French Republican artefacts in the design of nationhood in painting and sculpture.

Slide 16 FINAL THOUGHTS Usually a final video statement but here a lengthier text about the fifteen hundredth anniversary of one view of the birth of France because of the Baptism of Clovis in 496 A.D. with the visit to Reims of Pope John-Paul II.

In some or all of these slides one has the capacity to provide **links to further** readings and articles.

I thus found myself with a course which I had given for four decades completely redesigned and restructured for online offering. Once this was underway I could now turn to my five concerns.

In the classroom experience with students numbering in the fifties I read all term papers, ran the seminars and read all final exams. In the online experience, beyond participating in a fixed number of discussions boards where I ask them to respond ti a set question per lesson, the students have to write an online mid-term paper and write an invigilated final exam. In the online experience I averaged around 200 students per semester. For the online course I have had two Teaching Assistants who shared the evaluations of the mid-terms and final exams on a 50/50 basis (half read by me and half divided between the TAs). I can report that the grade range for the online course is essentially the same as with the classroom experience regardless of who did the evaluation.

I had not realized that an online course provided me with a more comprehensive ability to prepare and present lectures than the classroom. Rather than losing the lecture component, I found it was enhanced through a deliberate mixture of text and commentary, my own lectures embedded in either video or MP3 (audio) which can be accompanied by still images and illustrations (non-copyright) for specific points, greater access to clips from various media, far greater facility in integrating some thirty new interview segments (executed by myself and the eConcordia team) of individuals addressing propaganda from a theoretical or experiential standpoint. All of these enhanced my ability to continue to develop the course with greater facility semester by semester than was available to me in the classroom approach.

As for my assumptions about personal contact and isolation, I have now found these aspects to be among the strongest arguments for online courses. In traditional teaching one can interact with students during class time (3 hours per week), after class impromptu meetings, office hours, appointments, phone and, email contact. I would estimate this presents an opportunity to interact in the range of six to seven hours per week. The classroom experience in particular allows for sequential participation, when time permits, and is often monopolized by a certain group of students who feel comfortable in sharing. Many students find themselves intimidated by this approach.

My two years' experience has shown that an online course greatly encourages participation, contact (via a medium of course) and inclusivity for the students, the teaching assistants and the professor. In large part this happens because of discussion boards and virtual office hours. The former are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, while the course is running; the latter are live contacts at predetermined times by either voice or print. In the case of discussion boards, each student is required to contribute a comment to a question posed for one-half of the total lessons at the discretion of the student. Everyone in class though (student, TAs, professor.) can read the comments and respond if they so wish. I qualify this process as a sort of "extreme seminar," with far greater and consistent participation than in person and with more comprehensive comments than one gets in a seminar.   *[see DB, Lesson 4, Group 2, page 3]*

What makes this work so successfully is that contributions and responses can be submitted in writing. I prefer the written word to an oral exchange. Print gives one the chance to read, listen and then take the time to respond, rather than the feeling in a classroom that one has to provide an immediate response in any discussion. The use of print also facilitates reflection far more than classroom discussions or seminar arguments because, unlike the classroom, we have the ability to see our own contribution or response with some distance.

I next want to mention a practice I started once the course was operational. Each term I post a welcome message to the students in the Announcements. This message includes a one to two page **commentary on a specific current issue** which involves propaganda. Over time I have written about Arab Spring, the North America Gun Control debate, the evident Agitation Propaganda demonstrated by the striking students in Quebec just under a year ago. These comments also elicit responses to which I do reply. This process sets the stage for the interactivity of the course right from the beginning.

I think any academic subject lends itself to this approach. One can well envision current issues to be debated or to inform students in any discipline from Biology, Economics, Philosophy, Aerospace Engineering, Marketing, developments in the Fine Arts, etc., etc. The idea here is to introduce the students to the most current issues in your discipline at the outset of the course. You can then rework these statements in future presentations of your online course.

But beyond that I found myself, in large part due to student response, developing a post-online course offering to those students who wish to continue discussing and commenting upon upcoming propaganda issues after the course is over for them. I call this **Propaganda Horizon**, a means whereby postings on current propaganda issues can be made after the students have officially completed the course.

Because participation in Propaganda Horizon is limited to those students who have completed the course, to all the Teaching Assistants over time and to me, students must indicate their willingness to be part of this prior to their completing the course by indicating to me that they wish to be invited them to join. Once they have written the Final Exam I am not at liberty by University Policy to contact them by email unless they contact me. I therefore inform the students about Propaganda Horizon in the last month of the term. Students have indicated to me over time that they wished to continue the discussions. Hence Propaganda Horizon came into being. It is a private blog by invitation only and not affiliated with the University

The title of this presentation is Online Education: Coming With Age. I wish to conclude by addressing two aspects of this title.

The etymology of the word, education, is the Latin word *educare*, meaning to "draw forth." This is precisely my experience in teaching online. The success of online courses relies on the ability of all participants to draw forth from themselves information, opinions, values, insights in an ongoing dialogue and exchange where students, teaching assistants and professors learn from one another. Having taught in the classroom for four decades I have found that online education is a far greater facilitator of this process of "drawing forth." Online courses allow you as professor to interact continually with students in their educational experience and give you as professor a far greater possibility to guide students and to improve and adjust your curriculum.

Finally, the title says: Coming With Age, not Coming of Age. Individuals far more experienced than I who can speak to Online Education Coming of Age. But the title I offer to you means that older professors are a fertile ground for the development of online courses and online education is also fertile ground for our own development as professors. In many cases the ability to work successfully in online education also comes with age because our lives have been dedicated to curriculum development, supervising of students, thinking through and acting on research topics, etc., etc.   Underlining the importance of this phenomenon, I was surprised to learn that of the 55 credit courses currently offered through eConcordia/KnowledgeOne, roughly two-thirds of the instructors are over 50 years of age.

One individual who taught me the value of older professors engaging themselves in online education was someone whom you may know: Dr. Pamela Bright. Pamela died at 75 last November after a long battle with cancer. She was for a long time Chair of the Department of Theology and never ceased so amaze us with her intellect, her compassion and her love of life.

Two years ago Pamela approached eConcordia to mount a course on Celtic Christian Religion. In her last year of life she even travelled to Ireland to visit sites she presented in her course. The Chief Learning Officer of eConcordia put me in touch with her and for the better part of a year she and I exchanged on a multitude of issues about her course design, her integration of student input and critique; major **segmented** issues in online curriculum development down to specific terms which would most likely elicit student interest and involvement.

I visited her in hospital four days before her death. Understandably she was weak and fatigued. But on the hospital bed table were all her notes and text for the latter part of her online course preparation. She was that excited, involved and intrigued by this new means for her to teach even during the last four days before her death.

eConcordia/KnowledgeOne honoured Pamela posthumously by acknowledging that her online course is her legacy. I can think of no higher tribute which recognizes the value of and encourages involvement for older professor in Online Education.

Professor Emeritus Dr. Dennis Murphy (Concordia University, Montreal) has taught the Seminar in Propaganda in the Department of Communication Studies since the Fall of 1970 until his retirement in September of 2010. Since retirement, Dr. Murphy has taught the Propaganda course through eConcordia/Knowledge One three semesters a year. He has presented on a regular basis (1989 – 2003) on the topic of propaganda and ethics at the International Institute for Advanced Studies Annual Symposium held yearly in Baden Baden, Germany