

Professors: Living or Dead

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Web-based instruction, the Internet, computer networks, and services from book publishers have greatly increased the teaching capabilities of professors. They reduce the need for professors and students to be physically connected. I'm wondering if professors even need to be alive! Now I certainly do not recommend that we staff universities with dead professors, but the new technology environment imbues them with some pretty amazing capabilities. My real purpose is to use the capabilities of the dead to showcase the unique contributions of the living. That way we can better appreciate and emulate the living.

Dead Professor Capabilities

A professor who has died could theoretically teach a college course during the next semester, maybe even for years before his or her demise would be discovered. Here are the activities that the dead professor could do:

1. Deliver already prepared video or audio lectures through the web.
2. Grade essays and online chats by analyzing the number of times students use certain key words.
3. Incorporate new information obtained from the web.
4. Send grades electronically to the registrar's office.
5. Post new job and Internet oppor-

tunities received from specific Internet sources.

6. Answer student e-mail. A professor could program a set of pat answers to commonly asked student questions.
7. Organize web groups through which students could complete projects and/or study together.
8. Provide e-mail letters of recommendation based on computerized analysis of student performance.
9. Update test questions using electronic information supplied by the textbook publisher.
10. Show guest speakers on video.
11. Automatically score multiple choice exams.
12. Tabulate course progress on software spreadsheets.

Living Professor Capabilities

With all of the capabilities of a dead professor, is there a role for the living ones? Yes. What follows are things the living can do that would be very difficult, if not possible, for those dead to complete.

1. Incorporate brand new information into the course. New laws, research studies, and observations from the field, as well as daily news events can be added to enrich the content and pique student interest.
2. Answer uncommon student questions. Inevitably, students come up with great new questions every

semester.

3. Solve technological problems. If the computer system crashes, gets a virus or has a bug, the living must make the repairs.
4. Add the human element. A handshake, direct eye contact, and face-to-face discussions with students increase rapport and build empathy.
5. Incorporate advances in instructional technology. Improvements in web-course software, computer networks, and textbook materials are bound to continue.
6. Constrain innovative student cheating.
7. Expedite grade appeals.
8. Invite live guest speakers to class.
9. Review and modify the curriculum to satisfy the school or profession's evolving requirements and objectives.
10. Review and modify course activities, based on student feedback as to their experiences and learning needs.

The living professor and teaching technology can coexist, in my opinion, if there is a commitment to perform the activities of the living professor. I use the list of unique living characteristics to stay alive for my students. My pressure to be "dead" increases as I now add to my cable television teaching a course on the web. The biggest challenge for me is maintaining the human element for the students. ♦

Will They Walk Away?

Near the end of the 12th century, the Anasazi built a city on the Colorado Plateau that we call Mesa Verde. Constructed on a cliff, Mesa Verde is a remarkably beautiful city of single- and multi-storied pueblo dwellings that, even today, is one of the most impressive sights in North America. Around 1295, after the Anasazi had lived in it for almost 100

years, the city was abruptly abandoned. In a three- to four-year period, the Anasazi walked away and never came back. Why? No one knows.

Many classes are to students what Mesa Verde was to the Anasazi. Students enroll in a course, pay the tuition, and spend their time attending class sessions, completing assignments, and passing tests. But when the course

is over, so is their interest and time with the subject. They walk away and, intellectually, never come back." (p. 29)

Johnson, David W., Johnson, Roger T. and Smith, Karl A. (January/February 2000). Constructive controversy: The educative power of intellectual conflict. *Change*, 29-37. ♦