

New college courses for the 21st century

SEVERAL YEARS AGO I CAUGHT UP with an American friend who had emigrated to Australia and become a professor of history at a well-known university. He told me his university had been advised by an equally well-known business strategy consultancy that all university departments should become revenue generators, and each should be self-supporting.

My friend had a worthwhile solution. He invented a course titled “The History of the Body.” The focus: How the human body has been viewed by various cultures through time. It

was wildly popular, attracting large numbers of students every year, greatly benefitting the history department financially and the professor professionally.

But is “the body” really what we want undergraduates to know about history? What if that is the only history course a student takes? Might this course be an instance of pandering to students who prefer something ‘pop’ or even salacious? I even took my friend to task in an article at the time.

That was then

Now, I suspect my friend was quite prescient.

In my college days, Oberlin ’66, college was very much the preserve of an intellectual and moneyed elite—or athletes. Today the athletes are still coming to campus, but many complain that college admissions standards have been lowered for most others, and perhaps so in some cases.

But another powerful change has taken place in the student body—the arrival of the first generation raised with digital technology from birth. Call them Millennials, based on when they were born. Or call them Digital Natives, based on their familiarity with and attitude toward a connected world.

With their arrival comes an interesting paradox. Older professors advocate that because they have not attained “college-level” proficiency, they should be shunted to remedial courses, and at the same time deride the students’ technology as “the new spitball.” Many of the same professors have achieved little or no mastery in the students’ digital world, and would perhaps be shocked to know their students view them as functional illiterates.

It is with this paradox in mind that I return to my friend’s course. The title attracts the attention of today’s students. Not because it is digital (it pre-dates that), but because it is

unconventional, even a bit titillating. So much for attracting students, the course material and the instructor’s abilities will make the course worthwhile or not.

A different focus

What interests me about “The History of the Body,” or “The Anthropology of You Tube,” or “The Mathematics of Video Games” or “The Psychology of Crime” is their underlying focus on methodology rather than facts or even masterworks.

The goal of “The History of the Body,” is to get a student to think like a historian. If a student is attracted to a course purely by its title, and along the way learns how historians think about things, is anyone the loser? Many would argue, in fact, that every introductory course should do exactly that.

Digital Natives are already there with the arrival of “epistemic games.” David Shaffer is an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and he has created computer-based simulation games to train students to think like doctors, lawyers, psychologists, anthropologists and other professionals. Having gained familiarity with the practitioner’s thinking ability, it seems reasonable that learning the theory and lots of content should be facilitated.

The new college catalog

Why not remodel all survey courses? It might be as simple a task as each department head asking what course title and orientation will attract the most students to this discipline? Then, what basics and highlights within the discipline do we want non-major students to know?

Oh yes, make sure at least some of it is delivered online. ■



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