Teaching and “Teaching”

Thank you all for your presence here; it is a tribute to our honoree and to the idea of the award proposed and generously supported by Mark Siegel, class of 1973.

In a recent column in the *New York Times*, the usually careful writer Tom Friedman argues that a plausible solution to the commonly acknowledged problem of the increasing costs of university education is a much more determined and systematic use of internet and video education, with a sophisticated employment (as for example in supplementary MIT courses) of a more exacting system of instruction and testing than heretofore practiced.

No one should denigrate the use of the internet for such possible educational uses; nor deny that the internet is — and can continue to be — a wonderful source of accepted knowledge and detailed information, as shown by Wikipedia and by the plethora of other such sources. These would include, I should think, the advertised DVDs and CDs of experienced University lecturers, many of which are easily purchased and listened to, as if in a huge University lecture hall. In fact, of course, encyclopedias, for another such source, have been around since even before the French Revolution.

To illustrate his proposal, Friedman offers a Harvard example of such apparently effective and yet economical education: the celebrated course on justice and the law given by Professor Irwin Sandel of Harvard’s government department. This is a course which enrolls no fewer than 1000 students and must use the Brattle Theater and its balconies for its venue. I’ve watched videos of this “course” and marked on Sandel’s use of commonly accepted philosophical materials, such as those I’ve used in my philosophy of law and ethics classes over the years. Sandel talks to the assembly easily and interestingly, occasionally singling out a volunteer student or two in the first few rows to apply or test for a point, which then serves as the lesson of the day. The remainder 998 or so students watch and listen in the loges and balconies, with various degrees of engagement. Of course, student writings and papers, if any — or the one, at most — as well as a mandatory final exam, are read, if not mechanically, then presumably, by a multiple number of apprentices to the department, i.e. teaching assistants employed for that course.

The irony Friedman misses, I would claim, is the clear failure of Sandel’s course to “teach” any of these 1000 students, all, so efficiently, in one illusory fell swoop. Teaching, as I understand and try to practice in the classroom, is unlike merely informing, telling, lecturing, or power-pointing; it is not directed primarily, if at all, simply to transferring detailed or general information through indirectly demonstrating how informed the instructor is as a model; all the while, seeking to engage the student with the instructor’s interests. One can read her book for such details and information, or indeed copy and memorize the claims of the associated website.
None of this, I would claim, meets the challenges of genuine teaching: provoked learning and reflective understanding, which I, and Colgate, consider at the heart of the challenge of liberal education. Our students, in relatively small classes, are individually put into positions of challenged thought: personally confronted to show reflective understanding, imaginative application, and independent development and elaboration. No matter how “serious” and “attentive” the merely observant student, it is the imminent, insistent human encounter with the instructor’s verbal, and subsequently written, challenges for explanation, elaboration, and possible application, that are finally the honest tests of education and practical learning; best enabled — as alums consistently testify — under the auspices of a demanding teacher. This is a test — one of immediate human connection that often endures through time — that is neither sought nor achievable merely through the large lecture halls or, for that matter, from a required exposure to matters of the internet — even with directed testing as a challenge.

It is my contention that we cannot economize in the easy ways often suggested if we are to meet honestly the challenges of learning and genuine understanding that are initiated and realized most often through a determined teacher; the alternative is the shared illusion of unmonitored solitary learning, which is the too easily accepted substitute.

What I have been saying about the community of teaching and learning is in part an outgrowth of our modern humanistic culture; that, through the centuries, creative humans perfected the uses of words to tell and record stories — some true as history, some made-up as plays, poems, and fiction; the uses of color, shapes, and pictures to display and represent appearances: some received, others constructed imaginatively as drawings and paintings; and similarly for related sounds: to represent as melodies received cries and tones, as say, birdsongs, and then devising and composing artful, fresh sounding combinations: songs, symphonies, string quartets. It is the intellectual task of present-day humanists and teachers, reflectively, to attend to and build on this special talent: to understand this godlike ability of humans not simply to be in this world, but to ponder and question exactly how we are in, as well as of, this world; dwelling especially on those creations that more ingeniously enlarge perception, the understanding and self-understanding. Our best teachers, in the immediacy of the classroom, enable our students to draw fresh insights on these talents and their creations — probing (the class is indeed the laboratory of such probing) their meanings, while exploring with the students the many features of the human creative process itself.

Margaret Maurer, in the many years since Colgate has seen her work with students, is a genuine teacher in the sense defined above. Her principal focus in her classes, studying Shakespeare and English literature, is the recognized occasion for generations of our students’ exciting confrontation with, and genuine appreciation of the literary art; their discovery and understanding of created masterworks; and the light these project on the human condition. Margaret’s courses, like many others in the humanities, are designed to develop a eureka-like understanding of the uses of language to reveal thought, motive, and action: insightful keys to the most profound senses of being human in a human society. These are realized through the imaginative teaching of a master teacher of acknowledged masterpieces of human creativity.

Margaret is herself a uniquely creative teacher; and so, Colgate believes, an appropriate recipient of the University’s very special teaching award, particularly designed for such recognition.
Thank you