The Digital Gourmet: When Life Long Learning
Drives Classroom Technology

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I recently read Mary Aiken's *The Cyber Effect.* Aiken is a forensic psychologist who studies the pitfalls of human online behavior. Her short message is that people lose their filters when functioning online. We online customers, young, old, naïve, and seasoned, are vulnerable to all sorts of dangers, predators who seek out our money, our sexual proclivities, our children, and our retail interests. As someone who uses email and teaches online, the Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms familiar to millions interest me little. I also read Dick Eggers' *The Circle,* another book with a dystopic twist about an ambitious young woman turned executive and a non-critical consumer of the global, corporate world's utopic vision that knows all about us and wants to know more: our shopping, political, health, social, and financial information. The recent election where all that personal information online becomes fodder for political, presidential election intrigue suggests how much our lives and our very security are centered online.

This paper is not written as an apologist for online education. It exists. We as teachers who were raised and educated in a pre- or developing cyber environment have now been eclipsed by those for whom cyber is a central, daily reality. Wanting to be a discriminating

producer of cyber output, and here cyber-education, is what brings me to this conversation. We want to be, to attract, and to educate digital gourmets. We want to provide an experience that competes with the world of shopping, of joining, and of blending in with everybody else. We want to be the ones who remember the importance of critical thinking, of disagreeing, of validating individuality. We want to fight the reality of universalization where the individual is subsumed into the latest fashion trend whether the trend is clothing, politics, or psychology.

Teaching online is exciting. In innumerable scenarios, it meets the needs of adult learners. Having taught for sixteen years at the freshman, sophomore, and upper level undergraduate university classroom level, I can share some successes and failures. The classes I have taught—face-to-face, hybrid, and online are literature classes. The goal of all my classes is to make the material so exciting that students want to engage, learn, and participate. The goal is to have students want to hear or read what other students say about the compelling material. That is the key. Whether face-to-face, hybrid, or online, the challenge is the same—inspiring students to want to read, stretch their minds, be curious. A teacher knows success when students report that they could not wait to hear or read what other students expressed about the assigned readings. Success is also when students want to struggle with written expression. Success is when students are validated and thrilled because something that had crossed their minds as relevant is articulated in a more nuanced way.

Another key to success is when students disagree with the professor, when they argue with each other over the meaning of a reading assignment, and when they say something that is in the grey, not in the facile black-and-white of vernacular thought. Success is when the professor can sense that the class has a cohesiveness of passion for the material, when the proverbial pin could be dropped, and everyone would hear as ideas are discussed. Success is when each and every student shares complicated interpretations that are unique to each and different from the other.

The ethos of such a class is spiritual. Students listen to each other. The important point is that they listen. They not only listen to each other, but they listen to themselves. They hear complexities, validate confusions, and take pride in the camaraderie of struggling to face new paradigms. Rather than seeking simple answers, they reach for complications where there may not be a right answer but multiple answers. To watch a class that listens to a student struggling to express an idea and having great difficulty in articulating that idea, supporting that student with quiet patience, and thereby encouraging the student to go down the path that struggles for understanding, for the ability to articulate, and for the desire to communicate means the instructor has succeeded. For a student to have the trust in peers to express doubt, anxiety, and fuzziness about material, that is success.

When I have this goal in mind, the question of whether the classroom is face-to-face, hybrid, or online is moot. The adult learner is hungry for many things. Think about it. Whether in the face-to-face, hybrid, or online classroom, the adult learner is isolated by

family, job, and social responsibilities. With maturity comes doubt, anxiety, and isolation unique to each individual. If a class can respond to some of these needs, that is success.

I teach World Literatures to sophomores, Mythology and Bible as Literature (Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and Qur'an) to upper level undergraduates—mostly, but not all, English majors. The World Literature class introduces the *Ramayana* from India, the *Kebra Nagast* from Ethiopia, the *Tale of Genji* from Japan, *Monkey: Journey to the West* from China, *Popul Vuh* from the Mayan civilization of the Yucatan and Central America, and Greek theater, typically *Medea* and *Oedipus Rex*. Every one of these myths expresses human needs, desire, emotions, failings, and courage. Each one expresses different forms of divinity, social norms, and familial devotions and conflicts. The narratives are universal, ancient, and contemporary. In the Mythology class, we analyze examples of myths from around the world relating to their imprinting of personality construction, social integration expectations, and cosmic spirituality. In the Bible as Literature, we identify themes, linking all three scriptures by their unique polemical quests and often similar ethos. The stories are eternal for their modeling ideal gender roles, expressing the heroic, and demonstrating the normative and non-normative. They allow students to become self-reflective by applying critical thinking to heretofore unquestioned narratives that dominate yet may, at the same time, limit our ideas and expectations of ourselves and our lives.

Here are a few essentials to keep the adult learner engaged:

I. **Transparency**: The adult learner wants to know what is expected. For every unit, provide as a section "What you will learn" and an "Overview." Make reading and written assignments and their due dates and what will be on exams clear. For example, below is the "task" or assignment for a typical weekly prompt. Also include with the task, the purpose, grading criteria, and rubric:

1. Write a cohesive paragraph about ONE point that you find interesting.

2. Length of approximately 300-350 words

3. Quote from the text in support of your discussion. Provide an in text citation with a page number and a work cited listing.

4. Quote from the background reading in the text or background websites when you discuss context. Provide an in text citation with a page number and a work cited listing.

II. **Diversity**: The adult learner is curious about what other people think about complicated material.

1. Have students post (see above example for assignment requirements) responses on a public discussion board.

2. Require that each student respond to one other student in a meaningful way.

3. There are no "right" answers. Encourage students to explore their thoughts as long as they meet the requirements of the discussion post. Communicate that with your individualized feedback and assessment.

4. Students may include their own life experience, which they love to do. However that life experience can come in the final comments and as only a small part after the full, written response to the material.

III. **Student educators**: Have students "teach" as much of the class as possible:

1. Every prompt has at least two, ideally three focus fields that must be intertwined: context, content, and specialized perspective.

2. Student discussion posts are public. Students explain their posts to class.

3. Student presentations (PowerPoint Presentation—PPP—or other visual format) introduce essential, but specialized, material for the class. Each student presents once.

4. Flipped classroom format for hybrid classes: Students are responsible for having already read the material and taken an online quiz. Classroom meetings review posts from previous, discuss current, and introduce the next Learning Module.

IV. **Trust**: Establish a netiquette principle from day one and monitor all student posts.

V. **Seductive Website**: Bite-size pieces for each Learning Module: 10 minute audio lectures that includes a PPP; overviews; knowledge-outcome summary, and consistent organization; interesting links.

VI. **Instructor Feedback**: For every student post, provide individual unique feedback:

1. Develop a simple rubric

2. Provide individualized feedback

VII. **Administrative Musts**:

1. Provide prompt feedback

2. Check student private emails

VIII. **Things that didn't work so well>my plan**:

1. Synchronous online chats>synchronous chats for informal conversation for each learning module

2. Small groups>whole class interaction

3. Unclear syllabus> more concise and clear syllabus

4. Introduction discussion post> a chat for introductions

As with any desirable instructor experience, we continue to learn.