

Lagniappe

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Click-and-Enter: A Dialectic over the Future of the Teaching/Learning Dynamic in an Era of Search Engines

I have helped to develop many students over the course of my teaching and business careers. I have taught graduate courses, undergraduate courses, on-location at businesses, and on college campuses during the day, on weekends, and in the evening. I have witnessed fads involving methodologies — indeed, I have championed a few of my own, and still do.

As to integration of technology into the teaching/learning dynamic, the advent of the Internet, intranet, and extranet has created (and continues to create) countless new learning opportunities for both teachers and students. Business applications — a primary academic area of interest to me — represent huge and important opportunities. In a conversation reported by Harvard Business School Publishing, Don Tapscott, David Ticoll, and Alex Lowy, authors of *Digital Capital*, elaborate, “The most important implication of the ‘Net for business is not that it is becoming faster, safer, and more robust — but that it is becoming rich in function.” (*Please minimize that thought for now, because I intend to maximize it later on in this essay.*)

Yes, we are a knowledge-based, relationship-based economy where use of computer-based technologies is vital, robust, faster, rich in function (and necessary).

Yet, for the first time, I am concerned about an observable negative effect of the World Wide Web that grounds many of us for large chunks of time in every working day. It is this problem that is addressed in this essay. If entertained unchecked, this potential problem may pose threats to effective teaching, learning, and ultimately to effective decision-making in future generations and organizations.

“*And what is this great evil,*” you ask? It is what I not-so-fondly refer to as “click-and-enter mentality,” particularly as it relates to student research and problem-solving efforts. Many students (of all ages) who exhibit click-and-enter syndrome:

- a) believe that “the body of knowledge” is available and is there to be found through search engines (alone);
- b) believe that research is compiled in a linear path that goes something like this:

- type in several key words;
 - “ask Jeeves”;
 - Voilá! It will be there. (If it is not there, they conclude that no information is to be found on the subject.)
- c) often underestimate the time and patience needed to do effective research.

Let’s examine the real world. Consider marketing research as an example. Marketers (if allowed to do their work) infrequently enjoy the luxury of a linear research path. Their research process in reality is frequently circuitous and goes something like this:

There is an opportunity (and/or a problem). Information is needed. Marketers (if allowed) engage in an exploratory research process using qualitative and quantitative methods. Research sheds some light on the issue. Yet, they may be able to form only a tentative hypothesis (or, in the case of a student research topic, a tentative title). As more information is gathered, through review of varied resources (for example, books), and use of Boolean logic and creative brainstorming, the topic becomes more focused. Along the way, even the most diligent students (and marketing researchers) may become frustrated.

“Gee, Jeeves, this research stuff takes time.”

Many problems (and opportunities) cannot be addressed through quantitative models that teach the need to begin with a topic (or a hypothesis). The qualitative model suggests otherwise. We begin with the wide end of a funnel; we investigate the relationships; we recognize that the topic may be elusive for a while. *Both* models are valid (and necessary) in today’s academic and professional world. (*Please minimize this thought as well; we will return to it later.*)

How many of us recall that in the pre-Internet days, after searching card catalogs, we went to the library stacks only to find an exceptional book that was *next* to the book we were actually seeking? Once perusing that other one (and its bibliography), we discovered wonderful others. Those discoveries were reminders that cataloging is done by people; and, indeed, so are search engines. Students (and practitioners) in the new economy need to view *themselves* as the savvy search engines. Web search engines are tools. As tools, they are only as good as the craftsperson who knows which one to choose.

Additionally, much as with any tool or craft, one must learn how and when to use it. Therefore, students need to learn these competencies. Herein lies a piece of the future of the teaching/learning dynamic. And it begins with low (if any) tolerance for click-and-enter mentality.

“So what?” the reader may ask. What are faculty and others to do about this high tolerance for results and low tolerance for search? Well, “*First, you’ve got to get mad . . . I want you to get up now . . . I want you to get up right now; get up and go up to your windows and say . . . ‘I’m as mad as hell! And I’m not going to take this anymore.’*” (This excerpt from Howard Beale [Peter Finch] from the movie *Network* works for me.) Indeed, no one committed to teaching should tolerate “click-and-enter” mentality. What should you do after you get mad — or at least considerably irritated?

- (*Time to maximize an earlier thought.*) Explore the richness of function of the Internet with students. Give them the time to be hypertextual. Allow them to make mistakes — to bark up a wrong tree, if you will, and then shift gears to discover a more enlightening avenue and/or argument. Tree-barking is fine, if it has a knowledge-based rationale. Shouldn’t the college classroom be a place where students have permission to explore the possibility of “wrong,” to address problems as opportunities, to explore how many issues might affect those opportunities? Even in real-world marketing pursuits, we may do all our homework diligently, and still fail.
- (*Time to maximize another earlier thought.*) Insist upon both quantitative and qualitative methodologies in coursework and in practice. For those who despise “rich description,” ask them to illustrate what human activity is not characterized by it. For those who discount history, challenge them to identify any human endeavor that has not been touched by it.
- Teach students how to use the wealth of information available in virtual space. Do not assume they know. (Often, they do not.)
- As you are standing by your windows, continue to maintain that libraries still be places for books and journals and other media as may be appropriate. Yes, students can download articles, but they will miss much from not seeing the actual journal of origin and appreciating the related topics of the times. History matters. Do not allow “too much to be thrown away.” (*U.S. News and World Report*, April 23, 2001). As Jay Tolson suggests, be the watchdogs that insist that libraries be intellectually responsible. Consider developing classroom exercises and/or virtual chat groups that

involve discussion of other articles appearing in the same journal or magazine that might have been lost through dedicated search engines.

- Implement the message in the wonderful essay by Robert S. Root-Bernstein that appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Jan. 14, 2000). Professor Root-Bernstein argues that students should master and practice different kinds of thinking. Espousing “click-and-enter mentality” does not take us to the places he advocates. There is much to be derived from that essay. It reaffirms my confidence in believing that the effective teaching/learning dynamic relies on *the teacher* to ignite the inventive capacities of students. Following that, are the tools that make it happen.
- Encourage students to think critically. This admonition is not new to academic discourse. However, to me, that endeavor includes, but is not limited to, asking “what if.” It also means using techniques such as nominal group technique, as appropriate to class size, to ensure that diverse views are expressed and respected.
- For those who advocate critical thinking and proclaim zero tolerance of click-and-enter, insist that administrative policies “walk the walk” in support of critical thinking. Grade inflation, retaliatory student evaluations (written by those who are not enamored of reflection), and concern with enrollments are realities of academic enterprises. As with Howard Beale, let’s not kill the messenger; let’s support teachers who have the courage to be innovative, and let’s recognize students who do as well.

For me, the teaching/learning dynamic and my love of teaching and continued learning depend upon low tolerance of click-and-enter and strong emphasis on reflection and critical thinking. If the opportunity to witness an “ah-hah!” experience ceases to exist, then there is no reason to be in teaching. Indeed, it is what the classroom has always been about. Some things should never change — and perhaps this is one of them.



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