Technology & the Pseudo-Intimacy of the Classroom: an interview with Jerry Graff by [Michael Roy](), [Wesleyan University;]()

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Gerald Graff (http://tigger.uic.edu/~ggraff/) is a professor of English at the [University of Illinois at Chicago](). His recent work has centered on how for most students and members of the general population, academia in general and literary studies in particular are obscure and opaque, a theme taken up in his [CLUELESS IN ACADEME: HOW SCHOOLING OBSCURES THE LIFE OF THE MIND]()(Yale University Press, April 2003).
Academic Commons caught up with Graff to explore his thoughts about technology and the future of liberal education.

Academic Commons: Is our country's commitment to the ideals of liberal education really in crisis?
Graff: But one constant seems to survive the crises of every generation: a small percentage of college students "get" the intellectual culture of academia and do well in college while the majority remain more or less oblivious to that culture and pass through it largely unchanged. Changing these conditions, creating a truly democratic higher education system that liberally educates more than a small minority, has always been and still is the main challenge of liberal education.
Much has been made of the neo-Millenials (also known as the Net Generation) who are presently enrolled on our campuses, and how they learn differently than past generations. Do you see this description as accurate or useful when thinking about how educators need to change their teaching strategies?
I have always been skeptical of claims about learning differences between generations. Formerly, it was the 60s that purportedly made the adolescent mind non-linear, more visual, and so forth. Now pixels and megabytes supposedly produce a new kind of non-linear consciousness, or one wired into simultaneity, or whatever.
How is technology helping higher education?
Probably only in rather narrowly technical ways, so far, e.g. making registration processes more efficient. Communication across campus has been made much easier, but this benefit may have been negated by the overload problem: we now get information much more readily, but it comes in such excessive volume that the chances

of our recognizing the information that is really relevant and useful to us are correspondingly lessened.

How is technology hurting higher education? Aside from the overload problem just mentioned, I think there has been a failure to recognize and exploit the potential that technology offers for improving and transforming day-to-day instruction.

Let me give one example.

I have long thought that there is something infantilizing about the standard classroom situation, where the very face-to-face intimacy that is so valued actually encourages sloppy and imprecise habits of communication. That is, the intimate classroom is very different from–and therefore poor training for–the most powerful kinds of real-world communication, where we are constantly trying to reach and influence audiences we do not know and will probably never meet. We should be using online technologies to go beyond the cozy pseudo-intimacy of the classroom, to put students in situations that force them to communicate at a distance and therefore learn the more demanding rhetorical habits of constructing and reaching an anonymous audience. We have begun to do this to some extent, but our habit of idealizing presence and "being there," the face-to-face encounter between teachers and students, blinds us to the educational advantages of the very impersonality and distancing of online communication. Indeed, online communication makes it possible for schools and colleges to create real intellectual communities rather than the fragmented and disconnected simulation of such communities that "the classroom" produces.

Can you point to examples of such communities?

I meant *possible* intellectual communities rather than actually existing ones. I do not know any campus in America that has what I would call a real intellectual community, online or otherwise, in the sense of everyone–or almost everyone–on campus engaged in a continuous conversation about ideas all the time (as occurred for a brief time during the campus protest era in the 60s and early 70s). I think online technology makes something like such a community of discussion possible even without a crisis like the Vietnam War, but I do not know of any campus that has come close to creating such a potential community. Of course there may be many things going on that I do not know about.

How do you use technology in your own teaching?

I love using e-mail for writing instruction. I can get right inside my students' sentences and paragraphs, stop them and ask them "can you see a problem with this phrase?" or

"can you think of an alternative to this formulation?" or "please improve on this sentence," with an immediacy and turn-around speed that handing papers back with comments cannot begin to match.

I have also used class listservs, which seem to me to have great potential.The big benefit for me is the creation of a common space of class discussion that everyone can (and in my case must) contribute to, a space that prolongs the in-class discussion and enables us to pursue issues that had gotten short shrift in class. I wish these listserv discussions were more controlled and focused than they have been in my classes, and I think they can be when and if I learn better how to structure them.

One interesting thing I have learned from listservs is that most students see electronic communication as an extension of informal oral discourse, whereas I see it (when used in a class anyway) as properly an extension of formal writing. When I chastised one class for writing sloppy, prolix, and often unreadable blather on the class listserv, they objected that I was trying to shut down the liberating spontaneity and informality that is inherent in electronic media. I think this was a rationalization, but one that has to be anticipated.

In recent years it has become increasingly easy for non-technical people to produce extravagant multimedia productions on their desktop computers. Certain faculty mourn this as the final nail in the coffin of literacy and literature, while others celebrate the possibilities afforded by this new multimedia literacy. Who is right? Neither. I do not mean to denigrate multimedia assignments or the way in which they can produce new kinds of learning. I just do not accept the claim that such multimedia creativity is either the final nail in the literacy coffin or a revolutionary breakthrough. If I had to choose, though, I would be more sympathetic to the latter view, or at least be interested in hearing more about multimedia assignments. I am not technologically adept enough to have tried any myself.