

Tara's Theme

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Tara Brabazon

DIGITAL HEMLOCK: INTERNET EDUCATION AND
THE POISONING OF TEACHING

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DEMONISERS OF TECHNOLOGY have at least two things in common: they believe that computers are bad for us, and they often come up with catchy book titles. Take, for example, Sven Birkerts's highly successful collection of essays, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (1994). Just as the title intimates, Birkerts argues that the printed book and the reading practices associated with it are doomed. For Birkerts, engaging with computers and hypertext is akin to a Faustian bargain. In exchange for the thrill of speed, entertainment and connectivity, we've sold to the devil our capacity for deep thought, reflection and all that makes us human.

Silicon Snake Oil: Second Thoughts on the Information Highway is Clifford Stoll's title and, like Birkerts's, captures the book's argument: we've been duped by the promise and excitement of electronic networking. Stoll, once a computer hackers' hero, who uncovered a computer spy ring in the 1980s, has morphed into a 'humanist' and is now committed to exposing the darker side of the Internet.

The title of Neil Postman's *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (1993) is also apt. The book is a diatribe against the tyranny of machines over our social institutions. Postman warns that we have crossed the line from being a society that uses technology for worthy endeavours to one that is shaped by it.

This brings me to Tara Brabazon's *Digital Hemlock: Internet Education and the Poisoning of Teaching*. On the cover, the title and the author's name are displayed on a computer screen, underscored by a bottle of poison. The striking title and image trigger a number of questions: Has teaching been condemned to a slow and painful death by the arrival of the Internet? Does the act of going online resemble Socrates voluntarily drinking the hemlock? Are academics who consent to teach online selling their students short? The reader's expectation is that the book will at the very least reveal the limitations of online education, identify its dangers and argue why academics should resist. Brabazon does give

some attention to these themes, but they are not the book's main focus. *Digital Hemlock* is really about what Brabazon believes constitutes good university teaching — with or without the use of the Internet.

When she does discuss online learning, she takes an extreme position. For Brabazon, online learning threatens to enshrine all the worst aspects of the university as corporation: the McDonaldisation of education. She talks about students being dropped into a digital desert — somewhat ironically, just after detailing how she successfully uses e-mail to hook her students into the joys and rigours of doing her courses. Particularly abhorrent to Brabazon is the ubiquitous use of PowerPoint software, which, she believes, reduces knowledge to endless series of dot-points with no substantial content in between. Her rule of thumb is that, if it's online, it's pedagogically dubious and without critical content. She questions the techno-enthusiasts' claim that online learning redistributes authority and power, making classrooms more student-centred and collaborative. Who would want those qualities in a teaching context anyway?

But Brabazon's discussion of the limitations of online teaching is really only a curtain-raiser for the main performance: a passionate defence of the lecture, the mainstay of university teaching since the institution's birth in the Middle Ages. Education has to be conservative, she argues, as it's responsible for the fate of thousands of students and their futures. Further, as the lecture has survived the test of time, it must be the best method of teaching. By contrast, e-learning, which is under-researched and risky, should be avoided. QED.

An alternative explanation to Brabazon's logic is that lectures have survived, not because they represent the best mode of teaching, but because they are cheap to produce, provide an easy means of accommodating large numbers of students and require only a single faculty member. And as for e-learning, yes, we need to know more about it so that we can maximise its potential and avoid its limitations. However, making it work well, for educational objectives rather than corporate ones, requires actually using and evaluating it in authentic teaching and learning situations.

When Brabazon extols the virtues of the lecture, she provides evidence in the form of e-mails she has received from approving students: 'The lectures were made interesting. It made me want to be here.' And 'Tara was extremely well prepared for lectures and made them entertaining.' For Brabazon, large classes aren't the problem — it's the resourcing of universities or lack of it. But is she really sure that sitting in a large lecture theatre, even if it's not

overcrowded, gazing down at a pinhead of a lecturer, is not also the 'emotionally barren' terrain she ascribes to online learning?

The book is punctuated with tales of the writer's own teaching successes. Again, evidence is provided in the form of electronic testimonials from students in response to course evaluation questions: 'In all honesty, this is the best course I have done at Murdoch.' In identifying the most positive aspect of the course, students said: 'Tara Brabazon's zest and ability to relate to her students well'; and 'Most definitely the lecturer, Tara Brabazon. She is the most driven and involved lecturer I have ever had and I wish more lecturers were like her.' Brabazon reports a successful relationship with a student who takes her advice and becomes 'the star of her own life'. Tara Brabazon may or may not be the star of her own life, but she is definitely the star of this book.

In the last chapter, Brabazon anticipates criticism. She tells us that her arguments could be framed as élitist and as an attempt nostalgically to hold on to an inappropriate model of education. But she is not so much élitist as extreme. Rather than an either/or position on the use of technology for teaching in higher education, a more balanced examination of the complex issues would be of greater use. Similarly, rather than pitting the lecture against other approaches to teaching, it might be more productive to consider the possibility of a mix of modes, which, dare I say it, might include online interactions.