NCA President Art Bochner's Column from Spectra, August 2008

Things That Boggle My Mind

Is this all there is
Surely there must be more,
This cannot be the sum of life,
What else is there in store
That I shall find,
To further boggle my mind...


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I should have seen it coming. I can remember the first time—at least twenty years ago. A student asked if she could tape my lecture. Her request seemed innocent enough, even flattering. A few weeks later, however, another student informed me he wouldn't be able to make it to class the following week. "Is it ok if my friend, Tim, tapes the class session for me?" he asked. Immediately, I realized I had opened a Pandora's box of trouble.

You may remember the old Val Kilmer film, Real Genius, a movie centered on the lives of a couple of laser jocks—interesting characters but unimportant to the story I'm telling. In the film, a funny sequence of scenes takes place in a university classroom. In the first scene in the sequence, the camera pans a large engineering classroom with perhaps 200 students sitting shoulder-to-shoulder, staring at a bookish-looking engineering professor who is standing behind a huge desk and in front of an imposing blackboard full of equations—at least that's how I remember it. In the scene that follows, some time has passed and now some of the seats have running tape recorders on them. When the classroom is shown for the final time, the camera zooms out from the blackboard, moving around a now vast, empty classroom, each seat occupied not by a student but by a tape recorder—several hundred of them in all. Returning to the front of the room, the camera zooms to the professor's desk now occupied by the biggest tape recorder in the classroom from which we hear the sound of the professor's booming voice.

Skip ahead to the present. It's the first day of the summer session and I'm standing in front of about 45 students enrolled in my undergraduate course, Relationships on Film. They hardly notice me. I think I'm a distraction for them more than anything else. Maybe that's good since distractions appear to occupy a major place in the lives of this generation, Generation M—the Age of Multitasking. Then again, I'm like a dinosaur to these kids—a relic of the past. For the first thirty-five years of my teaching life, I taught in intimate but unwired classrooms. Occasionally, I wheeled in a monitor and showed a video, and later a DVD, but the students didn't have all these gadgets on their desks. They had books and articles, and notebooks and pens or pencils. Now the desks aren't really big enough to accommodate all the gadgets students bring to class. Some students walk in without notebooks. In fact, if I say notebook, they think laptop computer.
As I scan the room, I see that more than half the students have laptops opened on their desks. Just as many chat obtrusively on their cell phones. Several have headphones on allowing them to talk on their cells, while checking their e-mail or sports scores, or whatever page they're linked to on their laptops. I spot one or two corporate-looking students in the front row checking incoming e-mails on a BlackBerry or maybe it's a Palm Pilot-I don't really know the difference. I feel uncomfortable in this space. It's not "my space." For the first time, I feel as if I have no experience on "the other side of the room" on which to call in order to relate effectively to all this.

I'm often asked by friends and colleagues if I've thought of retirement. "I was born to teach. It's what I love. I can't imagine my life without it. How would I fill the void?" I reply. Now I take pause to reconsider. I recall reading an article by David Reissman who said he decided to retire when the gap between his world of experience and that of the undergraduate students in his class became too large. Standing here today, I grieve the loss of the emotional bond and shared frame of reference that has energized my life in school.

I try, but I can't persuade myself that what I'm witnessing is a good thing. I think back to what I experienced in my undergraduate course last year-- things I'd never seen before, rude things like students getting up in the middle of the class and walking out (presumably to go to the bathroom), then returning a few minutes later; students talking to other students while I or one of their classmates is talking or asking a question; students sending me text messages during class; students bringing huge sandwiches and fries to class and wolfing them down during class, rattling wrapping paper, crunching fries, and slurping the oversized coke they drink with it; students who e-mail me regularly, but will not think to take advantage of office hours to visit face-to-face and on and on.

This degradation in student civility shocks and annoys me. University students are supposed to be adults. Don't get me wrong. I'm not a killjoy. I think learning should be fun; life in the classroom should be energetic, spontaneous, and full of uplifting surprises. A bearable lightness of being can be a very good thing. I've written about teaching as seduction and how the most important learning normally takes place in the context of an interpersonal relationship between students and teachers.

But that's not what I'm talking about here. What I am talking about-the decline in student etiquette and civility-can be understood as an outgrowth of the corporatization of the university. Most public universities now function under a business model that has transformed the relationship between professors and students. We don't have students anymore; we have customers, and any business person will tell you that "the customer is always right." Many faculty members-especially young and untenured faculty members-are afraid to upset students. They fear their chances to achieve tenure and promotion may be affected by a "bad" set of student evaluations. Obviously, in a business model, the most important objectives are to sell the product (at a good profit margin) and satisfy the customer, and a bad grade on an exam, critical comments on a paper, or a challenging probe to a student comment in class may offend a student and spill over to the student's
In a perverse twist of logic, the business model gives the student "fate control" over the professor. Thus at some public universities, new tenure-line faculty are routinely encouraged to go to "teaching workshops," where they receive instruction on how to improve scores on their student evaluations.

I've heard some young professors say that one of the things they learn at these workshops is the importance of making the students feel "comfortable." If the objective is student learning, then this strikes me as questionable advice. It may be crucial to provide a safe environment for students, but safety is not the same thing as comfort. Some of the most important learning of my life came when I struggled to draw meaning from difficult and uncomfortable circumstances. Ask anyone who has benefited from long-term psychotherapy and they'll usually tell you the most profound changes came during sessions in which they felt uncomfortable (but safe). I'm not trying to equate teaching and learning with therapy or interpersonal growth, though I do believe that good teaching usually is therapeutic. My point is that discomfort often is associated with learning and change.

As a graduate student, I learned from critical feedback and tough-minded questioning. As a young professor, I learned from probing interrogations of my arguments and interpretations by colleague-mentors and journal referees. Of course, how this instruction was offered to me was important. I learned from teachers, critics, and referees whom I understood had my best interests at heart; they believed in me and were willing to patiently coach me to dig deeper and sharpen my analytical and research skills. Caring about a student's learning sometimes means giving them honest, helpful, constructive feedback, challenging them to go deeper, think harder, commit further, or search wider. The student may need some time to process and work through the feedback; and they may feel some discomfort. It takes courage to be this kind of teacher and staying power to be this kind of student. I don't think this kind of teaching and learning can happen if we treat students as consumers to be pleased rather than citizens to be educated.

If students are to function as credible critic/evaluators of teaching, then shouldn't they be the ones going to the teaching workshops? Don't we belittle the art of teaching by assuming student evaluations of undergraduate teaching should be taken seriously as "a measure of teaching effectiveness?" The question we need to ask is: what do student evaluations measure? For many years, we had an item on USF's student evaluation of teaching instrument that read: The reading assignments in this course were demanding. If you're the instructor, how would you want your students to respond to this item?

I've reviewed hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of student evaluations over the years—my own, those of my colleagues, and those of applicants for faculty positions. When I look at the scores or read the comments of students, what do I learn about the teaching and learning that occurred in this classroom? Normally, I don't get a picture of the interactive dynamics in this instructor's classroom. I don't see what was produced by the students, what they were encouraged to think about, or how they were changed.
intellectually or emotionally. Instead, what I get is a sense of whether the instructor was liked by the students, whether she was entertaining, a "good person," "clear" in her expectations, and well groomed. These may be desirable traits, but are they measures of "teaching effectiveness?"

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What's in store for Generation M? We don't need research to tell us that the more things you attend to, the greater your risk of diminishing both the quality and efficiency of what you produce. In other words, when you divide your attention and multitask, it takes you longer and the work you produce tends to be inferior. But if you insist on data, here's some reassuring news. Interviewed by Claudia Wallis for Time magazine's feature report on "The Multitasking Generation" in 2006, David E. Meyer, director of the Brain, Cognition and Action Laboratory at the University of Michigan said, "The toll in terms of slowdown is extremely large--amazingly so. The bottom line is that you can't simultaneously be thinking about your tax return and reading an essay, just as you can't talk to yourself about two things at once," he says. "If a teenager is trying to have a conversation on an e-mail chat line while doing algebra, she'll suffer a decrease in efficiency, compared to if she just!

thought about algebra until she was done. People may think otherwise, but it's a myth. With such complicated tasks [you] will never, ever be able to overcome the inherent limitations in the brain for processing information during multitasking." In the same article, Jordan Grafman, chief of the cognitive neuroscience section at the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS) made the point succinctly: "Kids that are instant messaging while doing homework, playing games online, and watching TV, I predict, aren't going to do well in the long run."

But here's what we know. The university students entering our classes today don't read whole books and they have a different set of cognitive skills than students of previous generations. They like quick hits, fast movement, and visual stimulation. They'd rather watch than participate. Enduring commitments and face-to-face interactions frighten many of them, and they are frustrated by staying on message, on topic, or going deep.

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"Despite digital distractions, large classes, decreased budgets, and fewer tenured colleagues, professors are still are responsible for turning students on to learning. To do so, we may just have to turn off the technology," Michael Bugeja, Director, Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication, Iowa State University

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I read somewhere that the cultural historian, Theodore Roszak, retired when he started hearing cell phones go off in his class. He'd had enough of the information age. I'm not there yet. Fortunately, I can take some comfort in knowing that Roszak also urged every teacher to be fiercely determined not to allow the mind to be reduced to the level of a machine. So I've decided not to cave to the pressures of corporatization in the university. After all, my obligations are different from those of my students. I'm expected to inspire, to motivate, to challenge, and to educate. I want my classroom to be a finite province of meaning, engagement, and encounter.
Thank you, Michael Begeja. I'm taking your advice. I'm turning off the technology with the expectation of turning on the students to conversation, dialogue, deliberation, and interpersonal encounter. In my classroom, there will be no vibrating or beeping cell phones, no laptops open, no ordering from a menu, no leaving in the middle of the class for potty breaks, no hushed conversations while other people are talking. My classroom is not a hotel lobby; it's not a restaurant; and it's not a computer lab. Here in my classroom, you're a grownup, an adult, a person who can be trusted to understand there are important things worth caring about in this world. We can have fun but we also know that becoming a responsible and engaged citizen is our serious business.

I clear my throat and approach the class. I'm ready to start another term.