Teaching Students to Hunt

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The current Covid-19 crisis is an extraordinary example of how knowledge, in every discipline, is expanding globally at an accelerating rate. Within months of the virus' first appearance, hundreds of research projects were mounted: an examination of its interaction with human genomes, the impact on transmission of various social distancing models, the usefulness of masks and ventilators, potential drug treatments, and so on. Every day, experts modify their understanding of the disease and its impact.

This explosion of knowledge is a global phenomenon that is not restricted to Covid-19. Every field of study is constantly being flooded with new data, theories and practices. As a result, no individual can hope to master a field. And, no matter how narrowly a teacher defines a course, its content is inevitably outdated by the first class. What then do teachers really have to offer?

When our seminary decided to move into online learning in 2013, I participated in a Wabash seminar to help me design an asynchronous course on 20th Century Theologians. In that seminar, I discovered one of the paradoxical things about online learning: the student has a large portion of the world's knowledge at their fingertips, but can be paralyzed by its volume. They need help developing skills to hunt down and organize the *specific* information that

matters most for them in their current project.

"Tiny talking heads" dispensing wisdom (the content of many early online courses) won't give them that. Nor will simple Google searches. The Wabash seminar showed us that our job as teachers is to show our students *how* to hunt: places where their elusive quarry tends to hide, which guides to trust, how to recognize it, make choices, bring it in. Or to use another metaphor, the seminar suggested that we are cartographers and guides. We help students map out a field of knowledge and then hunt for hidden treasure. We give them a satellite view of the landscape, and then drop them into the jungle with a set of experiments, landmarks, and search strategies that may lead them to a mind-blowing discovery. It is these skills that will enable them to find what they need in our evolving knowledge-scape long after I'm gone and my own knowledge is obsolete.

There are, however, several challenges to this way of learning. First of all, hunting is hard work. And adult students have many demands on their lives. Often, they register for asynchronous courses because they can work on them in the "cracks" of student life—after work, when the kids are in bed, on lunch breaks and weekends. So adult students may only take up the hunt seriously if the course design—especially its upfront presentation and initial exercises—grip their imagination and fire their passions. They have to feel that this hunt could lead them to something that will make a real difference in the career for which they are preparing. And even still (perhaps especially) when they are convinced of the value of the knowledge, they have frequently implored me to "just tell me what I'm supposed to know!"

Secondly, students live in a constant barrage of information from TV, internet, social media and cellphones--especially during a crisis like the one we are in. To stay sane, they learn to filter much of it out. And that's good--staying focused *is* important on a hunt. However, students' particular filters may not be set for the learning they need—their filters may strain out exactly the data most important for their growth. So, part of the teacher's task is to help students wake up, notice, and critique those filters. I've used the "Monkey Business Illusion" on Youtube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGQmdoK_ZfY) to illustrate the problem.

Finally, creating learning maps and discovery exercises isn't always easy for teachers trained in an older "sage on the stage" paradigm. Often our own hunting skills have been developed intuitively. We know how to find what matters, but it isn't always easy to articulate the process. Nor is it easy to craft an engaging way to introduce the process to students. I've found it enormously helpful to build connections with others who are teaching online. They've shared creative apps and mashups for introducing students to the search process and for presenting what they find, and they have been sympathetic guides for me when I too have gotten lost in the knowledge jungle.

https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/05/teaching-students-to-hunt/