New Blackfriars

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Comment: The Atmosphere of Intellect

"A student in my tutorial today lit up a cigarette and smoked it. That was a first." So wrote a friend on Facebook. Online teaching clearly has its advantages.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the bulk of university teaching in the United Kingdom – lectures, seminars, tutorials and supervisions - has been online. The first lockdown started in March 2020 with little warning. Whilst universities were caught off-guard, many had much of the necessary infrastructure in place for reasons not due to the pandemic. They had already gained experience of providing online courses, and thus had expertise to support the use of advanced online teaching platforms. University libraries, increasingly inclined to buy electronic books rather than hardcopies that need costly storage, were used to collaborating with academics in setting up online reading lists.

Online teaching has important advantages that ought not to be downplayed, not least for those who cannot afford accommodation in expensive university towns; those who experience social anxiety; those who need to look after children when studying; not to mention those who like to smoke in tutorials. Since online lectures are almost always recorded, online teaching affords greater time-flexibility and allows students to replay sections. The advantages for cash-strapped universities are also considerable: students taking online courses typically do not take up study spaces in libraries or put pressure on other facilities, such as university cafeterias and sports venues.

There are, however, some significant disadvantages. The Cambridge academic, Professor Dame Mary Beard, recently made a case on BBC Radio 4 for the traditional –in-person - university lecture. The traditional university lecture helps create a sense of community among students and academics; it offers a form of conversation in which the lecturer can both impart facts and have direct interaction with students. As Beard put it:

> "It's a conversation, not a performance, even if one side is more loquacious than the other. And to make it successful, you need eye contact; you need to see when they lose you, when they glaze over, or when the penny drops. You need to feel the room. It's about the almost imperceptible but incalculable difference between instructing and inspiring."[1]

[1] Mary Beard, "The end of university as we know it?", first broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on 19 June 2020. Retrieved 1 May 2021: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000k2cq

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St John Henry Newman in his *The Idea of a University* takes this line of thought further:

> "I protest … that if I had to choose between a so-called University, which dispensed with residence and tutorial superintendence, and gave its degrees to any person who passed an examination in a wide range of subjects, and a University which had no professors or examinations at all, but merely brought a number of young men together for three or four years, and then sent them away as the University of Oxford is said to have done some sixty years since, if I were asked which of these two methods were the better discipline of the intellect …. if I must determine which of the two courses was the more successful in training, moulding, enlarging the mind … I have no hesitation in giving preference to that University which did nothing, over that which exacted of its members an acquaintance with every science under the sun."[2]

In quoting this, I do not wish to advocate the adoption of the second of the two courses Newman mentions, not least because it reflects a situation in which only a very small and privileged proportion of the population (not women) were able to attend university. But Newman's principal point was not, I think, to disregard the importance of formal instruction: it was to highlight the centrality of interpersonal interaction in the sort of education that enlarges hearts and minds. This also involves a spirit of academic community, what Newman called the 'atmosphere of intellect', in which academic debate and discussion are fostered and valued. This transformative context requires the sort of interaction that Beard refers to, and this involves people getting together physically.

The worry is that this quality of environment of academic debate and discussion would be undermined by moving more and more to online teaching. Indeed, the much-publicised difficulties among university students regarding debate, or even countenancing debate and thus invoking censorship to the horror of some of their university teachers, on certain disputed topics, is arguably partly a symptom of the shifts already underway in universities that I have mentioned.

It is therefore significant that a research project in which University of Cambridge staff and students were asked about their hopes and fears for post-pandemic higher education found that many would support a permanent, but partial, shift to online learning.[3] That this finding was among students and staff of a university that, like its Oxford counterpart, prides itself on the extent to which it is able to provide students personal interaction with world-leading academics due to its collegiate system and the small number of students in tutorials, is

[2] Newman, John Henry. *The Idea of a University*, *Discourse 6.9.* Numerous editions.

[3] Simone Eringfeld, 'Higher education and its post-coronial future: utopian hopes and dystopian fears at Cambridge University during Covid-19', *Studies in Higher Education* 46(1) (2021), pp.146-157.

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surely noteworthy. Even in a university in which there are presumably high expectations of enjoying a true 'atmosphere of intellect', attitudes regarding the purpose of third level education are not what some might have expected or hoped for.

The desire for cost-cutting and a functionalist attitude to education presumably provide much of the underlying motivation for many of the shifts going on in university education. But it is too easy to blame only governments and university administrators for the negatives. Students themselves play an important role. Anecdotally, university departments are often pressured by student bodies to have lectures recorded, in part due to concerns regarding disability; but many students avail of this by not coming to lectures and thereby fail to help build up academic communities. Students have learned to do well in examinations without having to invest the time and energy in cultivating the sort of experience that Newman thought of prime importance. Even allowing for the significant advantages that online teaching might bring, a loss is also taking place and many of those losing out both cooperate with, and are unaware of, this.

Only time will tell how exactly university education will go. Only time will tell what the impact, both for better and for worse, of future developments will be. But we can be pretty sure of this: there are further changes to come and the signs of these changes have been with us for much longer than the duration of the pandemic.

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