WRIT 100 In-Class Critical Analysis #2 Fall 2020

Please read the essay (below) “Can You Be Educated from a Distance?” by James Barszcz carefully. Once you understand what Barszcz says, critically analyze the construction of his argument. One way of completing this assignment is to examine each paragraph, testing the claims against the provided evidence. Another way is to analyze the article more holistically, judging whether the article is a success overall. Whatever method you choose, please remember that your essay must be a minimum of three paragraphs, must set out an introduction with a thesis that indicates whether Barszcz’s essay is successful or not, must have one or more body paragraphs, each beginning with a clear topic sentence that develops your thesis, and must have a conclusion that restates your thesis and key ideas. Be sure that you edit and proofread with care. **This assignment is worth 20% of your final grade.**

**Can You Be Educated From a Distance?**

James Barszcz

By almost any measure, there is a boom in Internet-based instruction. In just a few years, thirty-four percent of American colleges and universities have begun offering some form of what’s called “distance learning” (DL), and among the larger schools, it’s closer to ninety percent. If you doubt the popularity of the trend, you probably haven’t heard of the University of Phoenix. It grants degrees entirely on the basis of online instruction. It enrolls 90,000 students, a statistic used to support its claim to be the largest private university in the country.

While the kinds of instruction offered in these programs will differ, DL usually signifies a course in which the instructors post syllabi, reading assignments, and schedules on websites, and students send in their written assignments by e-mail. Other forms of communication often come into play, such as threaded messaging, which allows for posting questions and comments that are publicly viewable, as a bulletin board would, as well as chat rooms for real-time interchanges. Generally speaking, face-to-face communication with an instructor is minimized or eliminated altogether.

The attraction for students might at first seem obvious. Primarily, there’s the convenience promised by courses on the Net: you can do the work, as they say, in your pajamas. But figures indicate that the reduced effort results in a reduced commitment to the course. While the attrition rate for all freshmen at American universities is around twenty percent, the rate for online students is thirty-five percent. Students themselves seem to understand the weaknesses inherent in the setup. In a survey conducted for eCornell, the DL division of Cornell University, less than a third of the respondents expected the quality of the online course to be as good as the classroom course.

Clearly, from the schools’ perspective, there’s a lot of money to be saved. Although some of the more ambitious programs require new investments in servers and networks to support collaborative software, most DL courses can run on existing or minimally upgraded systems. The more students who enroll in a course but don’t come to campus, the more the school saves on keeping the lights on in the classrooms, paying custodians, and maintaining parking lots. And, while there’s evidence that instructors must work harder to run a DL course for a variety of reasons, they won’t be paid any more, and might well be paid less.

But as a rule, those who champion distance learning don’t base their arguments on convenience or cost savings. More often, they claim DL signals an advance in the effectiveness of education. Consider the vigorous case made by Fairleigh Dickinson University (FDU), in Madison, New Jersey, where students—regardless of their expectations or desires—are now required to take one DL course per year. By setting this requirement, FDU claims that it recognizes the Internet as “a premier learning tool” of the current technological age. Skill in using online resources “prepares our students, more than others, for life-long learning—for their jobs, their careers, and their personal growth.” Moreover, Internet-based courses will connect FDU students to a “global virtual faculty,” a group of “world-class scholars, experts, artists, politicians, and business leaders around the world.”

Sounds pretty good. But do the claims make much sense? First, it should be noted that students today and in the future might well use the Internet with at least as much facility as the faculty. It’s not at all clear that they need to be taught such skills. More to the point, how much time and effort do you suppose “world-class scholars” (much less politicians and business leaders) will expend for the benefit of students they never meet or even see? Probably a lot less than they’re devoting to the books, journal articles, and position papers that are already available to anyone with access to a library.

Another justification comes from those who see distance learning as the next step in society’s progress toward meritocracy. A recent article in *Forbes* magazine cites Professor Roger Schank of Northwestern University, who predicts that soon “students will be able to shop around, taking a course from any institution that offers a good one. . . . Quality education will be available to all. Students will learn what they want to learn rather than what some faculty committee decided was the best practical compromise.” In sum, says Professor Schank, who is also chairman of a distance learning enterprise called CognitiveArts, “Education will be measured by what you know rather than by whose name appears on your diploma.”

Statements like these assume education consists in acquiring information (“what you know”). Accept that and it’s hard to disagree with the conclusions. After all, what does it matter how, or through what medium, you get the information? But few truly educated people hold such a mechanistic view. Indeed, traditionally, education was aimed at cultivating intellectual and moral values, and the “information” you picked up was decidedly secondary. It was commonplace for those giving commencement speeches to note that, based on etymology, education is a drawing out, not a putting in. That is, a true education *educes,* or draws out, from within a person qualities of intellect and character that would otherwise have remained hidden or dormant.

Exactly how this kind of educing happens is hard to pin down. Only in part does it come from watching professors in the classroom present material and respond to student questions, the elements of education that can be translated to the Net with reasonable fidelity. Other educational experiences include things like watching how professors joke with each other (or not!) in the hallways, seeing what kinds of pictures are framed in a professor’s office, or going out for coffee after class with people in your dorm. Such experiences, and countless others, are sometimes labeled (and dismissed) as “social life on campus.” But they also contribute invaluably to education. Through them, you learn a style, in the noblest sense of that term, a way of regarding the information you acquire and the society you find yourself in. This is what the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead meant when he called style the ultimate acquisition of a cultivated mind. And it’s the mysterious ways of cultivating that style that the poet Robert Frost had in mind when he said that all that a college education requires is that you “hang around until you catch on.” Hang around campus, that is, not lurk on the Net.