Lights, camera, teach

by Beth Felker Jones in the June 25, 2014 issue

In this column I usually write about a television show or a movie that I've watched from the comfort of my couch or in a movie theater. Other people have always created the experiences that I watch, discuss, and critique. But recently I flipped the formula: I spent time in front of the camera as part of videotaping an online class.

The last thing that the team and I filmed for the online course was the introduction. Though I'd been fairly comfortable adapting my course material for the online version, videotaping the introduction left me floundering.

The studio crew told me that this was a common experience. We teachers are used to "performing" our courses, I realized, but we're not used to stepping in front of a camera, smiling at nobody, and using our own names. I found the camera to be an odd stand-in for human beings, and I had to learn to bridge the distance between me and the unknown students who would see the lectures. We had to film "Hi, I'm Beth Jones" several times before I got past the strangeness.

I brought mixed feelings to this experiment. I believe strongly in in-person, embodied teaching. If I am a reasonably good teacher, it's because I've learned to teach in relationship with students whose faces I can see. I believe that relationship is key to everything I do and that education isn't content transfer: it's mentoring. This is especially important in teaching theology, where I have to work against gnostic dualisms that denigrate bodies and embodied life. I want my students to delight in the goodness of the body and to be encouraged and empowered by the hope that God is including their bodies in God's good plans.

Yet here I was trying to use media to bridge a distance between me and students whom I couldn't imagine, let alone see. It was a new way of communicating. I had to get a feel for starting and stopping, for thinking about my course material in unchangeable chunks.

Clear communication and clear organization, for example, are not a choice in video format; they're indispensable. In the classroom I often draw figures on the whiteboard in order to clarify a point, or I stop and go back to earlier material to help

students understand something new. In the video format I had to roll those functions into carefully worded teaching units. I believe that the effort made me a better communicator, and I hope to use what I've learned in my flesh-and-blood classroom.

I am also struck by the way that Internet-mediated education can bring learning into a different set of embodied relationships. My husband listens to history lectures while he's folding laundry, and the lecture material sometimes finds its way into our domestic life. The kids hear something and ask a question, or we pause the lecture to talk about a connection that it has to our lives. Internet education is accessible in ways that more traditional education can't be.

I've always had a populist impulse toward theories of distance education. Education at a residential liberal arts college is a rare privilege, and it's a place where certain valuable experiences happen—experiences that can't be replicated online. But education offered in various forms of media also offers valuable experiences—some that would never have been available to students otherwise. I don't want to surrender the Protestant concept of the priesthood of all believers, but I believe that the "holy priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:5) would benefit from access to more knowledge of the scriptures and the Christian tradition. If mediating education in new ways lets that happen, then I'm open to it.

Yes, there are good reasons to resist mediated education, but if it's bringing lecture halls into living rooms and providing learning for many who aren't or can't be in a nonvirtual classroom, then let's do both—and hope that old-school education and Internet distance learning will inform and improve one another.

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