

How Nice It Was

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February 2022

Last night, I dreamed that I was meeting my first class of the term at Camp Humphries. I was explaining what I expected of them and what they could expect of me. The dream was triggered by Frank Concilus commenting that his classes for the last two years were all on Zoom, thus he was not exposed to the virus. In using "Zoom," it seems like your only contact with your class is talking to them through a drainpipe.

In person teaching was cut off at the knees by persons with very different ideas of teaching than mine. Teaching at its best, involves personal interaction impossible on a video screen or in cheap impersonal mass lectures for 700 students.

The way we taught was refreshing for both instructors and students. Students escaped the grind of military duty if only for a little, it was enough to keep them sane. We were free from the drudgery of academia as our few faculty meetings were something to look forward to. There was no requirement for research, no heavy traffic to commute through and no apartments to rent. Our few faculty meetings were something to look forward to. We exchanged ideas and made friends in meetings and our own classes. Teaching and doing it well was what the Maryland program was all about. Slowly, things were negotiated away: we lost access to the dining halls, to base hospitals, to Mac flights between terms and then we lost our base quarters. A few years ago many lost their jobs, it was about all they had left.

A program of high-quality teaching was converted into what seems like correspondence school. If those who massively changed our teaching program had taught a few years as we had, I think they would probably have left it untouched. I cannot dispute that the "new" way is cheaper. Is cheapness really what is most important? Those who made such changes to how classes are taught must have experienced as students what they promoted. In Jenny's words "The Overseas Program with its craft and adventure was dismantled by the forces of mediocre mass administration and the McDonaldization of higher education."

Students deserve better.

Once I had a wife who would sometimes read a textbook and take the course final exam challenging a course, passing it with an A, without attending a lecture. Although her photographic memory was exceptional, and she graduated Summa Cum Laude and Magna Cum Laude, she was not creative in the least and had exceedingly poor judgement.

Teaching is people interacting. It is not memorization to spew forth canned content on an exam. We teach to get them to think. If one just wants "facts", books are much more reliable than memory. Think back, what class do you remember best? The ones forgotten were, most probably, of no great value to you.

In Physical Science, determined to show "conservation of angular momentum" I innovated sitting in a spinning swivel chair holding out a huge unabridged dictionary. Unfortunately, I crashed to the floor in the swivel chair in front of concerned students but I'm sure it is still remembered.

I once had a class in which the instructor said that all he remembered of a class was his professor telling of driving to a party while a pumpkin pie fell into his wife's lap. That story is what I remember most easily of that class.

Sometimes we clambered into caves, or we went out on coral reefs, sometimes it was only a walk to a nearby tree, but we had memorable classes and it was enjoyable. I illustrated my lectures with trays of 35mm slides. A Slinky shows wave motion very effectively. We dissected animals in biology. It was portable "hands-on" teaching as memorable as I could make it.

Maryland teaching has changed, and I was advised that I'd not like Maryland as it now is.



1991 – Dennis and Kunsan biology class



1987 – Biology field trip bus