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RECALLING OUR VOCATION:  
A CONVERSATION ABOUT TEACHING WITH MARK C. TAYLOR

**M**ark C. Taylor and Jeffrey Kosky met on Friday, June 15, 2012, at Taylor's home in Williamstown, Massachusetts. After a tour of Taylor's earthworks sculpture garden and a discussion of each other's current projects, they recorded the following conversation.

*Jeffrey Kosky: Thank you, Mark, for agreeing to talk with me today. Our conversation concerns pedagogy and pedagogical practice. This has to mean that we address the social, technical, and institutional setting where this practice becomes a reality. So I fully anticipate that we will discuss the controversial proposals you make in *Crisis On Campus*. But before getting there I would like to look at your memoir, *Field Notes From Elsewhere*, published in 2009, the year before *Crisis On Campus*. There's a section there titled "Vocation/Teaching." It seems like a good place for us to begin. You write: "I have never considered my work a job or even a career.... Rather teaching and writing are vocations, and that means they are callings" (115). Reading on, we understand this calling to pedagogical practice to be a curious one, as you remain uncertain of who or what calls, why, and, on some level, what it calls on us to do. This means we find few unequivocal or definitive answers to questions about the purpose, value, or meaning of teaching. Yet I see throughout this book a life's work that affirms its unquestionable importance. That work was recognized on a national level by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching when they named you College Professor of the Year in 1995.*

*I won't say our discussion today will identify your calling as a teacher, or determine the purpose of your pedagogical practice, but it may at least offer some content to this undetermined calling that is teaching (not science) as a vocation.*

*The stories in Field Notes tell how dedicated and committed you are to teaching. They show how seriously you take responsibility to the classroom and to your students – responsibility, not necessarily for your students in general or the idea of the student, but responsibility for the ones that are before you, in your face really. You speak to this when you write: “Teaching is serious business. It should never be taken lightly. ... The responsibility of the teacher and writer ... is to sow seeds of doubt wherever there is certainty, to find fault in every foundation deemed firm, to weave insecurity into the very fabric of security” (116). There’s something similar in the section “Failure/Success” which begins “Teaching is more about raising questions than providing answers. For many years I’ve told students on the first day of class: If you don’t come out of this course more confused and uncertain than you are now, I will have failed” (189).*

*But this is only part of the story of the teacher’s vocation. Those remarks are probably not the final or even the first word about your pedagogical practice. I don’t think you think the pedagogical practice is complete when it simply evokes doubt and finds fault or instills insecurity. In fact, you’ve tried to get at this in the very next lines when you say, “This practice is not to expose the impossibility of faith [and I would add here hope, a more important theme in Field Notes], but to show its inescapability for those who believe it impossible.” And after telling us that you will have failed if students don’t leave class more confused and uncertain, you go on to recount a story about trying to answer the fears and questions that haunted the classroom after the financial meltdown of 2008. At a time when looming uncertainty seemed to remove the promise of most futures, your response invited students to welcome this uncertainty, not necessarily in a comforting way, but with the hope that the chances they might take could open a future for them and all of us.*

Mark C. Taylor: Yes. There’s a lot that you raise. Thanks for these questions; they raise important issues. It’s important stuff.

JK: *I don’t think you can address it all, but I hope it gives us something to start with and then maybe something more to return to.*

MCT: I think teaching has always been multi-faceted for me. I’ve never separated teaching from writing. I see writing as teaching in certain ways, and I see teaching as enriching what I write. So the pedagogical practice entails both the teaching and the writing. Over the years, this combination has moved me to explore technology.

But let me start with some autobiographical remarks. I grew up in a family of teachers. My mother and father both taught high school. My dad taught biology and physics, and my mother taught literature. Reading and writing were therefore part of my life from very early on. I don’t think I ever thought seriously about doing anything other than teaching.

I majored in Religion as an undergraduate at Wesleyan and decided to pursue graduate work. The job market crashed just as I finished. I’ve often wondered what I would have chosen to do with my life had I known in 1968 and in 1970 there would be no jobs. But what one does with a PhD in the Humanities is more or less teach. When I was about to finish my degree, I sat in my

professors' office in the spring of 1968—which was an interesting spring, to be sure—trying to decide whether to go to Harvard or Yale or Columbia. They said, “it doesn't matter which one you go to; there are more jobs than anyone knows what to do with.” Two years later there were no jobs. And the year that I looked for a job in 1972, there were only three jobs in modern western religion, my field conceived as broadly as possible. I didn't have the choice to go to a research university. I was fortunate to get a position at Williams where I ended up teaching for thirty-seven years. Turns out, I think, in hindsight, that was a much better setting to have spent most of my professional life than a research university, and we can talk about that in terms of institutional setting later.

I went into the study of religion. The year I started graduate school at Harvard was the first year they accepted students right out of college with only a BA without a Divinity degree. Everybody else already had an MDiv. Even if you didn't want to go into the ministry, but wanted to go into academia, you had to get a Divinity degree before you started a PhD. That meant three more years of school on top of your four year BA.

I never went into the study of religion with any idea of ministry or vocation in that sense. It was always an academic pursuit for me. The MDiv program created a certain professional complexity for those who went through it in order to get into the business of academics. They spent a lot of their professional lives trying to convince themselves and others they weren't doing theology or other religious work.

The years I started teaching in the early 70's was a time when modernization was equated with secularization. Few then would have anticipated the role that religion plays in society now. But even now, as then, most students don't arrive at college expecting to study religion and they will often enter a Religion class with a set of expectations that very quickly get changed or transformed. This means part of the interesting challenge to teaching religion is to make students and colleagues aware of what religion is and is not—to expand their notion of religion.

I think that for many people—and this goes to what was in my mind in some of the passages you mentioned—religion functions primarily to give a sense of meaning, purpose, direction, foundation, security, certainty, and so on. That is of course an undeniable part of what religion does. But there are also, in various religious traditions, beliefs and practices that do the opposite—that rather than provide answers, raise questions; that rather than give knowledge, show the limits of knowledge; that rather than provide security, engender our sense of insecurity. One thinks paradigmatically of Job. He does not get answers at the end. He is told by the voice in the whirlwind: know your place, you do not and cannot understand.

Speaking more broadly, what worries me is not so much the unbelievers but the true believers. This preoccupation with certainty and security is deadly . . . Life will shatter. Of that I have no doubt. For individuals preoccupied with certainty and security this eventuality can be paralyzing—or they can avoid life in an effort to avoid its insecurities. But it's also problematic socially and politically, as we've seen in recent years. By cultivating a sense of insecurity,

uncertainty, doubt, I try to create conditions for openness. And from that willingness to remain open to the unexpected, to that which you cannot control or master—that is the source of creativity. Unfortunately, much of our educational system does not cultivate creativity. To the contrary, I think it represses it.

For many—certainly it was the case for me as I was growing up—school is in effect the church, temple, or mosque. I grew up nominally Presbyterian, but it was clear to me from an early age that the real church is the classroom. I don't mean that in any kind of indoctrinating way, just that school is the setting in which people wrestle with—though things are changing—the kinds of personal and social dilemmas that are inevitably a part of human life.

*JK: I like that very much. The classroom can be a place for cultivating certain habits of mind or forms of life, and it can be a place to confront the abiding dilemma of life. This makes me think to the word 'pedagogy,' which means literally the leading or guiding of youth. In some ways what you are talking about is the formation of persons or human beings. It's interesting to me to think about this in light of two historical models of a college or a university. There's the early 19th century model of the American college, which involves a set curriculum, no majors, everybody reading the same books. Few students genuinely questioned the authority of the teacher to tell them which books were worth reading. The goal here seemed to be something like the formation of a certain kind of person through the shaping effects of the pedagogy. While I don't think your pedagogy aims to form the same sort of character as was being formed then, there are ways in which what you describe as your own practice connects with that model. It puts you perhaps closer to it than to the later model of a research university, one that was launched in the late 19th century, though it really took off in the mid 20th, where education was about acquiring information or acquiring knowledge in specialized fields so that you could succeed in life or reshape the world in socially desirable ways.*

MCT: This is a complicated set of issues. First of all one of the points I make in *Crisis on Campus* is that much of our model for the university—and it trickles down to colleges, too—comes from an essay Kant wrote in the late 18th century called “The Conflict of the Faculties.” Then, second, on formation, the equivalent in German is *bildung*—which works on multiple levels: culture, also related to image and the like, and education. But culture is cultivation, to be sure.

The model Kant set up was based significantly upon his understanding of the arts. He was the first to distinguish high art and low art, or fine art and craft, in the way that has become normative ever since. He did that in “The Critique of Judgment” (1790). The distinction between low and high art was the distinction between art that was useful and art that was in effect useless or had no purpose other than itself—purposeless, in that sense. High art or fine art is art for art's sake. Low art was art produced for utilitarian reasons.

The reason the distinction arose was that the patronage system that had sustained art production was breaking down, and artists had to get a day job. This created a split in the production of art: art that they produced for the market was not considered real art. Real art, then, could not be judged by criteria of usefulness or market value, criteria that put its valuation

in non-producers, but consumers or users. Real art was instead judged by other artists. Kant, then, is the one who established the peer review system, the idea that only experts in the field can make these judgments.

Kant's utilitarian/non-utilitarian model is transferred to the university. And for reasons I've never been able to understand he reverses the pairings. He distinguishes between the higher faculties, which are practical, and the lower faculty, which is not. The higher faculties are three: law, medicine, and theology. They are useful and practical. It's worth noting here that Kant was writing at the time of the emergence of the nation-state. The higher faculties are what we would today call professional schools; they are going to provide the work force for the nascent nation-state. They did not possess academic freedom; they were functionaries of the state and evaluated by the execution of their function. The lower faculty, which is only one, is the philosophical faculty. Its function is to be critical. It's closer to knowledge for knowledge's sake, purposeless in a sense. What happens is that art for art's sake becomes knowledge for knowledge's sake. And that becomes sort of central to the self-understanding of the arts and the humanities – and to some extent some of the natural sciences.

If you ask many faculty members and some students what liberal education teaches you, they will say critical thinking. That derives from Kant's critical philosophy. Critical thinking is thinking about thinking and is deliberately non-utilitarian. There's value in knowledge for knowledge's sake. But just as art for art's sake only works if somebody else is paying the bills, so knowledge for knowledge's sake only works if somebody else is paying the bills. Part of the problem we now have is that the cost of education has become intolerably high, and the job situation is so difficult. Students often finish burdened with great, great debt, and have no clear professional opportunities available to them.

This puts the liberal arts education in general in great peril, and the Humanities in particular. We see it all around us, and it's going to accelerate. To continue justifying a liberal arts education, I think it's important to distinguish practical from vocational. Many faculty members won't do this, and see both as abandoning the purity of knowledge for knowledge's sake. I saw this up close when I tried to start Global Education Network. It is a mistake not to stress the extraordinarily practical value to liberal arts education in today's world, even if this is not necessarily a guaranteed vocational value. In fact, in many ways, a liberal arts education – knowing about other cultures, other languages, other traditions and the like – has never been more valuable than it is now in a globalized world.

In many of my courses over many years, I would – and still do – require the students to read the *New York Times*. No matter what the course. I taught an advanced undergraduate and graduate seminar this semester on Hegel and Nietzsche, for instance. Students were required to read the *New York Times*. Why? Because from my point of view, the ideas that Hegel and Nietzsche are dealing with help us understand what's going on in the world. When there are items in the *Times* that can be illuminated through these thinkers, I'll talk about them.

Now, that's a practical kind of knowledge. Imagine the people in positions of responsibility in government and the private sector who have no knowledge, no broad knowledge, of the world and of other societies and cultures. It often is appalling to me to see how little powerful business or professional people know of other cultures. I do not think we would have necessarily been in the mess in Iraq had people had some basic understanding of Islam.

So, I think pressures on the liberal arts are going to continue to mount, because it looks like a lot of what goes on in arts and humanities and liberal learning doesn't have an immediate and direct payoff. But if you think the cost of that kind of knowledge is high, wait until you see the cost of having a society where people don't have that knowledge.

*JK: One of the things I see in Field Notes is your openness to learning from your students. But at the same time, I don't think any of your students would ever say they felt like you were one of them or had somehow abdicated your responsibility to teaching. You keep a real power to impose a presence on them. You couldn't excite that insecurity and uncertainty if you were always only learning from them, I don't think. I find that tension very informative of your pedagogical practice. We could think about that in connection to the different institutions where you've been and also to how your own research has been shaped by your role as a teacher.*

MCT: You talked now and also earlier about responsibilities as a teacher. Responsibility in the classroom goes both ways. I always tell students, "I can't do my job if you don't do your job." It's a mutual contract. I sometimes say to them, "This is a longer relationship than marriage. You can get divorced, but this relationship, once we start it, is for life. Implicitly or explicitly what happens in this course will haunt you your whole life." That's certainly the case with the teachers that I had during my life.

I have always tried to have a dialogical relationship with students. In the last twenty years or so I had some original ideas on the uses of technology. But once I started exploring them, I became a student of my students. We entered into a collaboration.

One of the things that has happened in the course of my career—and it's a result of the collapse of the job market in the early 1970s—is hyper-professionalization and hyper-specialization. When I came to Williams in 1973, many of my senior colleagues were very good teachers. They were intellectuals, which is not the same as scholars. I think intellectuals are much more interesting than scholars. Most of them had never published a word. By the time I came up for tenure—which was early, only a few years later—you had to have published. With the flooding of the job market, colleges and universities needed means to differentiate people. Places that had never required publication started to require it. As the need to publish emerged, so too did new journals and series. In my early 30's, I was head of research and publications at my professional association, The American Academy of Religion. We started a press; we improved the quality of journals; we started book series, we did all those things. They were crucial to establishing the study of Religion at a time when we weren't even in ACLS. But it spawned this

excessive preoccupation with publication—which became, and still is, a very important—if not the most important—measure used to hire and promote.

My graduate students now have spoken at far more AAR meetings than I had by the time I'd been in the business for ten years. They're building a resume—well, in fact, kids today are building a resume from the time they enter kindergarten, really. But, they don't take time—indeed cannot take time to develop their thinking. People too often publish because they have to publish, not because they have something to say.

As this happens, the value of teaching declines. I've often said that teaching is nowhere in more disdain than at a research university, where status is measured by how little you teach. The very language of a teaching "load" . . .

JK: *Right, as if it were a burden from which you need to be relieved . . .*

MCT: . . . or the distinction made between *my work* and the teaching I do—reflects this disdain. The other thing that has been so pernicious about graduate education is this: there have been basically no jobs for forty years, but graduate programs have gone on as if the world hadn't changed. The purpose of graduate education, in most cases (and it's not so in all—I'm thinking primarily of the humanities), is to prepare people to do what you do, to go out and teach. But there have been no jobs for all these years, and rather than changing or adapting these faculties have, for the most part, just continued to go on as if the world hadn't changed.

The other problem is that value and status are not measured at research universities by undergraduates. Undergraduates get virtually no attention. Status is measured by how many graduate students you turn out; this process has long been a process of cloning, where you are turning out students who repeat the work you do.

But this has never been part of my experience. I'm not interested in turning out clones. Within the past week or so, I've had occasion to be in touch with a few former students. Two of them are medical doctors: one's the head of dermatology at the Mayo Clinic; the other's a leading anesthesiologist. The wife of the head of the Mayo Clinic was also a student of mine here at Williams; she majored in Religion and just finished her PhD in Sociology. She is working with a Sudanese community in the St. Paul area. Another student with whom I am in very close touch has been a Vice President at Harvard for years and is taking over in a few weeks as president of Bates. These are people who have gone into all sorts of different professions and are doing very interesting and important work.

One of the strange things about teaching, of course, is you're very involved in students' lives for a few crucial years and then they disappear. In most cases you have no idea what they ever do with what they took away . . . you hardly even know what they heard. Maybe it's better that way. [Jovial laughter.]

JK: *Measuring the success of teaching is very hard to do. One of the reasons you can hire and promote based on publications is because it's easier: you can count them. It's harder to count successful teaching. You can measure how many students walk in the door, but we all know that's no measure of how successful a teacher has been. It sounds as if you don't see the aim of your pedagogical practice as to produce somebody who can reproduce knowledge about whatever text it might be. In fact, I might even go so far as to say that your pedagogical practice aims to make something it can't predict in advance and only recognizes as a success after the fact. Many years later you look at the doctor, or lawyer, or businessman and see in them also successful pedagogies.*

MCT: In many ways probably more successful than some of the other cases. I don't like the model of teaching as cloning. For years I've said to students, don't do what I do. Take whatever I have to teach you, and do something I couldn't imagine. Come back and tell me what it was. Teaching is mysterious. I don't know how to evaluate it. I am not at all sure it can be taught. At Columbia now there is considerable pressure from the graduate school office and from the graduate students to run seminars in pedagogy. I'm sympathetic to the concern, but have very mixed feelings about it. I mean, you sit in classrooms for twenty years, and if you haven't figured out what is effective teaching and what is not. . . I'm not sure that sitting around a seminar talking about it is going to clarify anything. I don't necessarily want to say teachers are born not made, but it's mysterious . . .

JK: *It might be possible to make a good teacher better, but it's hard to make a bad teacher good . . .*

MCT: Yes, I think that's right . . . Another thing that has become increasingly difficult for young teachers is that, with the job market being so difficult, they have developed a sense of being constantly assessed and evaluated. Yet how one should measure their effectiveness is not so clear. From the time I started at Williams, we had student evaluations. I always used them . . . until the administration required them. Once the administration required them, I refused to use them. I took a lot of flak for that. The reason I did it was I had seen that the evaluations were used primarily to legitimate negative judgments; they would hurt you but never help you. I've often said, and I mean this: the only student evaluation I will take seriously is the one they do at their 50th reunion. It takes time for the effect of good teaching to grow on you. For people who want to assess my teaching, my policy has always been that anybody can come to my class anytime, unannounced. Colleagues, administrators . . . anybody. Other students, too.

JK: *We've talked some about the vocation of teaching. Let's try now to think about what might make it difficult to realize that vocation, especially today. I wonder if the vocation you describe is in peril because the university – and it's not just the university but everywhere in society – has bought into a model of the student as customer, indeed as consumer. That old phrase, "the customer is always right," strikes me as something that describes what is shaping the classroom today. Many students feel like their educational decisions and opinions are always right, they feel like the teacher's job is to support their decisions and their plans, because, more basically, they see their education as something that they acquire in order to help them realize what they know they want and is best for them. Universities are often all too eager to*

*make and offer information and experience tailored to meet this demand. Does this make it difficult to be responsible to the vocation of teaching we've been describing?*

*I also wonder about how some of the reforms you propose in Crisis on Campus might share this model. Your proposal gives a lot of credit to the students; it seems very responsive to what I think you hear to be the claims of youth today, what they need and want in order to succeed personally and socially. But I wonder how you avoid falling into supporting the trap of thinking the student/customer is always right. I think this notion might be a trap that hinders our ability to realize the vocation of teaching.*

MCT: There are several issues here.

Obviously, the composition of the student body has changed significantly. Wesleyan University, where I went to college, was out-front early in affirmative action with respect to African Americans – largely owing to the man who is responsible for me studying religion as an undergraduate, John Maguire, who was quite close to Martin Luther King. King and Abernathy often came to Wesleyan during all my undergraduate days. When I entered Wesleyan in 1964, there were two African Americans in my class and it was all men; by the time I left, the university was five percent African American. And that just gets at the issue of race. The demographics have changed significantly more even since then, racially and other ways, too. That changes a lot.

Students now come to college for very different reasons. Whether owing to changing demographics or to changing social and business structures or to some combination of both, the reality is that many see it as a means to social and economic mobility. They want something different from the students in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century American college you described at the outset, and we would be wrong to dismiss the legitimacy of these wants. It would be hard to tell them: “No, you, the customer, are not right to look to the university to help you in these ways.” It is also important to stress that a more diverse student body eventually has the effect of enriching the curriculum in ways that are better adapted to a globalized world. These changes were not always easy at Wesleyan as well as other schools, but they were essential, and our institutions today are much better because of these initiatives.

But the consumer mentality brings problems with it. It is seen in the student course evaluation, which we just mentioned. This practice not only creates an asymmetry, especially with the younger faculty. Students know they have power over younger faculty. That was another reason I resisted when it was made mandatory. It puts the vulnerability of the young teacher on display. This is, of course, related to grade inflation as well.

Another factor that contributes to the consumer mentality is the increasing cost of higher education. When you are paying so much, how could you not feel as if you have the power to get what you want? But again, we have to be careful: how can we tell somebody spending so much not to worry about getting what they want or getting an education that will prepare them for a job?

The difficult thing is that what the student *wants* is not what the student *needs*. This creates a real dilemma. Because much of what I teach is difficult, difficult material, difficult texts, it's hard for a student to *want* it – but maybe they *need* it. Now, does everybody need to read Hegel? No. Do I think the world would be a better place if they did? Yes. While the challenge of consumerism is to create desire where there is no need, the challenge of the educator is to create a sense of need where there is no desire. Young people don't know what they don't know. Part of education is getting them to realize this . . . then education can begin. It's a difficult notion.

There are thinkers you should learn to think about and thinkers you learn to think with. The way you learn to think is you apprentice yourself to somebody who knows how to think. That apprenticeship takes place in teaching, and it takes place in reading; it's not only my teachers to whom I apprentice myself, but it's also the intellectual figures I read who've been formative: Hegel and Kierkegaard and Kant, Derrida and Heidegger, certain artists. You begin by studying them to see what they said, but the point of the educational process, for me, has never stopped at scholarship. Heidegger distinguishes scholarship from thinking. That's partly the distinction between the scholar and the intellectual I mentioned earlier. Thinking is what is important; if scholarship is not in the service of thinking, it's not worth doing. The point of studying is to be able to understand better the world and those around you, by apprenticing yourself to teachers and writers with something to say.

So, when I am trying to understand the internet, it's Hegel who shows me how to begin to think about it. As I begin to understand the implications of the world-wide-web, I begin to understand aspects of Hegel in different kinds of ways. Obviously, you don't need to understand Hegel to do that. But, on the other hand, part of the problem in the world today is that people don't know enough about enough to make connections between different areas of what's going on. It's not a matter of not connecting the dots; people don't know the dots need to be connected. Part of that is a result of specialization. There are complicated problems today to which there are no easy or quick answers, and you have to learn how to think about complexity.

*JK: Could you talk more about apprenticeship . . . In a sense it's about choosing someone to whom you're going to commit yourself or submit yourself; that's different from being a consumer. Apprenticeship doesn't have to mean cloning or making someone who will replace me, just being in a relationship with someone into whose hands you entrust yourself to guide you through and out of your minor status – a literal pedagogue. Would that model hold up in the sort of university you describe in Crisis on Campus? You describe a situation where students choose courses or even relevant classes from a course (according to the model of the unbundled class) from all sorts of course providers in order to assemble the package that is going to help them best realize the path they want to take. That seems to threaten the apprenticeship model, as one assumes that in order for the student to make those choices they are autonomous choosers already, mature managers of their own interests. I think that is something that's great about the model that you've proposed but also something that frankly worries me. I might prefer to be a student in the years to come than a teacher if you're right.*

MCT: I said a minute ago that the humanities are in peril. [sound of a truck is heard] Probably UPS bringing my book for the day . . . [Jovial laughter.]

The difficulty is—and I saw this coming about fifteen years ago—the model that we have for a certain part of higher education is not sustainable—for financial reasons, for institutional reasons, and others. We also haven't addressed—I didn't understand this until I started reading about it—the diversity of the higher education landscape. Only fifteen to eighteen percent of the people in post-secondary education are eighteen to twenty-two years old, what many faculty in the liberal arts usually think of as the traditional college student. What that means is eighty-five percent are so-called non-traditional students. [Exit truck. They do not move.]

When I started thinking about this, I began to have questions that I have not been able to find answers to. Why is college four years? Why is it thirty-two courses, or however many courses or credits it is? Why is every course the same length? We're using an industrial model. It's based upon quantification: a certain quantity of courses, number of years, and the like. When it costs fifty-five or sixty thousand dollars per year for this kind of education—that's not just the Harvards, the Columbias, and the Yales, a lot of these schools are fifty thousand and up—fewer and fewer people are going to be able to afford a classic liberal arts education.

Do I think that, in an ideal world, everybody could study in seminars of twenty people or less? Yes. For me that's the preferred educational context. However, that's not going to be possible. But I still think that the issues and questions raised in the sorts of writings and courses you and I have discussed are too important not to teach. So, the question becomes: what are we going to do to be able to continue to educate people in some of these areas? I think what's going to happen is that some programs will be all virtual or online, you're going to have some that remain traditional place-based education, and there will be a large in-between that is hybrid and gives students more flexibility.

When we started the Global Education Network in 1998, it was to provide high quality online education in the liberal arts, humanities and sciences for all people at all ages at a low cost. We failed because of the resistance of faculty members in the arts and humanities; the very people who needed this were the ones who shot it down. Everything we were trying to do twelve, fourteen years ago is now happening and at the very schools that turned down our deal: Harvard and MIT, Princeton, Yale, Stanford. We sat in all of the offices of their presidents, and they said it's never going to happen at a place like this. Again, it was pretty clear to me that something like this was going to have to happen. My question was always how the liberal arts education would scale. We were taking the hardest nut to crack—courses in literature and so on. There are not courses where you have standardized forms of evaluation and where discussion is crucial. We were figuring out a way for students to have discussions online and for teachers to do grading. It wasn't clear to me how that was all going to work, especially if you have hundreds of thousands of students per course.

Now, to come to your point about apprenticeship and the like. I think, in many cases there's going to be a shift in some of what the teachers do. What are Harvard and Yale—let's say Harvard and MIT—doing? Why are they doing what they're doing? MIT has been putting course material online for a while. But now they're putting whole courses online and they're giving certificates of completion.

*JK: These are mostly in science and engineering classes, is that right?*

MCT: Yes, so far. I think they are trying to become the Goldman Sachs of the education world by becoming a global education brand that is too big to fail. If you're a small school struggling, you could outsource a certain part of your curriculum by letting students take whatever the course is from the Harvard or MIT program. Which solves one problem by letting you offer something that might otherwise have to be eliminated, but if you go down that road very far, you're not able to sustain your own program. So I think there are going to be a few high quality providers, and then a lot of others who use much of the content provided by these providers to make their own courses and programs.

When we started the Global Education Network, I always understood this as an extension of the classroom. I wanted a global classroom. One of the guys on our board was Jon Newcomb, who was at the time CEO of Simon & Schuster. Jon understood what we were doing as an extension of the textbook. Classroom or textbook? The fact is, we were both right. Just as Paul Samuelson writes the textbook everybody uses all over the country, so too will somebody at Harvard or MIT do the intro to econ course that students all over the country will take. You can also imagine that just as a teacher today uses the textbook in his or her class, so an instructor could use the Harvard or MIT lectures in his or her class. His or her role then would be to mentor, advise, guide discussions based on it. The course would be some kind of hybrid.

With respect to unbundling . . . we sort of discovered iTunes early on. We produced courses and found, most noticeably in areas like art history, that people didn't want to take the whole course. So we modularized them and let people purchase anything from one class, to a week, to the whole. That's fine for something like adult education. But, for the student who's trying to put together a coherent educational program, you will need guidance. While this is a new model, the prospects are exciting. Consider, for example, a thoughtfully guided student doing a project on changing landscapes in an era of climate change could include relevant classes from a course on modern art, a design course on landscape architecture, and a few from a geology course.

If you begin to ask serious questions about things like the length of college, everybody might not be in school the same length of time. If you think seriously about shifting from a quantitative to a qualitative mode of assessing student achievement . . . how does that qualitative assessment take place? I don't know, but I can think of several possibilities . . . some students may take three years, some five, before they can demonstrate proficiency for certification.

JK: *The reforms you propose sound like they are rooted in your sense of the diversity of motivations and purposes of students. They also sound like they originate in your sense of students' abilities and the worlds they inhabit. On some level it sounds to me like that's where it begins for you: How can a university be a place for future students?*

MCT: As I have watched my students over the past fifteen or twenty years, I have seen that they think differently because of technology. I have a two year old granddaughter. Over Christmas she got her father's iPad, turned it on, and found her games on it. That's hard to wrap my mind around. There is growing evidence from neuroscientists and psychologists that these technologies are literally rewiring the brain.

I think a good teacher meets the student where he or she is, in order to get him or her to where you want them to be. Do I think I could teach everything in this format? No. I don't think I could; I could not teach my Hegel and Nietzsche seminar this way. But many important courses and subjects can be taught this way.

It is also important to note that the technology provides ways of teaching not usually understood as online. Tele-presence greatly expands the classroom. My work with technology began with a course using teleconferencing technology, which I taught with a colleague and students at the University of Helsinki in 1992. It was the first time anything like that had been done. I later did a course with Kevin Hart and his students at the University of Melbourne. I could and did teach Hegel in those settings.

One thing that colleges and universities are going to be forced to ask more and more seriously is, what are they selling? I always have said that faculty live under the illusion that students go to college to get an education. In fact, they go to college to network, to be introduced into a certain kind of network of relations. Will that change in a world of social networking? I don't know.

JK: *Whether that will decrease or increase the value of going to a college like Williams or Columbia is not so clear.*

MCT: I make that point in a spin on Baudrillard. It was just the one I used to make when we were trying to get colleges and universities to join Global Education Network—the proliferation of the copy *increases* the desire for the original. That means that the best advertising for the bricks-and-mortar school is a strong online presence.

The *New York Times* ran a very interesting two-part series on student debt, a year or so ago. The topic is in the news a lot now, too. The *Times* story focused on Ohio. There are 200 colleges and universities in the state of Ohio. They focused on a young woman whose parents were of modest means. She attended a school in northern Ohio I'd never heard of. This was a third rate, a fourth rate school. Admissions put on the pressure, and she ended up going there. Colleges

and universities, it seems, often need students more than students need them. Anyway, this young woman ends up paying fifty-thousand dollars a year and ending up with tens of thousands of dollars of debt.

Now, what's going to happen when a student like her can take a course at MIT, complete a sequence, and earn a certificate of completion? Is that as good as being at MIT? Probably not. But, compared to taking real courses from podunk for fifty thousand, one could imagine a favorable comparison, especially if employers are recognizing the certificate and sparing her future debt. My guess is that the top-tier schools will want to corner the market—and of course they have their eyes not only on Ohio, but on China. It's a big market.

I suspect we'll end up with different levels. On one there would be a completely virtual certificate. There may be some sort of hybrid . . . But the golden ring would be the real experience at MIT or Williams or wherever. That will become increasingly boutique and elitist. Very valuable, but for fewer and fewer people.

*JK: Let's remember what's lost. It sounds like you would agree: something gets lost in the certificate. Education as formation and the vocation of a teacher that you've been responding to for a long time are imperiled. Certifying young people who go to work in fields like engineering or business might be easy, and it's certainly important to do at a price accessible to all. This can help equalize opportunity. But the education that leads to a certificate does not offer many of the life lessons that your vocation seems to . . .*

MCT: This is one of the things I've been talking about. The Dean of Columbia's school for continuing education is a very imaginative woman. Eighty-five percent of post-secondary students are not eighteen to twenty-two years old. Most of them can't be at a certain place at a certain time because they have jobs, family, whatever. Columbia started to offer hybrid courses in master's programs. They have them online, using a very sophisticated platform. Then they bring the students to Columbia for a week twice during their master's experience.

Right now, there's a lot of pressure to develop new master's programs. They can generate a lot of income, and scholarships aren't usually offered. What I would do in the Religion department, if I had the resources and the personnel, is to develop a program in—this is not a good term, but—Comparative Religion. Columbia, like many other schools, has begun to globalize. They have established global centers—one in India, one in Turkey, one in Jordan. I would use this to reverse the standard model for the master's experience. Rather than bringing the distance learning students to New York, I would keep the online component, make it global, and then have the face-to-face component be at a different global center. Let's say there would be two such meetings in the course of the master's program—you could have one in Turkey, one in Jordan. Students from many different cultures would participate in the program. Maybe we would bring them to New York once and then somewhere else . . . There are lots of possibilities.

But back to your point. I think you're right: there are some things can be taught this way easily, while others might not adapt. On the other hand, given what's going on currently, I'm not so sure that even those disciplines would suffer much from new media. I have a very close friend, for instance, who teaches at the University of California, Irvine. Last year he did a course in Religion. He had a thousand students and twenty TAs. What would be the difference attending this online? It might be a better experience to have a good online lecture than to go and sit in the back of a lecture room with a thousand students; you're probably watching it on a video screen anyhow.

For over twenty years, I've been trying to get institutions to make these moves. Most faculty members just do not want to change what they do. I'm not going to be in the business that much longer, but I guarantee you, ten years from now, if you're not doing something significantly different, you're not going to be in the business.

*JK: This is why I read the last chapter of Crisis on Campus as a challenge, and I admit I shuddered. I thought I might be one of those people who would not be in the business ten years from now – maybe not. That chapter is certainly a call to reskill. It seems like you're asking faculty members to reskill in response to the new kinds of knowledges that students are already producing and the new ways they go about producing knowledge.*

MCT: What I've always tried to say is, "rather than understanding all of this as a threat, see it as an opportunity."

*JK: Crisis on Campus could have been called Opportunity for Campus? That might have made sales even better or perhaps for a more favorable critical reception? [Jovial laughter.]*

MCT: We talked earlier about the distinction or lack of distinction between teaching and scholarship/publication. These technologies blur that line. They provide an alternative way to write by expanding the palette. Some of my books that I think are the most interesting are dismissed as scholarship. Take a book like *Hiding*. What I was trying to do with it was to push the book as far in the direction of a multimedia hypertext as I could, using design as argument. I published, concurrently –nobody ever realized this—a CD-ROM on Las Vegas that I understood as complimentary to the book. They were different sides of that text. The scholarly monograph as we know it is dead. It is not going to continue. But publishing in these alternative formats raises all kinds of questions about criteria of evaluation.

*JK: When I read Crisis on Campus, and as I tried to imagine what it would involve to make the transition you call for, I realized you were talking about acquiring a lot of concrete skills – tech literacy, facility with certain software, etc. But there was also a mindset. The major change in mindset is to think of teaching as creative activity – or as one's work in the way that one might think today about one's writing or one's lab as one's work. This gets at one of the oppositions you mentioned at the outset, an opposition that contributes to devaluing teaching: it is often opposed to what we call "my work."*

*Such a changed mindset struck me as something that's kind of obvious to a lot of people who've been part of a teaching college. Sometimes, though, when teaching becomes one's work, one's creative activity, I think it becomes a dangerous supplement: it replaces other forms of creativity, ones on which teaching in fact thrives and without which it often grows sterile. I see that around me sometimes. But by and large a lot of people who are teaching at colleges do understand their teaching as creative work, their work, and they do good with it. I wonder if they might look favorably on the sorts of things you propose if they could be persuaded to them as an extension of the creative aspect of their work.*

MCT: I would hope so. This also goes back to the question of collaboration with students. When I began to get into this almost twenty years ago, it was clear to me that this was never going to be my world in the way it is my students' world or my grandchildren's world. The collaboration I entered into was for me to teach them what I think they need to know and for them to teach me what they think I need to know. I don't know how to do a lot of the stuff I imagine. But they do. If I can imagine it they can do it.

For instance, Global Education Network came from an idea that a student brought to me. I taught a course using teleconferencing with Helsinki in 1992. It was very difficult to set up, because the college did not help us. We had to find outside support to do this. When it came time to write a term paper, the students rebelled. They said, it makes no sense to do a traditional term paper in light of what we've been doing. I said, well, you're right, but I can't go any farther; write the paper, but I promise you that I'll work on finding another way. Over the course of the next few years, I worked with students to develop courses that included a media lab designed and taught by students. I taught the classroom seminar. Rather than traditional term papers, students were required to create an analytic treatment of the issues we had been discussing in alternative media.

I have mentioned my work with Global Education Network. That whole initiative came from a student who was in one of these experimental courses. I tell faculty members they don't need to be intimidated by the technology. You don't need to know how to do it. What you have to do is be able to accept your ignorance in front of students. It's a terrific pedagogical opportunity and a two-way street. The students I've worked with have gone on to important work. The guy who set up the media lab now does all the web stuff for Telemundo. The guy who had the idea to webcast my classes now teaches Media Studies at Macalester. One of the other students who helped me is working with Google. Another works with a leading educational software company. A woman from Albania is now working in finance in New York. A woman from Romania went back to Romania and is going to business school there. They've done everything. As I say, if I can conceptualize it, they can do it—and they can imagine things I could not imagine that contribute to my teaching and writing.

When I teach some of my graduate seminars at Columbia, I give students the opportunity to write a traditional term paper or do something in alternative media. For the most part, graduate students write their traditional term paper. I understand that. And I wouldn't encourage a young assistant professor to do his or her first publication in a multimedia format. It's not likely

to be accepted. But this policy is short-sighted on the part of institutions. Making that change is going to take a while.

*JK: I was less than half-joking when I said the book could have been called Opportunity on Campus, for you really do see the crisis as an opportunity – if we can enter into the history of what’s happening now. The university has a tendency to stay within its ivory tower, safe from history. But you seem to be saying: “look, if we don’t enter into this moment, this is going to happen anyway, so we should enter this moment, take it as an opportunity, and make sure it doesn’t happen in the worst possible way.” I think that’s always been how you operate, trying to get ahead of changes so they can be inflected in certain ways.*

*I wonder, and I worry, though, if that risks being too accommodating to historical forces. If the university shouldn’t instead say “no” to certain trends. We’ve talked about how liberal education and the humanities seem more likely than other forms of education to be left behind by these trends. If liberal education and the humanities are lost, or even greatly reduced, does the university stop being the place for thoughtfulness and the intellectual? If it does, are there any other places in our societies where an intellectual or thoughtfulness can take root?*

*I think of this when I read Field Notes. You talk about the “life lessons” – a phrase that you use in that book – you try to teach students. You alluded to one at the start: failure is inevitable; at some point your world will fail you. Is there a place for that lesson to be taught in the university of the future? If not, are there other places or institutions where it could be taught?*

*MCT: Your point is right on. In the early ‘90s I had the idea to teach a course using teleconferencing. I don’t know where that idea came from. I truly don’t. I tried and tried and tried to figure it out. I didn’t even know what teleconferencing was. So I went to Boston, to AT&T, and asked them to show me. They set up something. I saw it. I looked at it, and I said: “this is the future of education.”*

*A few years later, as I began to explore the internet, it was even more clear to me that higher education would move in this direction. We tried to put together a company that had the Ivy’s plus three or four leading liberal arts colleges. I wanted educators in there, shaping that educational space, from the beginning. They didn’t come, and you end up with the University of Phoenix. We would have ended up with something like that anyhow, but the shape of that intellectual, that educational space would have been different had educators been involved from the beginning. It’s great that they are getting involved now. I only wish it had been sooner.*

*The other thing I was trying to do with Global Education Network was to address what I knew would be the increasing pressures on the liberal arts. I was trying to figure out a way that they could produce additional profit. What do we have that we can sell? What we have to sell are these ideas. But faculty resisted our business. I think it was largely because we set the company up for profit, even though the profit was going to go to the school and to the professor. Because*

it was for a profit: that goes back to Kant in certain ways. The fact that it was for profit made our work seem less pure, less like high art, and more servile, like a craft.

The Vice President of Columbia told me about a year and a half ago, as we move ahead, departments and programs that generate revenue are going to be the ones that get the most support. That's a reality. Will the humanities completely disappear? Not completely, not in the short term. Will the resources become fewer and fewer? I think that without a doubt the answer is yes. The question is, what do you have to do so that the kind of experience that you're talking about doesn't disappear? You can stick to your same old guns and go down in a blaze of glory, or you can try to think about other ways to operate. My point is, the best way to be sure it disappears is to continue doing what we're doing. Is there another way?

It's important to confront this question—because I *don't* see another place in our culture where these lessons can be taught or these questions asked. Certainly, as I said, for many people, a lot of what had taken place in church or in the synagogue or temple, those kinds of existential questions, get asked in the university or college. What's going to happen when that goes . . .

JK: *Everybody thought in the '70s that it was religion that was dying. Turns out it was the humanities. [Bitter laughter.]*

MCT: Exactly. If you look at the current world, there's no obvious place. Will other institutions? . . . Maybe, probably . . . But it's not at all clear. A lot of people think I'm attacking liberal arts education. That's not true. I'm trying to figure out what has to be done to continue to do it. Because, as I said, the surest road to failure is continuing to do what we're doing. You see that every day . . . Look at the situation in California . . . Two hundred schools in the state of Ohio. They're not all going to survive, but that school you've never heard of in Ohio is as important to that young person as Williams or Columbia is to a student there. We have to keep giving something to that person in Ohio.

I think, especially in this time of neoconservatism and neoliberal economics, where everything is about efficiency and instrumentality that liberal education is still worth something. That's why I tried to distinguish usefulness from vocation. Education is not exhausted by the transmission of information and the development of immediately practical skills. Those things are important, but having a breadth of knowledge, having the ability to analyze rigorously, having an ability to analyze complex systems and problems in ways that take time . . . Those skills are not always taught in a textbook. They take time, again, to cultivate. We could go back to formation.

JK: *To begin to make a conclusion, we could connect this with something you and I were talking about before we even started. It's that list of counter-virtues on your desk in front of you. We were talking about it earlier this afternoon when you were describing some of your current projects. They might be what's being formed in this formation process.*

MCT: The point is that the kinds of virtues that are so privileged today: speed, mobility, quickness, agility, adaptability, multitasking, all of those things . . . What gets left out is a certain kind of deliberation, some kind of appreciation for slowness, complexity, for obscurity, nuance, uncertainty, doubt, subtlety . . . Could this be what a liberal arts education forms?

Imagine the presidential debates. A question is asked, and the first sentence the candidate says is: "Well, Mr. Moderator, that's a very complicated question." It's the end of the conversation. And yet—this is a good deconstructive point I suppose, or a Freudian one—it's precisely that which is left out or repressed that the system most needs. Today our systems runs on speed and adaptability, but that alone eventually will lead to collapse and a breakdown. That's absolutely where it's headed.

*JK: A religious term for the virtues you describe might be the contemplative life, right? There's an absence of the contemplative approach to study and to the world. That connects with the issue of leisure, which I know also interests you these days. The medievals would distinguish contemplation from meditation. Meditation was a lower stage of monastic life; it was effort and struggle and hard work, chewing over all those words, whereas contemplation was actually a release from that.*

*I found this somewhere – I could find the reference – some medievals describe contemplation as *vacatio ab omnibus*, a "vacation from all things." Which is a great way to think about connecting leisure and contemplation, provided we don't understand vacation as simply indulging in pleasures or idleness. The word for vacation. . . it's really *vacating*. Making yourself *vacant* . . .*

MCT: Romney's use of the term "severity" was more telling than he appreciated. There's such a severity about so much of what's going on now. It's competition, efficiency . . . No value given to contemplation. Or to generosity . . .

If you're not on your Blackberry or iPhone twenty-four seven, three sixty-five, you're not important. That's insane. In times past, leisure was a measure of social status, whereas now it's not. The faster we go, the less time we have. The rhetoric of time, as so much else, is economic. We talk of saving and spending time. But time is not ours to spend, it is a gift—from whom, from what?—I don't know. It is a gift from elsewhere, which, like the call to vocation, cannot be named. We need to slow down and ponder the fact that the word for 'school' derives from the Greek *skhole*, which means, leisure.

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