Teaching Off-Line in the Classroom

As universities experiment, understandably and eagerly, with online courses, the following true story leads to a Coda that may be worth considering.

To make some extra money while teaching at the University of Illinois in the 1960s, I gave a course in Modern Drama for the Extension School. With ages ranging from thirty to seventy, all of my students had full-time day jobs. I thought, indeed *assumed* the class was a success—plenty of lively discussion, everyone participating-- until one day, Millie, a retired public school teacher, stood up and announced, "Homan, you could do better as a teacher."

I was thrown by her remark and a bit annoyed. "But Millie, how can you say that? Everyone has lots to say."

"Oh, sure, but they're saying it just to you. We're not talking with each other. Among ourselves. Your class is just a series of one-way, private conversations with you."

"What do you propose I do?"

She proceeded to give us what we would call "Millie's Rules." No matter how brilliant your idea, how eager you were to be heard, you could not speak unless what you had to say grew out of or responded to what a classmate had said. And in your opening line, you had to refer to the previous speaker by the first name. Millie called this "weaving the conversation."

Our group effort was awkward at first, like lovers trying to make up after a quarrel, but in a short time, and with a little practice, a typical class discussion would go something like this:

"Now, Betty's idea about Willy Loman's name in *Death of a Salesman* got me thinking about two other names in that Arthur Miller play, and I'd like to link them with what Janet said earlier about character types, which was his way of responding to Jean's

question about literal and symbolic names in the drama, or what last week Alice said about the theatre's 'being realistic but only up to a point.'"

Millie was right: the solitary exchange between teacher and the individual student gave way to a group effort. We were now weaving a tapestry of responses to the subject at hand, making the play our own, or—to risk a homespun metaphor—we became many cooks preparing a single but elaborate dish. One student, a court stenographer, offered to make a transcript of our weekly conversations, her reason being: "What we're saying is as important as the script of the play we're talking about." Soon we would spend half the class discussing that week's play, the other half analyzing our discussion of the week before. At MIT, Norman Holland, later to be my colleague at the University of Florida, was developing his reader-response theory: namely, that the ultimate "text" of a work is the continuous loop between writer and reader, each having a hand in the creation and therefore the meaning of the text.

Ever since, I've tried to follow "Millie's Rules" for class discussion. I often fall short, but when I do succeed, when that weaving, that live performance between and, more properly, *among* teacher and students takes place, I know my students are really learning.

Now that promised **Coda** with its partial truth:
This example of a profitable classroom discussion and experience cannot be fully duplicated online, anymore than a filmed stage production can capture a live performance on the stage.

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