

## FINDING A CLASSROOM, WHEREVER YOU ARE



There was no flourish of “Pomp and Circumstance” when I received my master of arts diploma in 2013. I found it in my mailbox and set

it on the coffee table before heading to the grocery store — a preview, perhaps, of what more graduations could feel like in the age of online learning.

California State University, Dominguez Hills invited me to campus for a traditional commencement ceremony, but I opted not to make the 1,800-mile trek from my Louisiana home. I wondered, though, what other rituals of fellowship I’d missed as an exclusively online student.

Remote learning suggests the wonder of great distances being crossed, but it also hints at a darker reading of the word “remote” — cold and aloof. Is an online class a true online community, or just another occasion to wonder whether “online community” is a contradiction in terms?

Online classes allowed me to study at night and on weekends, a big plus for a mid-career husband and father. My program quickly dissuaded any fears I had about my online instruction amounting to a diploma mill. One of my literature professors was a Fulbright

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scholar and Princeton Ph.D. The faculty’s high standards for writing and research required the best of me.

I recently reconnected with brick-and-mortar higher education as an adjunct professor who taught writing twice a week in a typical classroom. I enjoyed the direct connection with students that my classroom afforded — a familiarity that allowed me to quickly see when students were confused or bored.

As an older student, I easily adapted to the self-directed ethic of online learning. But I’m not so sure the college freshmen I instructed would have fared so well as exclusively online students.

In “The Idea of a University,” Cardinal John Henry Newman argued in the nineteenth century that higher education must be about more than a student’s vocational interest. In rubbing shoulders with each other on a traditional campus, he suggested, students of varied academic specialties could get a profound sense of how deeply all human knowledge is connected. Though students can’t hope to study everything, said Newman, “they will be the gainers by living among those and under those who represent the whole circle.”

Newman envisioned a kind of orchestrated serendipity, in which the chemistry major and English major bump into each other outside of their respective classes, both broadened by being drawn to swim beyond their academic ponds. Within online learning, in which a student buys a package of instruction as sharply defined as an eBay transaction, the kind of intellectual cross-pollination that Newman championed might be harder to achieve.

What I want for my children, whether they learn online or in a conventional classroom, is what Newman wanted for students of his own day — to be surprised by an idea they didn’t go to seek.

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