

The Information Super-Library

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By David Moltz

At a time when many community colleges feel pressure to focus on training students for jobs, one in California is making a renewed push on the Great Books — planning an online certificate program with the idea that liberal arts colleges and their students shouldn't have a monopoly on the classics. Its instructors believe the electronic delivery of these classical materials will draw renewed student interest in writers from Homer to Hemingway.

Next fall, Monterey Peninsula College in California will launch its Great Books Program. By completing an introductory course and any four related courses, students can earn a certificate recognizing them as a "Great Books Scholar."

While many community colleges teach classic works of literature, full programs and online programs in the field are uncommon.

David Clemens, Great Books Program coordinator and English professor at Monterey, said he got the idea for the program from a student who purchased a used copy of Robert Hutchins' *The Great Conversation* — an essay on the discourse of literature through time by the long-time University of Chicago president.

"He read Hutchins and became so excited by it that he founded the Great Books Club on campus," Clemens said. "The club became so popular that I thought teaching this curriculum might work at the community college level. Even though there's a lot of despair about reading, I thought that with proper methods and some kind of reward involved that reading could be revived in lower-division English."

Essential for the resurrection of this classical literature, he determined, was the option of taking the necessary courses online. To frame the Great Books in the world of YouTube and the iPhone, he said, required that he think like Janus — the two-faced Greek god of gates and doors.

“You have to have the ability to look backwards and forwards, to use a new thing to get to the old thing,” Clemens said. “It seemed to me the next logical step was to take this into an online delivery system. The problem is then how to package those courses in a way that is congenial to the online environment.”

Having created and taught a number of online courses himself, Clemens said the environment is most conducive for “boutique courses” or those students take because they have a genuine interest in the subject. For instance, he noted that he would never teach an introductory English course online, calling it “just wrong” and unfair to both the student and instructor.

Still, the online environment does present a number of challenges for Clemens and his fellow instructors, especially considering the difficulty of some of the works and authors this curriculum requires. Students who need quick answers to their questions – for example, about the meaning of a dense phrase or an antiquated word – may have to wait for an answer via e-mail or in a Web forum.

“Some books are just harder to teach, period, and that’s probably amplified online,” said Alan Haffa, a Monterey English professor who will instruct one of the online program’s lengthy survey courses in the fall. “The older the book, the more dense the book and the more historically embedded the work, the more difficult it’ll be to teach in this format.”

If there is an online disconnect between Haffa and some of his students, he said it is most evident when he finally has the opportunity to meet with them in person or talk with them by telephone during his office hours. For example, he said, he will often encounter a student who consistently mispronounces a character’s name or fails to read rhythmic prose with the intended emphases. The “give and take” of conversation that would correct these, he said, is lost online.

For all the shortcomings of teaching the Great Books online, the Monterey professors agree there are many benefits that make this method of delivery worthwhile. They even muse that the lag time in a professor’s response to a student query actually might be an advantage.

“Students have more time to think about what they’re actually saying in writing,” Haffa said. “In a classroom, if I pose a question to you, you’ll have to respond

instantly. Online, students have about a week to think about it and have more time to find quotes to support their ideas. In some ways, it's better. They have more time. That's the advantage of a written dialogue instead of a spoken one; it's a more critical thinking medium."

Though students will watch streaming video clips and explore other multimedia addendums to their classical literary coursework, the Monterey professors hope that their students will never fully abandon the physical books. Clemens, for instance, discourages his students from securing digital copies of their assigned readings – though most of them are now in the public domain and available online via sites like Google Book Search and Project Gutenberg. (He admits that his age may be what's preventing him from full digital immersion.)

Clemens and Haffa both reject the common criticisms of the Great Books curriculum – such as that it focuses only on "dead white men," making it inherently racist and sexist. The online environment, they say, helps to liberate them from these sorts of complaints. Also, they argue, the online option just may make these literary works more appealing to students.

"I'd like to think it makes it sexier," Clemens said of the online program. "It's not the great heavy tome. Students can do this on their own time and at their own pace. It makes it more personal. I just keep running into students who are hungry for something they feel is substantial. The notion of our certificate, which designates a student as a 'Great Books Scholar,' is a sign to an employer or for a transfer application that they've done something worth remembering. I think many students see value in that."