

Whip It Good

Craig Ullman

A man has just bought his first car. The first car in his family. The first car in his neighborhood. Maybe the first car in his state. It's 1903 and he's just bought a Curved Dash Oldsmobile, a jaunty little number and one of the first commercial petrol-powered cars in the United States. After stuffing the tank with high quality hay, he climbs into the car and waits for it to go. Nothing happens. He yells in a loud, threatening voice, but there is no response. Frustrated and with no alternative, he takes out his whip and

lashes it across the engine, but the recalcitrant car refuses to move. He sits there, head in hand, bitterly regretting having sold his old nag.

The man may sound like a fool, but actually he's a distinguished professor of computer science at UC Berkeley.

Well, not really. But the car and buggy confusion is not terribly different from the experience many professors have when they start offering audio downloads of their lectures to the students. According to a recent article in the *Los Angeles Times*, the students stop showing up to the lectures, and just come in for the tests. According to the article:

some professors are witnessing a spurt in absenteeism as an unintended consequence of adopting technologies that were envisioned as learning aids.

Already, even as many academics embrace the electronic innovations, others are pushing back. To deter no-shows, they are reverting to lower-tech tactics such as giving more surprise quizzes or slashing their online offerings.

The professors can offer as many pop quizzes as they want, whip that Olds engine as hard as they can, but nothing is going to budge. The combustion engine, like the Internet, is a disruptive technology, and the previous behaviors—as effec-



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tive as they might (or might not) have been—don't necessarily apply.

The hard part in all this is driver/teacher behavior. I wonder if there were sociological studies done about the travails of horse people becoming car people, what behavior managed in some form to carry over—did they name their cars? Did they pet the hood?

It's no more sweetly absurd than a professor expecting a group of students to show up at a certain time to watch them talk, when the kids have an anytime, portable format to get the same experience—or a better one, considering you can be sprawled out on the couch, dressed in your underwear, eating chips while viewing the podcasts, whereas some of that

behavior might be frowned upon in a classroom.

Teachers (... ah ... like horses?) need to reinvent their role in light of the disruptive technology. Instead of transmitting content through a lecture the students can access more easily somewhere else—even pause and rewind them—and let the class time be the *class* time. We can use technology to turn classroom management past the print era to the aural era. The students will be free to talk, to exchange ideas, not simply to participate in the class, but to *be* the class. Maybe this newfangled technology can be fun.

We just need to get the hay out of the gas tank.

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