

Breaking Down Walls (and Building New Ones)

Craig Ullman

Perhaps no change in federal educational policy has been as extensive as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) or produced as many consequences (unintended and otherwise). No doubt the next president, of whichever party, will have his or her own educational policy with an equally catchy acronym, and “NCLB” will be assigned to the idea closet along with Sputnik and the Skinner box.

Yet no matter how profound the next change in educational policy, one bit of innovation that NCLB has brought forth, I hope and expect will remain, is the extension of K-12 education beyond on the bounds of the physical school.

Okay, before you wag your finger, education *always* extended beyond the school as students brought home their work or did research at the local library. But NCLB fostered (and foisted) something more: tutoring after school, either in the school itself, or outside the school, at a local community center or a nearby Starbucks. Expanding the notion of school was, I suspect, at most an incidental goal of NCLB, but I think it’s the innovation (one would think with a very different execution) that will stick.

What schools can’t usually offer students, and what tutoring should, is individual attention. Sustained individual attention is simply not something a typical school is equipped to do. If we think about the world we live in these days being about *mass personalization* (think about Amazon having a tab on the home page entitled “Craig’s Amazon.com.” Not that it would be the same name for you—unless your name was Craig, too. But it would feature different items.) So I don’t think



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that going beyond the confines of the school is going to go away.

Beyond NCLB, as more and more educational content moves online, and as students and teachers *expect* to use computers and Internet applications to do their work, the continued virtualization of education is inevitable. As the virtual world becomes even more important in education, the school as a location becomes more abstract, and the walls that separate the school from the larger world begin to crumble.

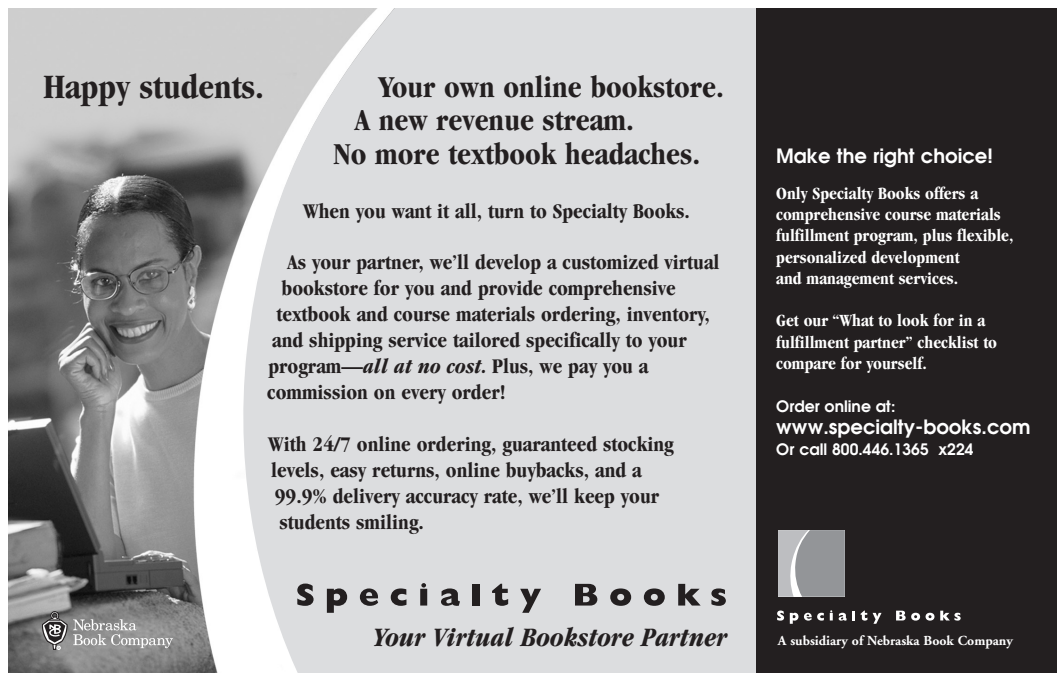
Between NCLB's emphasis on outside tutoring and moving content experiences to the Internet, we're seeing a lot of wall crumbling, both metaphorical and virtual. Now the question becomes, what will replace these walls?

Follow me on this one: The Orthodox Jews have a procedure called *eruv*. Eruv means "mixing" in Hebrew, and it enables

Jews on the holidays and the Sabbath to virtually extend their home, which allows them to perform activities they would otherwise be prohibited from doing outside it: carrying, cooking, and so forth. The boundaries of this unrestricted area are sometimes defined by a fence, but in the United States it's typically done with a piece of string. The area could be of any size—a city block, a neighborhood or, in the case of Jerusalem, a whole city. The eruv extends the boundaries of place, creating, just with string, a virtual home.

Maybe the new walls of where *the process of education* happens will be made of string: we'll encircle an area that will enclose the school, the library, the homes, the neighborhood, maybe even the world.

So maybe we won't actually use string ...



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Podcasting is not a new idea. It has been around at least since the audio tutorial movement and the Sony Walkman. A podcast is really a single concept event that is explained by an audio file, or an audio file supplemented by still pictures or video. The most widespread and current example of a type of a podcast is a song, usually 3 to 5 minutes long available in an electronic file format, such as MP3 or MP4, that also might be available as a music video with singers, dancers, and actors in addition to the song. Luther Vandross' tune "Always and Forever" is a wonderful 4-minute-and-54-second example. The tune is also available as a music video showing Vandross singing the song.

Individual songs work well as podcasts because most modern tunes have the characteristics of an effective single concept event—what many now are calling a podcast, which really is a learning object that is stored in an MPEG format. The characteristics of an *effective* podcast are as follows:

- A podcast is a single idea that can be explained verbally or, if necessary, with audio and appropriate still or motion pictures (not a face talking);
- A podcast is a recorded event that is 3-10 minutes long;
- A podcast is part of a series with each single event related to others;
- A podcast is a learning object available in an electronic format that is easily played, most often as an MP3 file;

- A podcast is stored on a Web site or other Internet location for easy access; and
- A podcast is current and changed or updated frequently.

In spite of what the *Chronicle* says, a recording of a lecture is a poor example of a podcast. Rather, it is best to "chunk" the class into five or six single concept blocks, each as a separate learning object. Effective lecturers do this already; they break up their class session into related topics. These topics can become podcasts when they are recorded electronically in an MPEG file format, especially if they are supplemented with related examples and recorded properly without distracting background noises. Podcasts are a reincarnation or reinvention of what the mastery learning movement of the 1960s called single concept files or single concept films. They were effective then, and can be effective today.

And finally, let's call them something other than podcasts. MPEGcast doesn't have the same cachet as podcast, but then Mpegcast doesn't remind everyone of Donald Sutherland pointing his finger at the last normal person, either.

REFERENCES

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- Finney, J. (1955). *The body snatchers*. New York: Dell.

"... A RECORDING OF A LECTURE IS A POOR EXAMPLE OF A PODCAST."