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WEDNESDAY COMMUNIQUÉ

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On Bullets, Storytelling and Teaching: A faculty colleague sent me [this article](#) from the Guardian that highlighted the limitations of using PowerPoint and, more specifically, the limitations of using bullet-points to deliver lectures. The article made me think again about conveying information using data versus telling stories, and about my Ph.D. adviser, who told me that a good teacher must confuse you for a while, before helping you dissipate the fog of new material. Independently, I read [this article](#) in the Chronicle of Higher Education, where someone quotes that his best professors “took texts that seemed complicated, made them look simple and then made them complex again.” This, in my judgment, is one recipe for great teaching: to make the students learn by exercising their minds, by challenging their current state of knowledge and by not oversimplifying. The challenge of PowerPoint and other presentation tools is to not present the material in predictably linear fashion but to reveal just enough to engage the audience. I do not completely subscribe to the saying that “power corrupts, and PowerPoint corrupts pointlessly,” but I do believe that using presentation tools to help organize lectures, while using storytelling to engage and question (even in technical fields) is a superior combination to simply PowerPoint-ing.

What is College For? This is the question that keeps being posed and answered by thinkers, parents, politicians and many others. The recent [article](#) in the Chronicle of Higher Education is the latest attempt I came across to answer the question. To quote: “we typically answer the questions by citing a variety of purposes of which liberal education is only one. Most other goals — marketable skills, moral and social development, learning how to learn — are tied to the demands of employers.” The author then considers that, except for liberal education, the top 100 major research universities (of which UNM is one), and the 50 best four-year-colleges, are very inefficient at providing the skills employers need. This has always been the case, for there has always been a cheaper way to provide specific skills than attending four years at a research university. The author goes on to describe that “the only *raison d’être* of a (research) college is to nourish a world of intellectual culture: a world of ideas dedicated to what we can know scientifically, understand humanistically, or express artistically.” Only if society regards intellectual culture as essential will it continue to support our research universities. In times of economic turmoil, societies may choose to reduce their commitment to their intellectual culture. Witness for example, the [recent move](#) in Japan by two dozen Japanese universities to “reduce or altogether eliminate their academic programs in the humanities and social sciences, following a dictum from Tokyo to focus on disciplines that ‘better meet society’s needs.’”

Online Instruction: Apparently, overpromising and under-delivering has been around for a while. No less than Thomas Edison stated in 1913: “Books will soon be obsolete in the public schools. Scholars will be instructed through the eye. It is possible to teach every branch of human knowledge with the motion picture. Our school system will be completely changed in ten years.”

Chaouki Abdallah Provost & Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs

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