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# Autodidacts, Cyberspace, Students, and Bjorklunden

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AUTODIDACTS,  
CYBERSPACE, STUDENTS,  
AND BJORKLUNDEN  
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Microsoft's long-awaited and much-debated release last month has made the phrase "I do Windows" take on a whole new meaning. And I, dutifully if a bit apprehensively, attended classes in our Information Technology Center to learn about this computer product as well as others that I might plausibly use in the coming months and years. "Computer literate" is not a descriptor with which I'm often associated, but I'm trying.

In fact, I'm the kind of guy Calvin Trillin wrote about in a piece entitled "Unplugged," who discovered after his son moved out of the house that he had lost the ability to tape. "I don't know if you've ever tried taping off one of those cable boxes without a kid around," Trillin's friend says, "but it's no joke." That's me, a member of the pre-microchip generation: someone who has a VCR, but it's always blinking 12:00 o'clock.

When we got a computer several Christmases ago as the family present, my son got it up and running without even glancing at instructions or an operating manual, played around with it for several days...and then left to go back to Minneapolis, leaving me holding the bag, or, in this case, the mouse. So my bona fides as far as computing and information technologies are concerned are, at best, suspect. I'll confess that I was optimistic here for a brief time, when I managed to knock my daughter off the lower rungs of the top ten Tetris scores, but my small motor control no longer enables me to claim even that triumph. I can wordprocess with the best of them, but I stand a better chance of identifying the names of New Deal agencies than telling you the meanings of DOS, RAM, CPU, and GUI.

All that being stipulated, as the lawyers say, I will nonetheless venture forth with a few comments about the very topic of computing and information technology. As many on the faculty know, computing has been at Lawrence and in the academic program and administrative structure here since the early 1960s when the college acquired an IBM 1620 with punch cards--which were not to be folded, spindled, or mutilated--accommodating one user at a time. In 1971-72 the college moved into the time-sharing age with the Digital PDP-11 series, in 1985 to the VAX series, and most recently to Digital's Alpha series. In the meantime, microcomputers, both Macintosh and PC-compatibles, have become near ubiquitous on campus in the last decade. Last year, we installed a computer-based statistics laboratory in Stephenson and created the Information Technology Center in the Mudd, and this summer completed computer clusters in the six large residence halls. Once fully equipped, these clusters will more than double the computers available to students at all hours of the day and night.

So Lawrence has been and will continue to be attentive to our place in the computer age. Indeed, both a first iteration of the college's long-range plan and our *Lawrence 150*

campaign have identified information technologies and computing as areas of great promise and potential for us in the coming years, and what the one calls for, the other seeks to provide: the resources to enable us to project ourselves into that future to the best possible effect.

While I do not pretend to understand the precise contours of that future in every particular, I have read and thought enough about such matters to be at once exhilarated and concerned. I am exhilarated by what we can anticipate as powerful tools to permit faculty to teach and students to learn in ways heretofore impossible and at a pace, in some instances, previously unimagined. To the extent that the future is a projection of the present, I can only marvel at how spaces like our language acquisitions lab and our new statistics lab will shape and influence our educational mission. Further, we are already beginning to explore the ways in which access to the information superhighway will enable students and faculty to connect to information resources nationally and world-wide and to bring those resources to bear directly on the educational mission of the college. We aspire to be responsibly responsive to these opportunities, and they are exciting ones.

In a recent survey of faculty at 1,000 colleges and universities, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting found that the vast majority of them regarded computing and related technologies as a significant benefit to their work as scholars and teachers, and as having an important positive influence on the quality of education for students. That view surely prevails at Lawrence, and so I urge the faculty, individually and collectively, to continue to examine and propose ways by which these resources can help us improve the educational mission of the college--in courses, in student research, in their own work, and beyond.

But for all of its promise and potential, the brave new world of cyberspace and information technologies also gives me pause. To hear or read the prognostications of some people, we will soon be in a world where the traditional delivery systems of education are going to be antiquated. Time and space and distance will no longer pose significant constraints on how and where we gather information, but each of us will be able to sit in front of a computer screen or a television monitor and either dial-for-data or participate in networks of people like ourselves in conversation and investigation of topics of shared interest. Indeed, this vision of the future is a description of the present in many respects; projected forward, the frequency and range of such electronic educational opportunities will multiply almost exponentially. Nicholas Negroponte, in his recent book *Being Digital*, notes that "in 1972 there were only 150,000 computers in the world, whereas five years from now, the integrated-circuit manufacturer Intel alone expects to be shipping 100 million each year." Those who have access to the superhighway will have seemingly limitless possibilities for learning before them. In many respects, the rapidity and acceleration of the changes ahead rival the situation Henry Adams perceived almost 100 years ago when he observed the dynamo at the Columbian Exhibition and saw in it the end of the world he had known and the beginning of a new age of unimagined power and change. We face a comparable situation today.

Adams's *fin de siecle* thoughts were not all positive, and we might have similar reservations as we approach the end of the century and the beginning of a new millennium. One troubling aspect of this future, for example, is the presumption, at least implicitly, that the true learners of the 21st century are going to be autodidacts: men and women who teach themselves, by themselves, calling up the information they want, when they want it. Negroponte, for example, posits a soon-to-be post-information age in which "everything is made to order, and information is extremely personalized" and that each of us will become a "demographic unit of one."

I heard the future, if you will, a little over a year ago when Professor Dan Taylor was interviewed on Wisconsin Public Radio about the Perseus Project, an imaginative and exciting CD-ROM program that helps teach students about the classical world. After Dan had offered his enthusiastic description of how he had used Perseus in his teaching at Lawrence, the interviewer opened the phone lines for calls. Among the callers was a young man who struck me as an early example of where we may be headed: he too was excited by Perseus and other computer-assisted marvels. He loved to sit at his computer and connect to information and data sources here, there, and everywhere. The advantage, he argued, was that he could get exactly what he needed--no more, no less. The computer was terribly efficient in this respect and as a consequence he didn't need to waste his time plowing through material he would deem irrelevant to his needs or his questions. In his most revealing statement, he professed that he no longer had patience with reading books; he simply wanted on demand and on command whatever information or answers he currently sought from the control post of his computer terminal.

The autodidact, then, may be a potentially disturbing feature of the future we know we are moving toward at high speed. What the new world of information superhighways and computers may portend is a world of isolated individuals, connected to one another not directly but remotely. Teachers in this scenario will not see their students personally, but as images on a screen. The fascination with long-distance learning may mean that a student can enroll for a course at home, participate in a class discussion through his television screen, e-mail his papers and exams to a teacher hundreds or even thousands of miles away, and receive his grade by dialing the registrar's office on the telephone.

In some ways there is something wondrous about such a scenario. But at the same time, one is tempted to ask "what's wrong with this picture?" Well, I can think of two things that are wrong, though there may be many more. First is the matter of equity or, put more pointedly, of the further emergence of a situation of radically disparate resources available to different groups or classes of people. If we're entering this new world of information technologies, we must be concerned, as citizens, that it not exacerbate the growing spread between the haves and the have-nots. We can ill afford, as a society, to permit many fellow citizens to get left at the station as the Starship Cyberspace is launched.

On a more immediate level, there is something wrong with this picture from the vantage point of the undergraduate residential liberal arts college. It too can get left at the station, as it were, and find itself quickly relegated to the sidelines. To change the metaphor somewhat, Lawrence might be prepared to embrace a future that will in turn spurn us, or at least spurn the identity and traditions of undergraduate education we have long professed and provided. It is not too much of a stretch to imagine a cyberspace future in which our kind of learning community becomes marginalized, or may be regarded as a throwback to the horse and buggy days of higher education. That wonderful image of Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and the student on the other may be replaced by Mark Hopkins logged on to hundreds of students scattered around the country or globe, none of whom he'll ever see in person.

Obviously, none of us wishes for that kind of future and few of us may perceive it a threat from the vantage point of 1995. But it behooves us to be alert to the dangers. If imbedded in the prospects for the future is a situation in which real communities are replaced by virtual communities, in which commonality is replaced by autonomy, and in which gathering is replaced by dispersal, then we face stiff challenges. In a perverse way I clearly am not advocating, one could plausibly take the position that the wisest strategy for the future--here the metaphor changes again--is to stand against this tide, not to swim with it, since we may find it a rip-tide that will sweep us out to sea in the undertow.

Last fall, Langdon Winner wrote a piece in the *Educom Review* on this very topic. Noting that the majority of college students he saw in class were young men and women "who have spent the greater portion of their lives staring at tubes of one kind or another," for whom "the 13-inch diagonal screen, not the printed page, offers the dominant learning environment," he worried. He was especially worried by the ways in which he saw higher education responding to that phenomenon--what he called the "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em" principle.

Referring to the ways in which many colleges and universities have come to rely increasingly on videotaped lectures, two-way interactive video classes, the uses of e-mail, and so on, he wrote: "Innovations of this kind arrive with glittering rhetoric about educational renewal. Students sitting at their computers will have access to the world's greatest lecturers! the largest libraries! the most exciting intellectual exchanges! Yes, colleges will enter the 21st century with cybercultural flags flying. But the dreary condition that underlies it all is that more students are going to be taught by fewer faculty."

"Virtual education is an excellent name for this trend," he goes on. "My dictionary defines virtual as 'existing in effect but not in actual fact.' As the virtual classroom expands, our students can look forward to receiving what is almost, but not quite, an education. The spectacle of a hundred students sitting in a room together staring at monitors and seldom if ever coming face-to-face with a knowledgeable human being seems to me a counterfeiter of higher education. Perhaps they are being adequately trained, so to speak, for jobs in today's competitive, global market. But are students gaining a deeper grasp of ideas, theories, and

the craft of intellectual exploration? I wonder."

We should wonder too. Lest the foregoing suggest that I am some kind of twentieth-century Luddite, urging that we smash the machines to preserve a way of life, let me assure you that I am not. Such antipathy toward technology is simply not an issue at Lawrence. In fact, the planning task force on computing and technology, which professed its enthusiasm "about the prospect of technological innovation in all its utopian splendor," quite explicitly stated that it "tried to conceive of the future of information technology at Lawrence less in terms of 'revolution' than as a natural extension of our long-standing mission as a liberal arts institution" and sought to "envision a technological future that consolidates and enhances Lawrence's identity as a community of learners."

So there is no interest or intention here of turning back the clock or of ignoring the promise and potential of computing and technology. The observation and question of Peter Lyman of Stanford put the situation well: "Higher education is the last social institution primarily organized around print technology and still resistant to information technology. Is this testimony to the strength of the tradition of liberal education, or a sign of its decline?" Lyman clearly believes the latter, and argues that "mass communication and digital information [are] primary cultural subjects which require critical attention." Hence, one challenge for liberal education is to prepare students to "read" this kind of information "with critical sophistication comparable to the way it teaches students to read print in the college library or classroom." In other words, we have an opportunity and obligation to consider a new epistemology. That is the kind of challenge Lawrence should be prepared to meet.

In trying to meet it, however, we must do so in terms consistent with our mission and purposes. Lawrence is, as it has been for almost 150 years, a learning community of teachers and students. All of the changes of that century and a half, from recitations to lectures to seminars to independent studies; from rote learning to active learning; from absorbing the results of research to participating first-hand in research; from a set curriculum to an open one, have not altered the essential character of the college as a community of scholars.

The report of one of our first planning task forces began by urging that Lawrence be a mentoring community for its students, a phrase that suggests directly the active engagement of faculty in promoting the learning of every individual student. We must remain true to that calling, even as we move toward greater utilization of and address more critical understandings about computing and technology. In sum, our focus must remain on the student as an independent, creative individual, but also on the student as a member of a community, where the discussion of ideas, the criticism of ideas, and the creation of ideas take place in discourse, dialogue, conversation.

Discourse, dialogue, and conversation may be possible modes of communication on information networks as members of virtual communities in cyberspace. But the special

character of a liberal arts college stems from the modes of communication we use as members of a real community in real space. And so, as we look to our future, we have a special obligation to maintain and enrich real space, space that is not an image but a place, not experienced abstractly but directly. Gerhard Casper's observations about the university in the coming millennium speak to this condition. "The university as a physical space will remain attractive," he wrote, "to the extent that we will make it more valuable to people to interact personally and face to face in learning and research. Ironically, our future may lie in going back to the pre-university Socratic gymnasium as our main mode of discourse. The university as a physical space will be superior to anything else to the extent that we provide a convincing structure for individual learning." In such a space, the unmeasurable stimulation of thought, of learning, arises from the simultaneous and proximate thoughtfulness and study of colleagues and peers. The Lawrence campus is such a space and place, and we will continue to strive to make it hospitable and central to our mission.

But Lawrence is fortunate to have another such space and place, Bjorklunden, our 325-acre northern campus in Door County. This magnificent property has been in Lawrence's possession for over twenty years, though only a minority of faculty, staff, students, and alumni have visited it. Beginning in 1979, we began holding summer seminars there, many of them conducted by members of the Lawrence faculty, for friends of the college. In addition, a few professors have taken students there for brief visits during the last fifteen academic years. But the lodge could not be used in the winter months, and so the college could never take full advantage of the distinctive resource it had in Bjorklunden.

What makes Bjorklunden special is not just the magnitude of the property, the 325 acres, the mile and a quarter of Lake Michigan shoreline, the stands of cedar and birch, the expanse of meadows and fields, though these are impressive enough. Rather, it is the fact that Winifred and Donald Boynton, over a period of several decades, created there a distinctive place in what they called Bjorklunden vid Sjon--the birch forest by the sea. In the years of World War II, they erected a Chapel, modeled on a Norwegian *stavekirke*, as a testimony to peace and the endurance of the human spirit. In her book *Faith Builds a Chapel* Mrs. Boynton gave voice to the sentiments and motivations that prompted that work, work featuring folk paintings, carvings, needlework, and furnishings the Boyntons crafted themselves. Similar evidences of their handicraft were found in the lodge and studio.

Two years ago, the main lodge at Bjorklunden was destroyed in a fire; last fall the trustees decided to retain the property and build a new lodge; last month we awarded the building contract; a few weeks ago, construction began. By next summer, then, we will have a lodge on the estate that will be winterized and able to accommodate up to fifty persons overnight, with spaces for dining and assembly. And that prospect affords us some opportunities that I hope all of us will find truly exciting.

We can now transform Bjorklunden from a seasonal asset to a year-round component of the college. We will resume our summer seminar program there in 1996, to be sure, and

that is welcome news to many diehard Bjorklunden Seminar participants; indeed, several of them have kept the spirit of Bjorklunden alive these past two summers with an annual seminar held at other locations in Door County. But beyond the resumption of the seminar program, we now have the opportunity to make Bjorklunden far more integral to Lawrence, not an add-on, but a defining characteristic of the college into the future.

As a physical setting, Bjorklunden provides a place that enables and encourages people to confront themselves and others on a personal scale, one that is and will be at sharp contrast to the isolation of the autodidact or the anonymity of mass culture. A year ago, I received the annual president's letter from Bob Atwell, president of the American Council on Education. He had spent several weeks on the shores of Lake Champlain, where, he said, "human contributions for good or ill pale before the magnificence of nature. I am struck by how much we city folk crave the natural beauty," he went on, "and I wonder why we choose to experience so little of it." Atwell's observation may be an unconscious echo of John Muir's observation regarding the topographical features of Yosemite: "There is some deep personal distillation of spirit and concept which moulds these earthly facts into some transcendental emotional and spiritual experience."

These notions have a bearing here. I do not want to wax poetic and sentimental about nature and natural beauty; nor am I about to suggest that Bjorklunden is a place where we hold hands in a circle and sing "Kumbaya." But we should not dismiss the capacity of Bjorklunden to effect in us sentiments that help make us whole. I do not want to ignore the very real sense of peace and serenity that Bjorklunden affords, as these human needs are met with decreasing regularity in the modern, digitized, high-tech world. What Winifred Boynton called "a sanctuary for all," "far removed from confusion and aggression," Bjorklunden can serve an aspect of our mission in a distinctive and important way.

In connecting Bjorklunden to the mission of the college, in making it a strong complement to our educational program, we are venturing to some extent into new territory, both literally and figuratively. Yes, we have had possession of that magnificent site for twenty years, and yes we have been conducting summer seminars since 1979. And even yes, many of those who have experienced Bjorklunden have argued passionately and persuasively that it can serve admirably as a special extension of our brand of liberal education. But for all of those yeses, we have not heretofore found a way to make the case that Bjorklunden could become an integral and ongoing part of our undergraduate college.

In making that case now, we will need to avoid several pitfalls. First, it would be inappropriate to argue that Bjorklunden is simply a "retreat," a place to "get away" from the trials and tribulations of the campus culture. Second, and conversely, it would be inappropriate to argue that Bjorklunden should be transformed into a separate venue for the academic program of the institution.

Let me explain. Bjorklunden is not to be simply a retreat where groups of students,



or faculty, or staff, or combinations thereof hie for a weekend in the woods, to commune with nature. And to say that Bjorklunden is not another venue for the curriculum is to say that, while individual faculty and departments have already proposed some imaginative and exciting uses of Bjorklunden for the conduct of the academic program, and while Bjorklunden offers us an ideal site for such uses, those uses alone would not justify the trustees' decision to retain the property and build a new lodge. We could rent other spaces if we wanted to conduct some aspect of the academic program "off-site," and there are other settings for field studies in biology or geology.

At the same time, a number of faculty members--several of whom have no prior experience at Bjorklunden--have proposed some very promising uses of the place for the teaching and learning mission of the college. We should certainly encourage and enable such uses, whether they be, for example, immersion weekends in the foreign languages, chamber music opportunities, a base for science field trips, discussion groups on post-graduate choices, or any of a number of other possibilities--including some that will be free-form and spontaneous. I welcome the faculty's creative proposals along these and other lines.

But my vision for Bjorklunden takes a different and more ambitious tack. I propose that Lawrence commit itself to a program that would guarantee every student an opportunity for a Bjorklunden experience at some point in his or her undergraduate career. Rather than leave it to the initiative of individuals or groups to go to Bjorklunden or to the happenstance of which faculty have integrated activities at Bjorklunden into their courses in which term, I urge us to explore and create ways to make Bjorklunden a part of what it means to be a Lawrence student and to participate in our brand of liberal education.

This exploration and creation will be effected only to the extent that there is broad participation of students and faculty in determining the content and contours of what I've called a Bjorklunden experience and in devising the program to deliver it. As part of his new duties as Dean of Off-Campus Programs, Dean Lauter will have the responsibility to convene conversations about such a program with members of the community and to work with a committee of faculty and students to propose the ways in which we might proceed to implement one.

We can imagine, for example, that the Bjorklunden experience would consist of a reprise of Freshman Studies, in which students would reconvene in their sections for a weekend in, say, the junior year to discuss an assigned reading--perhaps an article--and to reflect on the meaning and import of Freshman Studies two years later. We can imagine also, for example, that the Bjorklunden committee would propose a theme or topic for a given year, the investigation and pursuit of which would be undertaken at Bjorklunden. In my view, such a topic or theme would not be "academic" in the narrow sense, but would focus on issues involving civic concerns, personal values, "big" questions, and the like. There would be assigned readings and faculty participants, though the purpose would be conversation, not instruction.

Precisely how Bjorklunden is used to serve Lawrence students is less important in my mind than ensuring that a Bjorklunden experience becomes a thoroughly memorable and distinctive component of a Lawrence education. The fond memories that Lawrence alumni have for Freshman Studies or for the London program, for example, would thus be extended to Bjorklunden. The universality of a Bjorklunden experience would be a common bond shared by all Lawrentians, a memorable, even a pivotal moment in their undergraduate years. And just as the London Center affords some students a distinctively memorable experience away from the home campus, so would Bjorklunden for each and every Lawrence student.

At bottom, then, Bjorklunden has rich potential to serve as a distinguishing feature and asset of Lawrence. In a world that threatens at once to be characterized by atomization and mass culture, it offers the kind of setting and sanctuary that can afford members of the Lawrence community special opportunities for reflection, renewal, and refreshment, to engage themselves and each other in meaningful and purposeful ways, and to be touched and uplifted by what Donald and Winifred Boynton accomplished and intended there. It is, sadly, reasonable to expect that spaces such as Bjorklunden will grow more and more rare with time. Lawrence is thus the steward of a precious and unique place, and it is more than an opportunity, it is really our obligation, to make Bjorklunden a part of what it means to be a Lawrence student.

In welcoming new students each September, I tell them that our aim at Lawrence is to treat them not as disembodied minds, but as persons, that we care about the ways in which they conduct their lives, interact with others, and contribute to the common good. Those aspirations must continue to inform our mission. For us, liberal education is not only a matter of the intellect. It is a matter of the individual self, alone and with others. Again, Gerhard Casper frames the case well: "The residential version of the American college may have no equal in challenging the familiar; in challenging prejudices and values; in creating uncertainties; in bringing about new ways of relating to one another. Its emphasis on socialization and peer interaction, in the eyes of many, make the college environment, as distinguished from the college curriculum, a formative and formidable experience that is valued in its own right." In the high-tech future, we will need to be even more vigilant and diligent in promoting those values, on the campus and at and through Bjorklunden.

So let us, as a community, take full and imaginative advantage of the power and promise of computing and information technologies, and let us find ways for those resources to enable us to perform our tasks in liberal education in new and enriching ways. But let us also go back to the future, as it were, using Bjorklunden to help us find new ways to make personal engagement with self and others a rich and vital component of a Lawrence education. As we do, we will help make this college an even better and more distinctive institution for ourselves and for those who will follow us in the years ahead.