

e-Learning Nudism: Stripping Context from Content

Herbert Hrachovec

1. Tales of three Professions

Let us start with something truly universal, namely food. During most of human history it has been produced and consumed on a local scale. Much of this has changed. Food industry is operating as a global system, increasingly independent of places of origin or seasonal changes. Beef or tomatoes have become commodities like lumber or iron ore. And, to complete the picture, this led to a second order backlash. As wholesale industrial production obliterates regional distinctions and stratifies the market, qualitative differences often dissolve. All beef or tomatoes tend to assume the same (non-)taste, provoking consumer dissatisfaction. So, on top of the existing distributive network of cheap supplies, brands of quality products are established. Those products, in turn, refer back to places of origin and all the matters of detail that used to guarantee the trusted provenance of food. “Happy chickens” provide high quality eggs under a new regime of bio-ecological controls which, I hasten to add, exploits the displaced nostalgia affecting the age of food factories.

This pattern is not restricted to nutrition. Think of another universal cultural product, music. Many people of my age have, over the decades, assembled a collection of tapes, records and CDs, often in quite specific circumstances, the memory of which remain attached to the respective items. Now, enter the iPod. On a 40 GB hard drive you can easily store a mid-sized life collection of audio material. There is a truly amazing kick one can get from being able, by the literal flick of one's finger, to evoke any desired song or symphony that ever made it into your portfolio. There are drawbacks. The physical appeal of carefully designed covers is lost as is most of the information supplied with the original product. And here, again, attempts to compensate for this deficit are made. Options to include scans of your CD covers are provided, personal playlists offer some second-level history and you may evaluate your favorite tracks by a system of individual quality control. A derivative order is superimposed upon a new kind of egalitarianism.

Consider, as a third case, an example which is less universal but suitable to the current event, i.e. teaching at universities. This is an activity that seems, to follow entirely different rules. There are, however, serious indications that this is changing. Since their foundation in medieval Europe university courses were given to relatively small groups according to a weekly schedule. The physical presence of teachers and students was taken for granted. Computers and network technology are disrupting this tradition. Virtual communities are built upon the simultaneity of information exchange on the internet

and are independent of established rhythms of work and rest. Such communities are orthogonal to the localized and temporally segmented teaching activities of the present order. This is, admittedly, yet a fringe phenomenon and it is still unclear whether and how it will be integrated into the pedagogical mainstream. But there are less spectacular developments exhibiting a similar trend. It is entirely uncontroversial that university instruction is making use of handouts, paper summaries and scripts. Countless teaching aides have been produced - and discarded. Now, the advent of digitally enhanced education changes the field. Such materials can easily be copied, distributed and improved upon by an in principle unlimited number of interested participants. You might feel uncomfortable with the analogy but last weeks slides on Tarski's truth theory are very much like those tomatoes grown in the south of Spain and ending up in Helsinki.

Educational economics plays an increasing role in university development. In order to attract students well developed curricula are needed and they are expected to contain a fair amount of digital resources, which are much more expensive to create than sheets of paper in the old days. The flip side is: they can be sold. Whereas hand-outs remained an obscure asset, suitably organized electronic courseware promises to become a major business. As "Learning Management Systems" offer comprehensive services to entire universities at substantial costs, university administrators try to channel traditional teaching into new formats, hoping to serve more students at lesser expense. One catchword, capturing those concerns, is "learning object". A learning object is the equivalent of a chunk of beef, registered according to some classificatory scheme, marked by a stamp of approval by some authority, deep-frozen and waiting for delivery. Here is a more respectable description. Learning objects are digital entities designed to be used (and re-used) in learning activities. They are supposed to be independent of specific educational settings, disengaged from more comprehensive courses. Information pertaining to their educational, technical and legal status is to be captured by meta-data accompanying the objects. Learning object repositories (LORs) collect those molecular units and offer facilities for search and peer evaluation.

Much of the supporting framework for learning objects is still under construction and mainly restricted to English-language projects. There is a strong case to regard the whole enterprise as "a strategy of US-american universities to capture international markets", as Jörg Becker has written (Becker 2002, 92). But this will not be the focus of the following considerations which are going to offer a philosopher's view of the situation outlined. And I will be reporting on an actual, small-scale attempt to test professional instructional writing largely free of context.

2. A Funny Thing Happened at the Way to the Forum

Even though the above account has offered a structural description, I have intentionally included a note of indignation, hinting at the hurt pride felt by many academic teachers faced with attempts to shrink their classroom activities into digital portfolios that can easily be moved around and delivered in various unpredictable ways. This is, indeed, the challenge of virtual communities in mobile, networked learning. But among all the publicity surrounding those technical achievements a simple fact is easily overlooked. Most of the assertions about learning objects equally apply to the written word in contradistinction to

spoken language. As Derrida has reminded us, writing clearly is a disruption of the living presence of a vocal conversation. Critics of learning objects might just as well attack books. And it is again Derrida who pointed out that the Socrates/Plato-transition, including the Phaidros complaints on writing, have had an immense influence on Occidental philosophy. The tension between ineliminable contextual speech and alphabetic notation that can be stored and transmitted across time and space is an ancient concern, even though it has acquired new urgency in the age of multimedia recording.

It seems that a crucial development took place at the forum in Athens at about 350 B.C. when Socrates' teaching was turned into manuscripts by Plato. All kinds of knowledge can be recorded in writing, of course. I will only be able to trace the philosophical activity initiated by Socrates and Plato. Compared with privileged access to secret and expert knowledge and in marked opposition to the private instructions offered by the Sophists Socrates was a forum operator and this does not simply refer to his perambulations around the Athenian market place. The decisive point is that these locations had a formative influence upon *the kind of activity* philosophy was about to become. Socrates did not address professionals nor did he attempt to develop a jargon suited for some experts. As far as the art of living and related matters are concerned everyone is eligible as an expert. This makes for the high degree of abstraction manifest in the Platonic dialogues. One of their most effective strategies consists precisely in shattering the naive, quasi chauvinistic confidence of Socrates' interlocutors, which is revealed as improper generalization from a small segment of experience. There is, in other words, a close connection between the setting of a market place and Socrates' teachings. It does not seem to be in philosophy's best interest to disregard or even reject abstract and decontextualized cognitive constructions since this is precisely how Platonic ideas are introduced. Philosophy, after Plato, has constitutively been sympathetic towards all purpose learning objects, if I may put it in those anachronistic terms.

The well-known methodological struggle between philosophy and the empirical sciences derives from the Socratic move. There is a pervasive difference between learning how to predict an earthquake or some event on the stock market and learning how to lead a good life. I will not enter into this controversy, but simply use an example to discuss the implications. My overall aim is to convince you that, to use an inverse anachronistic phrase, Platonic ideas make good learning objects. A forum is, nowadays, a virtual meeting place on the web, like "<http://science.orf.at>", a service of the main Austrian TV and radio channel. It covers the most recent developments in the sciences and humanities and includes so-called "hosts", i.e. columnists that are invited to contribute from their field of expertise. One of the most popular issues of scientific controversy in 2004 was brain research and human freedom, so I decided to enter the market place with some ideas about this matter. Time does not allow me to present my arguments. But it is probably no less important to report on a collateral effect of this intervention. Writing in an on-line forum forces one to review the relationship between scholarly work and the blunt, unmitigated forces of public opinion.

Writing in a Central European context it is still possible to hide between the pose of academic legitimacy, quoting Kant against the neurophysiologists. Given those circumstances the rift between philosophical and scientific jargon seems inescapable. These considerations pushed me into a Socratic posture and towards an unanticipated conclusion: the unconstrained freedom on the market place (of ideas) is not a bad environment for abstract, encapsulated philosophical productions. Platonism, or its most recent offspring, digital, free-floating content objects, thrive on the forum. On the internet nobody knows that you are a God. There is no way to impress readers with the usual credentials. One solution is

to offer autonomous, self-standing units of knowledge/instruction. In the case of brain research the contribution responded to an experiment by Benjamin Libet which shows that so-called “activation potentials” are registered slightly before test subjects report on conscious intentions to perform a simple action. Within a tightly controlled environment certain observations are prompted and subsequently used to support deterministic conclusions. It is one thing to respond from within the disciplinary matrix of current philosophy of the mind and another thing altogether to take up the challenges of the forum.

One obvious challenge is that the lack of professional quality control favors rhetoric and opportunism. But, putting this problem aside for the moment, a more interesting question arises. What is the appropriate way to present philosophy taking the general public as the ultimate frame of reference? There is (i) an easy answer and (ii) an open-ended response. In some sense all that is called for is to report on the most recent “state of the art”, e.g. introducing the conceptual tools used by the experts. This would amount to giving a popular account of quasi technical developments in the theory of mind. Philosophy however, extends beyond expert knowledge. “Freedom” is more than a technical term within ethics and social philosophy. It is a concept that is deeply entangled in a web of high-order notions determining our self-understanding and generally guiding human behavior. To put it in a nutshell: a philosophical contribution on a web forum requires considerable abstraction *plus* the prospect of practical application. This is a big order. I'll list three helpful strategies.

One rule is to avoid tentative constructions, hypothetical loops and a lot of hyperlinks leading into neighboring territory. A forum is not a library. One has to make a point; peer-to-peer exchange is a different matter. The laws of public discourse demand fairly self-contained inputs in order to avoid a blurring of contours and a loss of accountability. Things are simplified, to be sure, that price has to be paid in an exchange of ideas across weakly related contexts. A second rule concerns a design problem. You should adapt the length of your entry to a standard given by “best practice” examples within the respective medium. The requirement usually evokes shocked protests from within academia. Yet, it is a matter of courtesy, not to mention enlightened self-interest, to keep to an average amount of written text. Attention is in limited supply and has to be exploited carefully. A third rule follows from the two preceding ones. It is impossible to treat complicated issues within the short span of attention provided by a web forum. The solution is to split the problem and offer several installments. My piece was called “Conditions for Freedom” and came in five parts dealing with “Beginning”, “Experiment”, “Possibility”, “Reasons” and “Discourse”. Just as the individual items of a TV series are implementing a characteristic pattern, albeit in a progressive narrative, the installments of the sequence were intended to communicate one message, elaborated from different angles.

Definitions of “learning objects” vary, but most include the following characteristics. They have to be self-contained, modular and re-usable. They are made to be combined into different curricula. In short: I have been producing something like learning objects. As it turns out the vernacular view of philosophy, applied to the new media setting, prompts the creation of mobile conceptual units of instruction. In fact, these modules feed into the incipient global exchange of digital information triggered by RSS-syndication and tentatively extended by recent standards governing the management of learning objects. So, what about the scepticism directed against the commodification of teaching voiced at the beginning of this talk? It seems that I have entered an exchange system dealing with packaged thoughts, similar to distributing vegetables in boxes.

3. Bare Essentials, Contaminated

Raising one's voice on the forum draws attention to the speaker. If she is not shielded by a special purpose she is engaging in a mild case of exhibitionism. Philosophy is such an undertaking. In talking about “freedom”, “reason” or “possibility” *per se* a philosopher loses the contextual embedding provided by issues like “freedom of speech in early modern Austria” or “Kripke systems for modal logic”. This makes for an exposed stance appealing to nothing else but words in isolation from their employment in language games. And, as Wittgenstein has convincingly pointed out, this leaves us with an empty Platonic shell everyone may use according to one's own liking (and profit). Yet, this is not the whole story. Take the discussion between neurophysiologists, psychologists and the interested public just mentioned. In order for this to be a debate at all it does not suffice to compare data about activation potentials and dopamin emission. If there is to be a *contest* common ground must be presupposed. The bare essentials of the notion of freedom must be recognizable and agreed upon if this confrontation is not to degenerate into showmanship and name-calling.

My point is that philosophical learning objects may provide commonplaces tying together diverging lines of discourse. Trivialities are very mobile items -- and necessary ingredients in building up a more sophisticated discourse. This might not strike you as an orthodox pedagogical strategy, but it is -- at least -- well in line with one prominent view of what philosophy is supposed to do: “Die Arbeit des Philosophen ist ein Zusammentragen von Erinnerungen zu einem bestimmten Zweck.” (Wittgenstein 2000, 280) To give a gloss that Wittgenstein would probably have rejected: philosophy is modular in design, dependent upon the re-usability of certain building blocks. Here is an interesting extension to this quote. “Das Lernen der Philosophie ist *wirklich* ein Rükkerinnern. Wir erinnern uns, dass wir die Worte wirklich auf diese Weise gebraucht haben.” (loc.cit. 282) The post-Tractarian Wittgenstein is usually quite critical of Plato. Yet, here we find him endorsing idealized abstractions, i.e. memories of quasi innocent originality. And his allusion to Platonism is obvious.

Following such hints we can see that important parts of philosophy have always worked this way. There is a wealth of puzzles, thought experiments and linguistic twists, starting from antiquity up to the present time. I'll only mention Zenon's antinomies, Plato's cave, Descartes' dream, Hobbes' Leviathan, Putnam's twin earth and Searle's Chinese room. Daniel Dennet has called such constructs “intuition pumps” and this seems to conclude the case in favor of learning objects in philosophy. I have hinted at a certain exhibitionism involved here. But this might better be described as a peculiar accessibility and transferability of its products.

Still, an essential part of the picture is missing. Wittgenstein talks about re-assembling memories *for a particular purpose*, which is precisely the factor that gets abstracted away in the creation of “intuition pumps”. A nice example is his own famous scale. In the *Tractarian* context it is to be used before being discarded. In November 1930 we find Wittgenstein re-deploying the metaphor. “Was auf einer Leiter erreichbar ist interessiert mich nicht.” (Wittgenstein 1995, 112) The message is very different, one might even call it the opposite of the earlier quote. Such is the fate of free-standing instructional units. Like pictures, philosophical learning objects are defenseless against misuse. To make matters worse, it is not even clear what court of appeal might judge against alleged misuse once one has stepped outside the customs of the land. Socrates did not die in bed.

Philosophy, it seems, embarks on a project of de-regulated exchange in cognitive goods and services. This is a pointless enterprise unless those units are re-integrated into some purposeful activity. Conceptual nudism, or Platonism, if you like, makes only sense where clothes are available. The beauty of ideas meets an unlimited supply of circumstances; the rest is learning.

Literature

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