A marketing touch that has become a waste of time!

(5/4/13)

It was meant to signal a close encounter. In consumer behavior it identified a means to customer satisfaction. In higher education it sought to highlight faculty-student interaction more readily achievable in a smaller learning environment than in a large-scale lecture hall.

But like so many promotional jingles, this one, too, seems to have run its course. What with the ubiquitous interest in globalization and the burgeoning adoption of MOOC’s (massive, open online courses), the once proud focus upon “personal attention” no longer finds its place in university marketing materials.

The reality still exists, of course, but now with a changed meaning, one that may reflect the increasingly insular effect of modern communications technology. In a recent article in The New Atlantis, Roger Scruton highlights the present and future problems of a generation that has made a fetish of its phones and tablets and has become accustomed to “hiding behind the screen.” Less dramatic, though no less connected, is the emerging reality that students require “personal attention” but do so in a way that differs from what this used to mean.

Today, the questions that students ask disclose not the traditional merit of intellectual curiositas but the mundane demand that teachers give instruction directly to each of them on an individual basis. No matter that the instructor has prefaced his lectures with instructions to the entire class on multiple days, or painstakingly explained the details in writing distributed to one and all, or posted the materials online for any and every student’s convenience. Such effort has become a waste of the teacher’s time, since he/she nowadays needs to say it yet again, this time “personally” to individual students who ask what has already been answered for the whole class.

Consider the student who wants the professor to tell her how she’s going to do in this course, as if the simple mathematics needed to calculate a grade exceeds her ability to figure it out on her own based on the grades already received. Or the student who wonders what needs to be submitted next, and asks that question less than an hour after the professor has explained the details of that very assignment. Or the student who demands to know what rubrics were used in evaluating his work, as if “excellent” cannot be distinguished from “average” without using some precise algorithm (and this, despite the explanations of differing grade levels already given on the syllabus or in the college catalog).

Mass communication may be doing wonders for the world, but in education it only goes so far. Modern technology may now enable the communication of information on a massive scale, but less and less is that information actually assimilated by the masses.
When one’s sphere of social interaction is centered on the communications device in one’s hand, the world becomes a rather small place, and learning is reduced to retrieving information that is, or should be, available at one’s fingertips. A university used to be the doorway to a “higher” education sought by students who become gradually equipped for their own learning and increasingly responsible for their own living. Today, instead, it is becoming a basement for “narrower” education with lowered expectations, where student demands must be met lest these young consumers regret taking this course or attending this institution.

“Personal attention” used to mean learning from one who already knows, in a setting in which many could benefit from a professor’s experience and wisdom. Now it simply means “tell me what I need to know” or “show me what you want me to do” so that I can get done what I need to do without expending too much thought or effort on my own. After all, as students increasingly bemoan, we have other things to do!

**REV. THOMAS F. DAILEY, O.S.F.S., S.T.D.**

Director

“Believing means entrusting oneself in full freedom and joyfully to God’s providential plan for history .... Faith, then, is an assent with which our mind and our heart say their ‘yes’ to God, confessing that Jesus is Lord. And this ‘yes’ transforms life, unfolds the path toward fullness of meaning, thereby making it new, rich in joy and trustworthy hope.”

(Pope Benedict XVI, 10/24/12)

**BOLD BELIEF** is a daily blog from the faculty at DeSales University, whose mission as an institution of higher education in the tradition of Salesian Spirituality is to foster vital dialogue between Roman Catholic faith and human culture.