

Book Review

Teaching Naked

Teaching naked: How moving technology out of your college classroom will improve student learning. José Antonio Bowen (2012). Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 2012. 352 pp. \$38.00. Soft Cover. ISBN 978-1-118-11035-5

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Abstract

This article is a review of the book *Teaching Naked: How Moving Technology Out of Your College Classroom Will Improve Student Learning* by José Antonio Bowen, with particular attention to its applications towards language instruction classrooms. Split into three sections, the book presents new technology that has recently become available, how to use it with special attention toward a flipped-classroom model, and finally some persuasive arguments for the inclusion of technologically-flipped classrooms in higher education (particularly American universities) written for an audience of administrators and policy makers. After a brief introduction section, I intend to critically examine each section, and close the paper with a discussion on the potential benefits and complications when applying this approach toward SLA and language classrooms.

Keywords: *educational technology, flipped classrooms, SLA*

Introduction

Technological advances continue to define and redefine the ways in which teachers and educators look at design, implementation, and assessment of learning in higher education. José Antonio Bowen, current president of Goucher College in Baltimore, musician, and joint PhD-holder in humanities and music from Stanford, is the author of *Teaching Naked: How Moving Technology Out of Your College Classroom Will Improve Student Learning* (2012), a recent publication attempting to address various issues related to technology in the university classroom. His book, a body of roughly 300 pages of text, is separated into three parts which address the digital landscape we now live in, the practical applications of technology in (and outside) of university classrooms, and finally advice for administrators currently employed in higher education as to the educational market in terms of online versus traditional face-to-face delivery methods for learning. In this paper, I will break down each part by summarizing the main points from each chapter, then include a synthesis of the goals and themes for these three sections of the book before finishing with a general discussion of the successes and areas of weakness found therein. Finally, the field of second language acquisition (SLA) has an established specialized field studying the use of technology in the teaching of languages, and I will attempt to approach the statements presented in *Teaching Naked* with a view toward their applications and potential dissonance with SLA pedagogy.

First, we will begin with a general introduction to the stated goals and audience of the novel. The book begins to shed light on these in its preface, mentioning its dual audience of “higher education faculty and administrators-with the dual purpose of illuminating both the why and the how of our technological and pedagogical feature” (p. xiii), and asserting that “technology is a technique, not a strategy” (p. xiv). Bowen then relays his goal “to show how new technology can support best practices in pedagogy” (p. xiv), and that this technology “is most powerfully used outside of class as a way to increase naked, nontechnological interaction with students inside the classroom” (p. x, italics in original). After explaining the structure of the book, the closing section of the preface reflects on the author himself, including the concession that “like most faculty, I have not been trained in pedagogy” (p. xvii), but quickly follows this by mentioning his discussion of the ideas in the book with pedagogy experts.

Now, we shall turn to look at the chapters in-depth and begin summarizing the work as a whole.

Summary

As noted above, the book is split into three parts comprising eleven chapters. Part One: The New Digital Landscape includes chapters one “The Flat Classroom and Global Competition,” two “Social Proximity and the Virtual Classroom,” and three “Games, Customization, and Learning.” Continuing to the lengthier Part Two: Designing 21st-Century Courses, we have chapters four through eight, named “Designing College More Like a Video Game,” “Technology for Information Delivery,” “Technology for Engagement,”

“Technology for Assessment,” and “The Naked Classroom” respectively. The final part, Part Three: Strategies for Universities of the Future, rounds out the remaining chapters with titles “The Educational Product in the Internet Age” for chapter nine, “The Naked Curriculum” for ten, and finally “The Naked Campus” for chapter eleven. A traditional bibliography and index follow the body of the text. For the purposes of this review, we will split the chapters into the same three parts described in this paragraph, beginning with part one.

Part One: The New Digital Landscape

The book opens with a state-of-the-union like address on the classroom and education as it stands after the Digital Revolution, pointing to the ubiquity of electronic forms of learning by way of a long list of examples of “flat-screen classrooms” (areas where learning has been primarily delivered on various technological screens), concluding that “The point here is not that online learning is better but just that it is here” (p. 9). Bowen utilizes the metaphor of 1970s General Motors (and their inability to take seriously the threat of foreign auto companies) to parallel the state of competition in American higher education and also faculty set in traditional face-to-face delivery methods. It becomes clear throughout this chapter (and holds true throughout the remainder of the text) that the focus for the book will be on American universities and their particular brand of education, using world markets and foreign universities more as a point of comparison to highlight aspects of the American market. Next, Bowen poses the question of “learning or credentials?” (p. 14) and notes rankings reports for American universities mostly concentrate on input factors such as SAT scores and selectivity, and include only “indirect at best” output factors like rate of alumni donation. Bowen continues by examining the pricing structure and noting that “it is at best a paradox, at worst appalling, that although we say we want to develop critical thinking skills, we structure most of higher education around delivery of content” (p. 20) before summarizing the four business models of education. First, the free model (which Bowen says will continue to grow); second the elite university (Yale, Harvard, etc.) model which will survive on brand recognition; third the for-profit and community college “results-oriented, flexible, convenient, and jobs-focused” model which students will continue to pay for; and lastly, the traditional university (sometimes referred to in the text as ‘middle universities’) without elite status and becoming increasingly expensive, whose future is more in the balance than the other models (p. 23).

Chapter two, “Social Proximity and the Virtual Classroom,” introduces the reader to the nature of social interaction in the digital age and makes the case for embracing new technology by providing examples of positive applications of Facebook, Twitter, and Skype. Additionally, the introduction of a key component of the book labeled ‘implementation’ sections begins to add the practical side with specific, concrete illustrations of the uses of each new piece of technology as it is presented. These implementation sections are less frequent in Part One of the book, but quickly become the core of the work in Part Two, as will be discussed later. Another noteworthy moment in chapter two shows a honing of the audience for the book, as Bowen writes “for many of us, going to concerts, lecture, the movies, or social activities provided time to be disconnected from

other demands. Our students, however, find requests not to text during these activities strange, annoying and downright silly” (p. 28), giving weight to the notion that mostly scholars past the Millennial generation (a dichotomy of Millennials and non-Millennial teachers returns several times in the remaining chapters) will be reading this book. Closing the chapter is the concession that “more contact is not automatically better contact, but the potential for increased reinforcement and application is there....The talking head is dead, but the need for thought and reflection will only increase” (p. 47), and calling for an awareness that “we engage and provoke students best face-to-face if we focus on human interaction. The best courses will make the best use of social and physical proximity” (p. 49), supporting the theme of his book that we maximize time in class with more non-technologically-enhanced human interaction.

Chapter three focuses mainly on presenting an extended metaphor of video games design to illuminate how we should design learning. Pulling primarily from James Paul Gee’s work and presenting a large body of research enumerating the many hours students are devoting to video games, Bowen introduces the concepts of customization and how the general structure of video games can teach us much about built-in incentives and lower consequences for risk-taking. Additional examples come from the world of mobile applications or ‘apps,’ and Bowen presents the many advantages of utilizing apps for education to extend beyond the physical sphere of the college campus. The final lines of the chapter state the potentially controversial declaration that “we need to make college more like a video game” (p.71), and part one draws to a close here.

Summary and critical reflections on Part One. Overall, Part One is mostly used as an argument for the inclusion of a wider variety of technology to keep up with the current market. The audience appears to be professors stuck on PowerPoint and lectures as their only delivery method, and teachers who are already proponents of technology might not benefit much from this introductory section of the book. Still, there is a wealth of resources and the inclusion of implementation sections beginning in chapter two is helpful for those looking for new practical ways to use the technology they may already be familiar with, but there is little attention given to the potential negatives of increased technology in and outside the classroom. The fast-paced nature of technological advancements also brings into question the staying power of the advice presented here as new updates and changing software is sure to quickly replace the recommendations offered. The scope of the book remains broad so that it can be applied to a wide range of disciplines, and a consequence is that there is no discussion of how certain disciplines might benefit more from this shifting of technology outside the classroom versus others that may have gains from keeping it inside. There is a stark lack of student voice included as support. Many statements are made as to the wants of the students (and to a lesser extent, parents), but they are almost exclusively generalized declarations without quotes or research cited to back up that this is truly a desire expressed by the student population. For so much discussion about the market and the value of education for students, the consumer’s voice is missing.

Part Two: Designing 21st-Century Courses

Part Two starts immediately where we left off with the title of chapter four “Designing College More Like a Video Game. This chapter mostly functions as the theoretical framework for the book, building on the presentation of Gee’s work and adding Zull (2004), Bain (2004) and the update on Bloom’s taxonomy of educational objectives provided by Fink (2003) (a central theory referenced with regularity in subsequent sections of the book). The headings in this chapter move from brain development, to models of intellectual development, models for designing educational experiences, to contexts for learning, and a look at the nature of motivation. The chapter heavily fluctuates between exposition and ‘implementation’ subsections, with nearly half of the chapter’s information delivered in the latter. Bowen’s call is to better integration and use of technology to motivate change (with repeated use of the video game metaphor established in chapter three) and creating “pleasantly frustrating” tests and constant low-stakes tasks “that motivate students to persist” (p.97). In closing, Bowen turns his focus on how “we now need to determine which technologies can most enhance learning and when and how we can use them to motivate change” (p. 102), the central questions of the following chapter.

Chapter five, “Technology for Information Delivery,” is the start of the most practical section of the book, and again we find implementation subsections occurring frequently. Bowen shows us tips for freeing class time with e-communication to deliver announcements; summaries; reading, files, notes, and handouts; and additional content ‘outside’ or before class begins, plus how to utilize email as a teaching technique with a concrete example from one of his classes. His central aim is to move first exposure to a subject from the PowerPoint-delivered lecture in the classroom to technology students view before coming to class (a variation on the educational concept of flipped classrooms). Next, Bowen thoroughly explores podcasts which he believes are “better than lectures,” both in that teachers can find a wealth of existing podcasts or create their own, and the benefits (mostly found on pages 114-116) they have over video-captured lectures. Separating these podcasts into modules, Bowen believes, will help make “the role of the professor in the future...less about creating new presentations of old content and increasingly about curating, assembling, and guiding students through existing materials,” or as he suggests, following “one of the maxims of the new media...’Do what you do best and the link the rest’” (p. 124-125). It is possible that this might create the added strain, however, of having teachers become experts on a wider body of online information so students do not find example modules with inaccurate or problematic information. Bowen assures us that “most of us object to meetings with 40-minute PowerPoint presentations followed by 10 minutes for questions. What we really want is to see the presentation in advance with some time to ponder it” (p.126), and it is on this premise that the technology-flipped classroom thrives.

Chapter six returns to motivation and investigates technology that engages students. It is beyond the scope of this review to highlight all of the advice given here, but the titles of implementation sections (motivating reading, the syllabus as motivational tool, twitter or text for recall, email for slow thinking, virtual labs, virtual study groups, Googling before

class, and primary data assignments) give us a glimpse at the range of topics addressed and the numerous applications offered. Bowen promotes transparency (“If you want students to read for content or first exposure, create clear reasons to do so,” [p.134]), and returns to the theme of the book as

the need for more nontechnological face time, but it is unpractical and perhaps even foolish to think that we can design assignments for which students will simply choose not to use the greatest resource ever created for scholars. If you want students to learn to do something longhand that can be done in a fraction of the time on a computer or the Internet, you should have good reason (p. 146).

One consistent complaint lodged against flipped classrooms is that it is only successful if students do the required readings beforehand (and fails if they do not do them). Chapter seven addresses these concerns by providing advice on using technology as assessment to check for completion of the outside readings and activities before students enter the interactional environment of the classroom. Advocating various uses of multiple-choice tests before class, Just-in-Time-Teaching, writing and peer-reviewed writing, and games to promote and ensure learning and preparation for classroom activities in the first half of the chapter, Bowen then challenges readers to rethink the test by presenting the collaborative, open-book, open-Internet nature of the current state of the world and the job market. He explains

Whether we are educating citizens, job seekers, or scholars, it makes sense to ask students to memorize less and analyze more. Whether we call it digital literacy or critical thinking, future students must be able simultaneously to find information and evaluate it. Making tests open book and open Internet creates a situation that is much more like the real world, but it also requires a radical rethinking of the notion of testing. We can still use multiple-choice question, but rather than ask questions that are about only pieces of information we need to design questions that test thinking skills (p. 178).

“The Naked Classroom,” chapter eight, begins with another heavy declaration that “we have a national problem: college is boring, and students are not graduating,” pointing its finger at the lecture-only classroom as a significant cause for this boredom (p. 185). The first few headings in the chapter investigate the place of lectures, exposing their good qualities (good at showing the correct entry points for content, excellent at motivation, providing role models, and at making connections and better questions), and challenging our common-sense assumptions about them (see implementation: picking the right pedagogy, page 190). Bowen then suggests alternative activities to happen in classrooms instead of lectures, mostly revolving around collaborative tasks, structuring good discussions, lab and studio work, and searching for ways to integrate service-learning projects. Also, tips are presented for what to do with students’ technology use in the classrooms and Bowen comments on the long-standing debate of banning laptops and cellphones (his stance: “respect students enough to make class interesting and worth the time to stop texting,” and “make some use of technology but have consistent poli-

cies: think about what your policies say about your attitude toward the modern world” [p. 209]).

Summary and critical reflections on Part Two. This section truly is the meat of the work as a whole, addressing the how-to and practical side that is implied by the subtitle of the book. Whereas Part One seems to lean heavily on only the positives of technology in the classroom, Part Two feels significantly more balanced and dives further into questions of what might arise when executing the suggested pedagogical implementations. The overall focus appears to be an attempt to shift the elder faculty audience Bowen continues to appeal to toward these new methods. A concern with this, however, is if the audience of this book has mostly been on teachers who are non-tech users, the switch to all these new gadgets might be a steep learning curve that would require even more time for new users to acquaint themselves with all the bells and whistles and subtleties that Bowen promotes. Teachers already accustomed to the platforms mentioned, however, may find this section most helpful in discovering potentially new uses for these familiar aspects of their teaching.

Part Three: Strategies for Universities of the Future

After endorsing technology and exploring its driving force of change in Part One, and demonstrating in Part Two how it can transform and improve on learning, Part Three opens with chapter nine’s “The Educational Product in the Internet Age” which attempts to “address the more administrative and financial issues confronting face-to-face high education and will argue that teaching naked is a vital strategy for its survival” (p. 217). Once again, Bowen utilizes extended metaphors by looking at the evolution of music, journalism, and the selling of books to give historical insight into how the digital revolution might change education. Pointing to a cycle recurring in these three spheres, Bowen lists three lessons learned—that the product can change, customization and social isolation will increase, and more choices will create new gatekeepers. He then defines our product as an experience, as local, as a hybrid, and as unique, challenging higher education to “distinguish the real product from its unnecessary packaging” (p. 231), limit the online strategies of middle universities (those not associated with elite brand names) to local regions, “replace larger lecture sessions with brand-name online podcasts and instead have local faculty interact with students in smaller face-to-face sessions” (p. 236), and “emphasize naked human connection across the curriculum and in all learning” (p. 239). The key, Bowen states in the close of the chapter, is in finding the right hybrid. “The best course of the future will combine both online and physical instruction, but in different amounts. The best curriculum will combine common courses from cheap online sources and physical courses that are offered only locally. The key will be discovering the right hybrid for your institution” (p. 241).

Moving into chapter ten, “The Naked Curriculum,” Bowen continues to zoom out to the larger administrative issues that we saw in chapter nine. Again he targets the middle universities, asking them “to choose whether to become part of a larger supply chain or grow a more unique local product.” The remainder of the chapter tackles the daunting

task of how to make changes from the top down, with headings such as “turn professors into curators,” “rethink the units of learning,” and “improve curricular progression.” A particularly detailed implementation section entitled ‘how deans can foster better teaching’ (pp. 247-252) is one of the strongest in the book. Bowen’s discussion of what is the unit of learning we should be looking at analyzes the idea of badges and credentials, then asks us why we continue to view the bachelor’s degree as 120 units or if there might be better alternatives. This subsection culminates in the assertion that “the degree is a unit of packaging, not the product. The real product is learning” (p. 259). The chapter ends with a push to improve curricular progression, stating “the current assumption in American higher education is that the course is the learning unit and that courses are additive and interchangeable: 30 credits makes you a sophomore, and 120 credits means you can graduate,” and further down “What this says about American education is that we are focused on content. If all we require is that any student complete the final exam to a sufficient standard in a certain quantity of courses, we signal that there is only a single level of thinking available or required” (p. 261, italics in original) and not the progression of more and more advanced critical thinking skills that universities claim is their mission and best case for their place in the educational market. He urges administrators to reflect on the nature of sequential learning (“why would we not require juniors to have better writing skills than sophomores in every class?” [p. 262]) that is or is not built into their curriculum.

The final chapter, “The Naked Campus,” moves to an even wider view of the state of bureaucracy in higher education, and considers the economics of the university educational system. Headings in this section promote integrating infrastructures, integrating learning, reconsidering price discounting, creating learning-based pricing, becoming curators of risk, and identifying the market so as to best serve it. How will this flipped-technology classroom change the nature of the buildings and classrooms we use if it is applied globally across all disciplines on campus, Bowen asks the reader. More large lecture halls might become available to be split into smaller, more experimental classrooms with moveable furniture instead of merely rows upon rows. Pricing based on learning outcomes might make faculty worried and afraid about administrators measuring ‘effective teaching,’ Bowen notes, but “if higher education priced its product...and delivered guaranteed learning for a fixed price, we would at least be consistent in our logic that educated students are the product” (p. 279). His advice for the “crowded” market of middle universities-”market differentiation will be essential in the future. Focus on the intersection of your core strengths and your core market and find something to do well” instead of fighting to make it or move higher on Top 50 rankings (p. 283). In the end, Bowen claims it becomes a necessity that “we...maximize the learning per square foot: it all needs to be naked” (p. 286).

Summary and critical reflection on Part Three. Considering Bowen’s history as Dean of the Meadows School of the Arts at Southern Methodist University and his role as current president of Goucher College, it may come as no surprise that the strongest area of this book is in the administrative section of Part Three. Where many books might be content to praise the new technology and offer advice on how to use it in a classroom, it

is to our great advantage that Bowen includes this final view toward integration of these practices into higher levels of the academic world. For those professors and scholars already tasked with extra administrative duties, this will likely provide substantial aid in advocacy for the significant changes Bowen presents throughout parts one and two. For younger professionals not currently as involved in the administrative process, this section proves insightful for the various concerns administrators face when attempting to incorporate new pedagogies or wide-spread modifications to existing systems.

Discussion

As mentioned above, the book does not endeavor to enter the discipline-specific benefits or applications, but most of the implications lead to a belief that the majority of the teachers reading this operate with a mostly sage on the stage, lecture-driven-only teaching style (since, Brown contests, most faculty have not received training in pedagogy) and “little to no training in course design” (p. 99). The language learning classroom, however, presents a different atmosphere, and in the following paragraph I attempt to analyze some of the points of *Teaching Naked* in view of this specific discipline and its typical classroom.

Bowen does address the foreign language education discipline in an implementation subsection in chapter three (see ‘implementation: foreign languages,’ pages 57-58) and also the market for flat-screen foreign language education on page 6, however briefly. Mostly, though, the text promotes a push toward more task-based activities and student production and discussion in the live classroom while technology is utilized outside the class. The propensity to find communicative methods as the dominant teaching style for many language classrooms in the United States means that a vast number of language teachers are already employing more student discussion and face-to-face interaction with their students (as opposed to the PowerPoint-driven lecture). Virtual communities, computer-assisted language learning (CALL), social-media sites and on-line aids for language learning have been a frequent point of discussion and research in the field of second language acquisition for decades, and the best practice tips in Part Two might not be as new to those who’ve attended large conferences of professional organizations in the field like TESOL International and other language pedagogy events. Additionally, many language textbooks in the introductory classes are mandatory and the insistence on utilizing pre-built podcasts from others’ courses and other universities might not overlap as well and could create resentment from students who buy the book and never use it. A positive to the pre-recorded podcasts and materials, though, might exist for non-native speaking teachers of a language where they could employ more native-speaker speech (and from a potentially wider range of dialects or geographical areas) for their students. Chapter seven’s use of technology for before-the-class assessment might be most applicable for language teachers in providing new ways to better prepare students for the day’s lesson. Chapter eight’s question of motivation for students to come to class instead of sitting at home is weaker in view of the fact that for many students of a certain language, however many hours a week they are in class

might be the only chance they get to interact with other speakers of the language (either other students or native-speaker teachers).

The main criticism with this work is its lack of student opinion and student voice throughout. As mentioned earlier, the support of the voices of our students that these are true desires for their education could greatly strengthen the points made in the text. Two research projects cited in the book appeared to have some feedback from students built in, but the only direct quote from a student appears nearly two-thirds of the way through the book on page 193. So much of this text depends on the truth that students want to see this kind of larger integration of technology outside of the classroom. Bowen says in chapter six “students like to distinguish between the classroom and the real world, and if you interact with students only in the classroom you reinforce this false dichotomy” (p. 136) and that technology “offers faculty the chance to change how much and how often students think about course content outside of class” (p. 30), but some students might not want to receive notifications, questions, and academic problems when not on campus. Some students do not want to mix social media, games, and other ‘fun’ activities with the feeling of academic ‘work.’ Without student voices represented, it is hard to know if these assumptions are truly catering to our students in the ways they are seeking. The subsection ‘implementation: sample reading introduction’ provides us with a nearly three-page example email in an attempt to show how email can be used as a first introduction to a topic before class starts, but one cannot help but wonder if students will apply the same logic as when they “might go to the library between classes, but most students could (and still) get by with just the class notes and maybe a glance at the textbook” (p. 127), skimming these email introductions for the necessary questions to pass the before-class assessment and ignoring the rest. Also, certain communities might be better built for access to technology and more accustomed to learning this way, while others might not. In the end, I believe it will come down to the assessment of needs of our students before utilizing this as a long-term pedagogy.

Teaching Naked appears to be most beneficial to scholars who have been working (mostly lecturing) in academia for long periods of time without pedagogical training, who have previously not attempted to incorporate technology, and who are in administrative positions. Many professors accustomed to technology in conjunction with teaching may find it best to skip Part One and focus primarily on Part Two for new ideas of implementation and assessment. Revisiting the goals and the audience as described in the preface of this book, I believe Bowen succeeds in speaking mostly to the readers he planned on addressing and presenting arguments for the pedagogical move of taking technology outside the classroom. In conclusion, as teachers with a wide range of student populations and student needs, it is up to us to monitor the evolution of online education and technology and decide if the flipped-technology classroom is the best model for us. If it is, Bowen’s Teaching Naked will be a good place to start and a great resource as we embrace this unique pedagogy.

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