

Reflections on On-Line Teaching: My First Course

Charles T. Tart

Institute for Transpersonal Psychology

*The following was written the week after I finished teaching my first on-line course, *Altered States of Consciousness*, ITP 768. Here are various reflections on it.*

ITP 768 is a graduate level course offered through the External Program of the Institute for Transpersonal Psychology, Palo Alto, California.

Bottom Line: Would I Like to Do It Again? Yes. In fact I'm scheduled to do it next winter quarter. It will be open both to external students and resident students.

Format: As with traditional courses, students had assigned readings for each of the 6 weeks of the course. Since this was supposed to be the equivalent of a normal 10-week residential course, reading assignments were heavy (four textbooks) although only parts of each book were assigned. Since "lecturing" was not really feasible unless I wanted to spend an immense amount of time typing into the computer, heavy reading was needed to be sure the students were exposed to the full range of materials.

Each student was required to post the print equivalent of a 2-page paper on the assigned topic for each week. In practice, students posted anywhere from 400 words (about 1.75 printed pages, double spaced) to 1200 words each week, for each student. I would post comments on the more interesting parts of these papers, usually within a day or two (the 6 week schedule demands concentration), and students were asked to post comments on each others' papers and comments.

This having all the other students see your papers was a new (and sometimes mildly stressful) experience for most students, but it ended up working out quite well. Thus the students all functioned as teachers for each other, and this was a very rich experience. It gave practice in public writing for students, which may have been one of the best educational outcomes.

Students completed a covenant of confidentiality at the beginning of the

course, so eventually felt comfortable in posting fairly personal material.

Initially I had told students to e-mail their papers to me, I would read and add editorial comments to them (answering questions, developing interesting themes, asking questions, and so on) and then I would post the more interesting parts of their papers to the virtual classroom. When I had to be away for a weekend, though, I realized I was a major bottleneck: class flow would be greatly hampered while I was away and nobody was writing anything uninteresting! So we switched to students posting directly.

Economics: Initially 11 students registered, but 4 dropped out for reasons of technical difficulty or not having the time to keep up the intensity required for a 10-weeks-in-6 course. Although I kept no track of my time in originally planning and setting up the course (that's what you do for any course), once the course started I ran a stopwatch whenever I actually sat at the keyboard to read student papers, comment on them, post news items to the class, keep track of participation, and so on. In many varied length sessions (4 minutes to 1.5 hours), I averaged 6.1 hours per week on this direct course work, or roughly 52 minutes per student per week.

These are accurate figures and don't really reflect technical problems that I would learn to overcome, as I'm experienced in e-mail and bulletin boards.

I think this is directly comparable in some ways to teaching a regular course, where I would spend 2 hours in the classroom and 2-3 hours reading and commenting on student papers each week over a 10 week period. On the other hand, each student in a regular course doesn't get 52 minutes of individualized attention each week, or even 31 minutes of individualized attention if I spread that 52 minutes over a 10-week time period.

The economic problem is that the tuition from 7 students does not cover my salary and institutional overhead costs. This is OK for an initial experi-

ment, perhaps even for the second experiment next winter, but it's not feasible in the long run. ITP has no endowment or tax support and can't run at a loss. So I'm open to suggestions for how to handle more students, say up to 15 in the on-line format.

One possibility I don't feel good about is having auditors who just read the material but don't post papers or comments. When you're discussing personal material that's supposed to feel confidential it feels funny to have "lurkers" that you know nothing about. In a live classroom you may have some people who are quiet, but at least you see them and have some feeling for who they are.

One possibility would be to simply limit the amount of time the instructor will put in, say 6 total hours per week, at the keyboard. I would find it necessary to read all the papers and discussion to keep on top of the class, but that would mean telling the students in advance that they may not get many comments on their papers. Do I flip a (many-sided) coin to determine whose papers I'll read first and stop commenting when the clock runs out? (Any other ideas?)

I think on-line instruction will be an important wave of the future. It won't replace live instruction in all cases, but at least supplement it. Thus we need to work out the economics.

Miscellaneous Advantages: One week when I was ill I saw the great advantage of the on-line format. Usually when I'm ill I have an hour or so in the mornings when I'm pretty clear, before the fever goes back up, and I was able to work on the class then and keep it moving. But I wouldn't have been able to drive in to school to teach a live class.

The fact that you can download stuff and upload your responses at your convenience is very handy. Little 5 and 10 minute blocks of time can become teaching time.

See On-Line Teaching/page 12

The 20th Annual International SPR Conference at Cirencester, England

The Society for Psychical Research will hold its 20th Annual International Conference at the Royal Agricultural College in Cirencester between Friday, the 30th of August and Sunday the 1st of September, 1996. The formal program of the Conference will include the presentation of papers on all aspects of psychical research and parapsychology, as well as some symposia or round-table discussions. Full details will be included in the July issue of the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*. The presentations will begin after lunch on the Friday and continue (with appropriate breaks) until lunch on Sunday.

Accommodation and meals can be provided at the Royal Agricultural College but early booking is advised. Twin rooms are available for couples but the charges per person will be the same. Limited en-suite accommodation is also

available at extra charge and will be allocated in order of application.

The charges for the whole Conference (in pounds sterling) will be as follows (with charges for SPR members and associates in parentheses): Accommodation plus Meals plus Registration, £160 (£150); En-suite supplement per room, £12; Accommodation plus Breakfasts plus Registration, £120 (£110); Lunches plus Registration, £66 (£56); Registration only, £44 (£40). Registration covers the cost of the Conference Abstracts, all tea and coffee breaks and the Sherry Reception. Accommodation refers to the two nights: Friday and Saturday. Meals refers to all lunches, dinners and breakfasts from Friday dinner to Sunday lunch inclusive. People requiring lunch on Friday should indicate this and add £38 to the booking fee.

The closing date for applications is the 15th of August 1996. If you would like to attend the Conference, please write to the SPR to obtain an application form or merely send a letter to the Society indicating your requirements, together with payment.

UK residents should send a check (in pounds) or postal order made payable to The Society for Psychical Research. Overseas applicants should pay via international money order, Eurocheque or with a check drawn on a UK bank.

The address for correspondence is: SPR Conference, Society for Psychical Research, 49 Marloes Road, Kensington, London W8 6LA, England. You may also phone or fax to 44-171-937-8984.

On-Line Teaching/from page 11

The "anonymity" of students can be helpful. I don't know if anybody looks "funny," what their cultural appearance was and so on, so everybody was "judged" straightforwardly on the basis of what they wrote. And I liked everybody as a result of reading their writings and comments.

For those who worship "objectivity," you can use your word processor to count the number of words in each student's contribution and so know for sure how much each student is doing! Of course we sophisticated transpersonal types would add a weighting factor based on transpersonal profundity to each posting, so that the sum of these multiplications would represent each student's contribution [;-)] [on-line symbolism for humor, in case someone is taking this last comment too seriously]. Seriously, I am asking Metanet (our host) to develop a good reporting tool along these lines as a way of easily knowing when a student is getting behind and needs encouragement, but not to base grades on.

With my own rough count, I can say things about this course like: more than

50,000 words were generated by the class; I posted about 67% of the words in the class, although this consisted of library items as well as my specific comments on student submissions and comments. Individual students each contributed 3% to 8% of the total words.

Miscellaneous Disadvantages: There is a "sparkle" when a good live class discussion gets going that you just don't get in the time-stretched-out format on-line. At least one student found the discussion somewhat disjointed for this reason and suggested a "talk" mode on-line, where everybody would be on at the same time. I don't think this would work, though, as it's a drag to watch somebody's slowly typed words appear on your screen when you're hot to respond.

The on-line format makes it harder to keep a detailed view of how the class is going. In a live class you can see puzzled faces or excited expressions that give you feedback that something is going poorly or well, but that's lacking on-line. Too, without exams it's

hard to know if everybody is doing all the reading and absorbing most of the material. It was quite clear from the posted papers and comments that the students were really working with and learning from the material they wrote about, but as to the rest of it ...

Students also strongly disliked the 6 week cram format! I think 12 weeks for the same material would be more like it, educationally speaking. That would also allow more time for discussion, which tended to slip away with the need to read a lot of material for next week's paper.

All in all, though, this was a successful experiment.

Comments and suggestions are welcome. You can mail me comments at ITP or, if you e-mail them to me, send them to cttart@ucdavis.edu. The relevant addresses are: Charles T. Tart, Professor, Psychology Core Faculty, Institute for Transpersonal Psychology, 744 San Antonio Road, Palo Alto, California 94303, or e-mail: cttart@ucdavis.edu.