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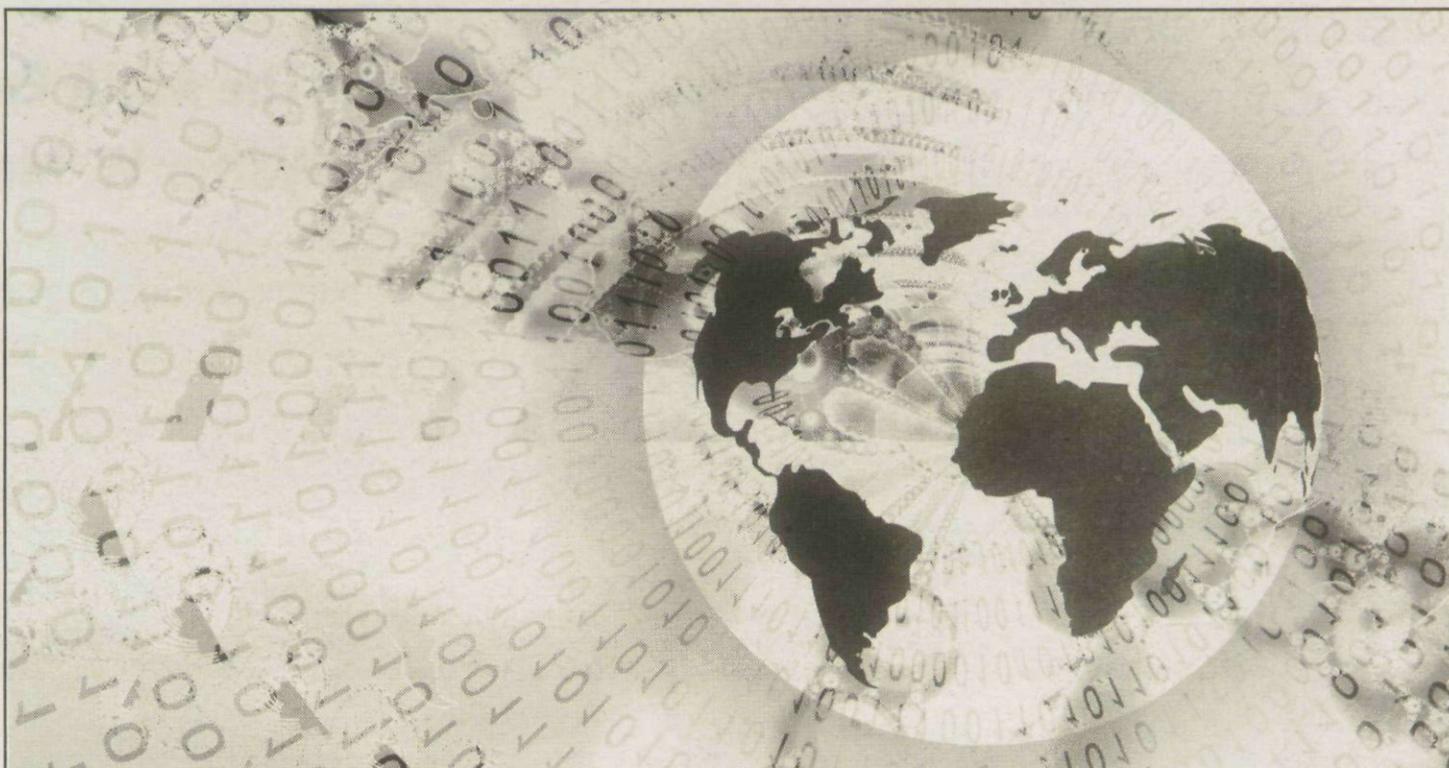
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straddling the digital divide: keeping a foot in each world

Mordecai Lee

Self-improvement is deeply embedded in American culture. That's the basis for the myriad of continuing education opportunities routinely offered no matter where one lives. They range from personal enhancement (creative writing, music appreciation) to professional development (Spanish for businesses, latest breakthroughs in pediatric nursing). Marketing research recently released showed that 15 percent of all Americans participate in at least one continuing education workshop every year. For my hometown of Milwaukee, it's even higher: 22 percent.

Yet, continuing education has always been treated by public administration as something of a neglected distant cousin. Public administration practitioners aren't in a licensed profession, so no one is compelled to take continuing education workshops in order to maintain one's status and ability to practice. Generally, our profession has instead rallied around the MPA as the basic (and terminal) credential. Have MPA, will travel, seems to be the motto. Finally out of the classroom for good! That's too bad, since like for licensed professionals, public administration practitioners would benefit from taking an occasional continuing education workshop. I also think that continuing public administration education is here to stay because for some people the traditional model of higher education (tests, papers and grades) is not a good fit for their personal learning styles. Continuing ed is an alternate path to professional training.

Certainly, the digital culture has permitted revolutionary changes in pedagogy in general. But, as a professor of public administration whose tenure home is in a school of continuing education, my conclusion is that continuing public administration education has tried to keep one foot in each of the two worlds, the traditional one and the digital one. The ongoing role of the non-digital and traditional approach relates to the heart of continuing education, classroom teaching. The other foot, in the digital world, relates to almost all non-pedagogic aspects of continuing education.

Several research projects I've conducted, as well as daily experiences teaching, have contributed to this observation.

The premise of continuing education is very much rooted in in-person pedagogy. The concept of a professional development workshop is to bring together practitioners and a seminar leader. Rather than the focus of one-way lectures used in credit-based education, the premise of a continuing education workshop is that the participants bring as much real world knowledge into the room as the instructor. True education, this orientation dictates, occurs as a result of free flowing conversation amongst all people in the room, not speechifying by the teacher. This kind of interpersonal synergy is more difficult to accomplish in a digital environment.

The Madison campus of the University of Wisconsin runs a Certified Public Manager program. For the last few years, they have occasionally offered online workshops of some of their classes. My own experience teaching one of their digital classes was a mixed one. On one hand, the asynchronous conversations by class members seemed to be successful. One student might keyboard some thoughts at midnight, while another would do it during normal business hours. The flow of conversation could be sustained. That was the good news.

The bad news was that certain topics were adaptable to digital education while others seemed a more awkward fit. Yes, I could lead a discussion about what might be important elements of successfully working with elected officials. But, my effort to take them on a detailed walk through certain legislative documents produced a seemingly endless posting by me. Even my mother wouldn't have been able to wade all the way through it. What could be an interesting topic for an in-person class didn't seem to translate well to the digital one.

These personal experiences were confirmed by a research project I conducted. Two summers ago, I surveyed all noncredit certificates in public administration. (The results will be published in *Public*

Administration Quarterly early next year in a symposium edited by Hindy Lauer Schachter and Howard Balanoff.) While I was mostly focusing on other pedagogic issues, it was apparent how little digital teaching had penetrated this category of higher education. Almost all actual teaching relied on traditional one- and two-day in-person classes. The same was true about noncredit certificates in nonprofit management, based on a similar survey I had done a few years before that was e-published in *Public Administration and Management: An Interactive Journal* (<http://www.pamij.com>) in 2002. So, the teaching side of continuing public administration education seemed to reflect the customary traditions of in-person learning.

On the other hand, digital technologies seem practically universal in the non-pedagogic aspects of continuing public administration education. Both from my survey results and from personal experience, it is fair to say that the potential of the digital world has been largely adopted. Pretty soon, continuing education in public administration will be totally paperless in all respects outside the classroom. Nowadays, as with credit-based education, a student can do just about everything online: peruse a program's requirements, receive the latest timetable, register for classes, submit tuition payments, and pose administrative question and get answers. This has truly been a revolution in how education is administered (as opposed to how it's taught) and it has happened as fast as in other areas of life. What a decade ago would have seemed exotic is now commonplace.

Can continuing public administration education continue to straddle these two worlds? Is this getting the best of both worlds? Or, is the seeming compromise of relying on the traditional and the digital aspects of education inherently unstable and doomed to failure? My conclusion is that technology is unlikely to replace totally the benefits of the in-person classroom experience. Yes, there are degrees

we can earn a degree without ever stepping in a classroom, but should we?

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and certificates in public administration that can now be earned completely online. Some are offered by accredited institutions of higher education. So, yes, it can hypothetically be done in continuing education as well. In the future the technology of real time two way (or more) video-streaming will inevitably get better, overcoming its oft times herky-jerky quality.

But, like the army general who believes that no advances in the technology of warfare can ever totally replace the traditional 'boots on the ground,' I predict that digital technologies will increasingly contribute to advances in continuing public

administration education—just as long as we don't completely eliminate the in-person workshop. The human touch is not an abstract concept. It's about the social nature of learning. We don't have to give up on it totally just to stay au courant.

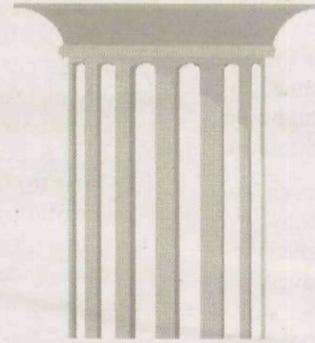
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