

OPINION

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Letter to the Editor

Cyberspace Classrooms and E-Professors: *One Laptop Learner Considers the Merits and Downfalls of Online Classes*

UCSB has recently begun to experiment with teaching online classes. Many parts of the traditional face-to-face lecture class work well online, but some do not. Knowing the difference between when the web works and when it doesn't is the only way the university can teach online classes without eroding the quality of education.

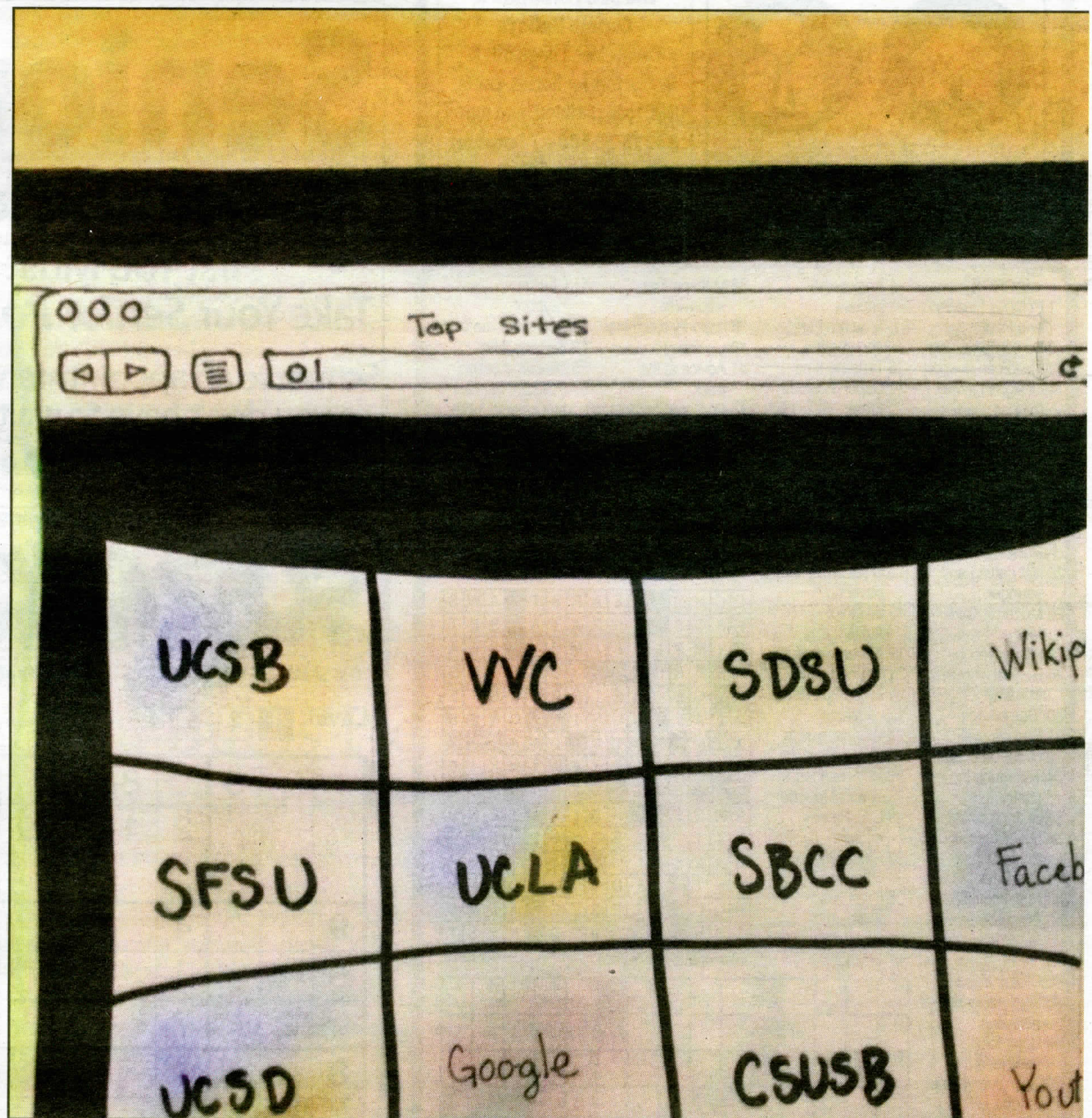
One place the web shines is in its replacement of the traditional lecture. Lectures are often one-way, with the professor disseminating information to the students. There is no reason this information broadcasting can't be moved online. Some on-campus professors make their classes interactive by inserting questions to check the student's understanding, often with iClickers. This can be done online as well. I took a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC), a course delivered simultaneously to tens of thousands of students from the University of Michigan, and in this class, most of the lectures had integrated multiple-choice questions into the lesson. Because the web can replace the traditional lecture, courses like MOOCs are made possible. It also allows lectures from the best speakers to be disseminated widely.

The online lecture format is different from the traditional lecture format and has some unique requirements. It is very important that online lectures are videos. There is much more to a lecture than a professor's words or even the sound of his/her voice; body language conveys a lot, and movement of any sort (be it a video of the professor or video of a whiteboard) lends visual interest and helps keep the students engaged. Also, with the number of distractions available on the computer, it is very easy to lose interest in the class without ever intending to. To these ends, lectures need to be broken up into separate chunks timed at less than 20 minutes each that build on each other, with each containing a single big idea.

One of the wonderful things about online classes is that they are easy to fit into a busy schedule. It's OK to stop after any video and return later. Formatting the class this way allows people not only to fit the videos into their schedules but also allows people to easily find the video on a specific topic if they wish to review it later.

So the lecture is easily moved online. That's great! But there is a lot more to a university class than the lecture. One of the goals of a university, and especially a research university like UCSB, is to create a community of scholars. This requires not only interaction between the students and the instructors but also unstructured time between professors and students in which they can ask questions too esoteric or off-topic for a general class discussion. Theoretically, this could be done online, but I have yet to find a more productive way to communicate with faculty than meeting in person. Many online classes have discussion forums, but these have a disadvantage because there is a significant time lag in posing a question, receiving a response, posing a follow-on question and so on. Real-time electronic communication technologies could potentially change this, but, as Jane Jacobs observed in 1957, "person-to-person (even with video added) is no substitute for face-to-face." This is still true today.

Khan Academy understands this very well. They are promoting a model in which video lectures occur online, and students do exercises in class where they can receive help from their instructors. This "flipped classroom" approach takes full advantage of



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the strengths of the web to disseminate information without losing the critical person-to-person aspect of education.

I took Geography 12: Maps and Spatial Reasoning online at UCSB in the fall. The class was well-done. The instructor as well as the TAs had open office hours each week. There was also an on-campus section. Many of the activities in section could have been moved online, but this is something that must be decided on a class-by-class basis.

In general, online classes need to be made up of engaging videos to replace the traditional lecture, and we must remember that there is more to a university class than the lecture. We need to address all these things in order to perpetuate the mission of creating a community of scholars. Otherwise, we are shorting both the students and the university.

Matt Conway is a third-year geography major. He has enrolled in online courses at four universities.

Views expressed on the Opinion page do not necessarily reflect those of the Daily Nexus or UCSB. Opinions are submitted primarily by students.