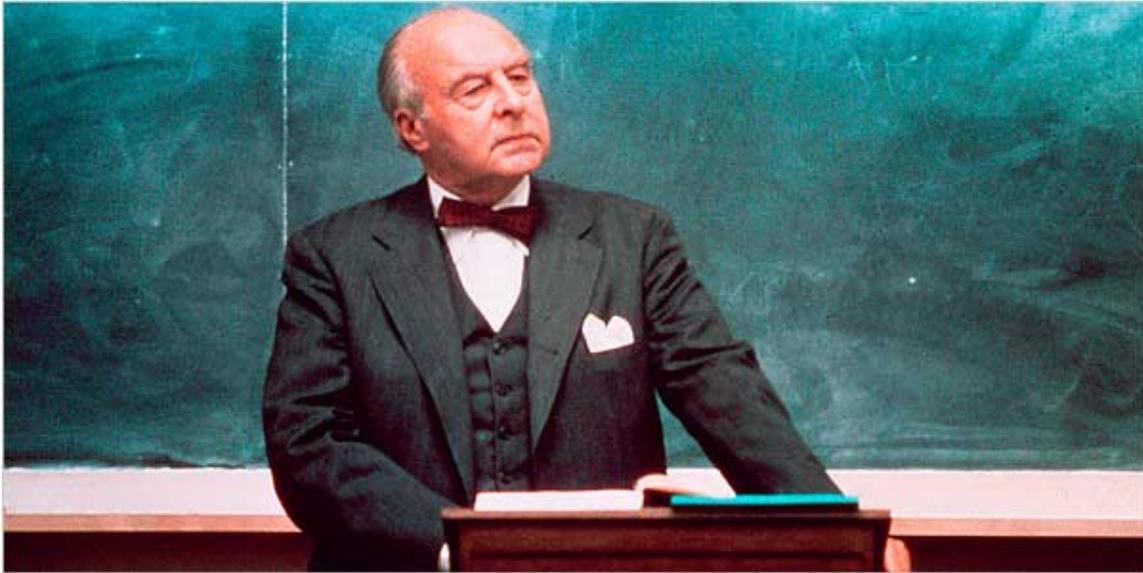


The Professor as Open Book



John Houseman, "The Paper Chase," 20th Century Fox/Kobal Collection

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IT is not necessary for a student studying multivariable calculus, medieval literature or Roman archaeology to know that the professor on the podium shoots pool, has donned a bunny costume or can't get enough of Chaka Khan.



Yet professors of all ranks and disciplines are revealing such information on public, national platforms: blogs, Web pages, social networking sites, even campus television.

When scholars were recently given the chance to refute student criticism posted on the Web site RateMyProfessors.com, a cult-hit television series, "Professors Strike Back," was born. The show, which has professors responding on camera to undergraduate gripes such as "boring beyond belief," made its debut in October on mtvU, a 24-hour network

broadcast to more than 7.5 million students on American college campuses.

“It’s our dominant show driving half of the traffic to mtvU now,” said Stephen Friedman, general manager of the network. “It gets more than our music premieres.”

There was a time when professors did not outrank music premieres on television. They were buttoned-up authority figures, like the legendary fictional Professor Kingsfield, portrayed by John Houseman in “The Paper Chase.” The personal lives of professors could only be imagined from the sparse clues of clothing, handwriting and the contents of offices.

These days, the clues are usually digital and are broad invitations to get to know the person behind the Ph.D. It is not uncommon for professors’ Web pages to include lists of the books they would take to a deserted island, links to their favorite songs from bygone eras, blog posts about their children, entries “written” by their dogs and vacation photographs.

While many professors have rushed to meet the age of social networking, there are some who think it is symptomatic of an unfortunate trend, that a professor’s job today is not just to impart knowledge, but to be an entertainer.

Certainly, professors have embraced the Internet since its earliest days, using it as a scholarly avenue of communication, publication and debate. Now it is common for many to reveal more personal information that has little connection to their work.

Some do so in hopes it will attract attention for a book or paper they have written; others do so inadvertently, joining Facebook to communicate with students and then finding themselves lured deeper by its various applications.

Many, though, say that by divulging family history and hobbies, they hope to appear more accessible to students.

William Irwin, an associate professor of philosophy at King’s College in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., has a Facebook profile, appeared on “Professors Strike Back” and, last summer, created a MySpace page (with a harpist playing music by Metallica) that he says had some 10,000 friends.

Note the word “had.” Mr. Irwin’s page, on which he was blogging constantly, he said, vanished around Thanksgiving for reasons he has yet to unravel.

“There were all kinds of people I was meeting,” he said. “It was kind of an exciting alternate universe to be part of.”

Mr. Irwin updates his Facebook page with photos and titles of books he is reading, but he misses what he calls the Las Vegas feel of MySpace. Still, his postings ignite a

conversation with students. “Anything I can do to kind of meet them halfway,” he said, “I try to do.”

This sentiment is shared by scholars who think that knowing that your Latin professor likes fly fishing and runs a knitting circle could improve the teacher-student relationship.

David H. Collingwood, a mathematics professor at the University of Washington and a Web page pioneer, whose online photographs show him drinking wine in Italy, mountaineering and scuba diving, said in an e-mail message that undergraduates in large classes often fear approaching the professor for help. Having a common interest can break the ice.

“I have students come to my office hours and comment on a commonality between their interests and mine,” he wrote. “For example, one student said they had sat in precisely the same spot as I had in the Italian Cinque Terre town of Vernazza.”

Nate Ackerman, a lecturer in mathematics at the University of Pennsylvania, whose Web page includes information about his wrestling achievements and photos of him with his cats, agreed. “It’s better when your professor’s human,” he said.

Some scholars suggest that the need to present oneself so chummily is indicative of student demands. Sam Gosling, a psychologist and an associate professor at the University of Texas at Austin, who has about 300 students on his MySpace page, said there are students today who think professors are not doing their jobs unless they convey information in zany, interactive ways.

It is something he sees reflected in student evaluations and something that anyone can observe on RateMyProfessors, where students critique classes with comments like “bring a pillow.”

When David Linton, a communication-arts professor at Marymount Manhattan College, was asked in “Professors Strike Back” to respond to a student who said his class was “not a happy learning experience,” he said in part: “What the hell does that mean? Who the hell said it was supposed to be happy? I hope it’s good. I hope it’s stimulating.”

With his frank rebuttals and voluminous puff of gray hair, Mr. Linton has become something of a celebrity thanks to such appearances. “I walked into the gym the other day and some woman on the treadmill looked up and said ‘I just saw you on RateMyProfessors.com,’ ” said Mr. Linton, who is now dreaming up a series, “Professors at Play,” that would juxtapose scholars’ work at universities with their personal hobbies. Were he to have his own episode, he would like to be ice or roller skating.

“It bespeaks a certain kind of desire that all of us have for that moment of fame,” he said.

But there are those who prefer to be more opaque, at least in cyberspace. “I can see it if somebody’s using a Web page to store syllabi and articles and store biographies, store

vita and that's fine," said Stephen Eric Bronner, a political science professor at Rutgers. "But just to say 'I shoot pool' or 'I play poker,' this kind of thing, what does it really mean? You humanize yourself in front of your students. You don't have to do it through that."

Mr. Bronner, who recently returned from Darfur, was perplexed that more people remarked about his appearance on "Professors Strike Back" than his trip. "I don't know, I find it a very odd thing," he said. "It's just, it's irksome in a way."

There are many reasons professors have embraced the Web and other media to reveal more of themselves. Mr. Gosling, whose studies include personality and virtual environments, noted that people are far less formal in all areas of life. "Twenty years ago, many fewer professors would have been wearing jeans and sneakers to work," he said.

It is also possible, he added, that some professors are doing online what they have long done in their offices: displaying family photos and personal artifacts, decorating with posters, literally keeping their doors open.

Mr. Friedman of mtvU said it is the nature of the age. "I think it's part of this increased transparency," he said.

He acknowledged that watching the uninhibited scholars responding to student criticism on "Professors Strike Back" is "almost as if your therapist, who you know nothing about, is going to come and respond."

"It feels as if they are breaking some kind of wall," he said.

And yet, in some ways, the online and on-screen chumminess may not cross over beyond those realms. A number of professors said the most disarming thing of all to students is when they encounter a professor not on a Web page, but in the real world.

When a student spotted Mr. Gosling on a street near campus, he said, "She looked at me in, like, horror. Like, 'Wait a minute, you have a life?' The idea that I would continue to exist — it was sort of a violation of her expectations."

The Professor book. Read 1,048 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. The Professor was the first novel by Charlotte Brontë. It was originally published in 1847. Open Preview. See a Problem? We'd love your help. Let us know what's wrong with this preview of The Professor by Charlotte Brontë. Problem? This book starts off promisingly enough, but as the character grows less sympathetic and the plot draws out predictably, much of the charm is lost. Perhaps it was not unexpected that I would be drawn into the plight of a young, educated man thrust out alone into the world with no prospects, forced to work pointless jobs for frustratingly inept employers for subsistence. It mirrors not only my experiences, but that of most of my generation. Professor McLearn is an unlikely champion for open source software as his background was as an engineer for a large software company which sells very expensive network solutions to corporate clients. He worked there for ten years before he was made redundant in a takeover of the company. "It was the best thing which has ever happened to me," he now says. Tips for Open Book Exam Prep: - from the standpoint of information content, open book exams are no different from normal exams; - as such, you need to have a thorough understanding of all the core material - your primary focus - and elaborative material under the exam syllabi; - during class, make sure you understand key concepts from the instructor, and if you don't, ask questions for immediate clarification and/or elaboration; - ideally, you should always prepare your new lesson the night before the class lecture on the next day, so as to facilitate schema activation; that's to say