



When Ads Enter the Classroom, It's a Deal With El Diablo

By David Debolt

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First it was the long-distance phone calls. Professors in the history department at the University of Montana at Missoula were told this past spring that the university could no longer foot the bill. Then the annual travel budget was slashed to \$350 per person—enough to get as far as Lansing, Mich., but just barely, as the department chairman, Richard Drake, puts it.

“I think they would expect us to parachute in to Lansing and then hitchhike to wherever else we needed to go,” Mr. Drake says.

Finally came the copy machine. When the toner ran out, the department had to finish the semester without it.

In the midst of this economic mini-crisis, one of the professors, Kyle G. Volk, came up with a bright idea: Get a local business to sponsor a course. After all, advertisements and sponsorships have become commonplace on campuses, so why not in the classroom?

Mr. Volk cut a deal with El Diablo, a locally owned taqueria, to sponsor his course, “The Americans: Conquest to Capitalism.” In exchange for \$250, Mr. Volk plastered the restaurant’s logo on the syllabus, handed out the stickers to the course’s 250 students and, on the first day of class, projected its stick-figure devil image, with horns, tail, and pitchfork, on one of the classroom’s walls. His plan was to use the sponsorship as seed money for a department newsletter and other projects.

As you might suspect, the plan did not sit well with administrators.

But why not? A quick tour of the average American campus reveals advertisements lurking in many corners. They come in different forms and range from subtle to blatant. Billboards and signs fill football stadiums named for corporations. Colleges sign exclusive contracts with Coke or Pepsi, then line their hallways with their soft-drink machines. Fast-food chains offer meals inside campus dining halls and cafeterias.

Even classrooms are sometimes sponsored—named, much like buildings, after longtime donors. Those names, however, are branded on the outside of the classroom—and that’s where they need to stay, says T. Bettina Cornwell, a professor of sport management at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor.

Naming rooms for donors “is not as in your face as being on top of a course outline,” says Ms. Cornwell, who studies sponsorship-linked marketing.

For her, the question is what is being advertised and where. She says, for instance, that it is acceptable for a local bank to sponsor a business-college breakfast. In fact, such events occur often. But placing ads within classrooms—where students receive the majority of their education—could influence or distract from the learning experience, she says.

Denis G. Arnold agrees.

Mr. Arnold, an associate professor of management the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, compares classrooms to polling places, where campaigning is prohibited within 100 feet. “In order to protect the intellectual freedom of students, there should be a protective ‘bubble’ over university classrooms,” Mr. Arnold says. One exception to that rule, he says, is requiring students to bring a newspaper, which tends to contain ads, to class.

A syllabus is different. “Good students” have no choice but to look at it, he says, and in required courses are a captive audience.

Alex Molnar, director of the Commercialism in Education Research Unit at Arizona State University, says introducing ads into the classroom affects professors' abilities to act as "impartial arbiters, who attempt as best they can to seek truth and express the truth as they see it."

"In a classroom the point is to provide an educative experience that gives students greater knowledge and power, control over what they know," he says. "The point of advertising is 180 degrees different. It is to manipulate and to control through manipulation people's choices in a particular and favored direction."

Not everyone sees the classroom as a sacred temple. Douglas Rushkoff, an adjunct assistant professor of media theory at New York University, sees no harm in advertising a local eatery during class. Today's students are inundated with advertisements throughout their day, so why not in class as well? he asks.

"I don't think it is as pernicious if the ads are communicating directly and openly to the students about what they might do in real time as students between their classes or around their studies," Mr. Rushkoff says.

Mr. Rushkoff is more concerned, he says, with corporate interests that try to influence how a student should think about the subject matter.

One example is at the University of Florida College of Dentistry, where Astra Tech, a developer and manufacturer of medical devices and dental implants, endows the college. In exchange, students work with the company's dental implants in their training. One official says the college simply cannot afford to develop equipment and technology itself. Without them, the official says, students fall behind industry trends.

"How do you get your students exposed to technology generically without marrying yourself to an industry conflict?" asks Samuel B. Low, an associate dean at the university's Health Science Center.

Educators there are vowing to improve the balance—and variety—of products they present to students in the classroom. Mr. Low's position, associate dean for continuing education and strategic partnerships, was created last year to serve as a faculty liaison between the university and its corporate sponsors. Before new products reach students in the College of Dentistry, he says, they will have to be approved by a curriculum committee made up of faculty members.

Exclusive arrangements exist at other health centers as well, Mr. Low says.

"It is a true dilemma," he says.

Back in Montana, students seemed unfazed by the ads in Mr. Volk's classroom and, for the most part, did not mention them. One student told the professor the partnership was "strange" but not a distraction.

But the sponsorship with El Diablo did not last long. The university informed the professor that the agreement violated a campus policy adopted in 1977 that states, "the use of paid advertising relevant to academic programs or offerings shall be limited to the dissemination of information rather than solicitation." Officials said Mr. Volk's arrangement with the restaurant was a "good-faith mistake," though, and did not punish him.

The professor no longer promotes tacos and burritos in class, but advertising persists. It's just more subtle. When he opens up PowerPoint, he's saying, "go Microsoft." The computers in his class whisper, "I'm a Dell."

"I'm not intentionally doing it," he says, "but still."

Comments