

The Emperor's New Web

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When I first joined the NUS more than ten years ago, I immediately realized that what Singaporean students wanted more than anything else was “the notes”. If you gave them lecture notes, they would love you and give you great teaching evaluations. It seemed to me that a lot of them confused collecting lecture notes with learning. I found this very frustrating, but at the time the message coming down from the top was clear: The NUS wanted to move away from spoon feeding, and we were discouraged from handing out notes.

But everything changed with the coming of the web. It seems like somebody has decided that the way to become world-class in teaching is to have a web page. Now what are you going to put on that web page? The beauty of the web is that it allows for interactivity and hypertext. Creating such course material, however, requires a lot of both work and knowledge. So what to do? Easy, just put the lecture notes on the web! Our servers are now filled with course pages containing static, linear text. But just because it is on-line, rather than in the cop, it is somehow supposed to represent a great leap forward in teaching.

I believe very strongly that learning is not a spectator sport. The main thing is to make sure that the students really read the material, and I believe that most people find it much easier to read a printed textbook than an on-line version. So what will we achieve by putting lecture notes on-line? We will put *both* publishers and the copy shops out of business, waste countless staff hours in typing lecture notes, and trick students into believing that having access to the lecture notes is the same as having learned the material.

I think the web is a great tool. I very much appreciate the effort the Computer Centre has put into developing IVLE (Integrated Virtual Learning Environment, ivle.nus.edu.sg). I especially find the discussion forum extremely useful, but this is because it facilitates activity. Putting typeset notes on the web does not in my opinion add significantly to the learning process.

So why this urge to put the notes on the web? I believe that part of the reason is to look good. Now that it has been decided that we are supposed to be world-class, we need to have something to show off. A web page with lots of typed lecture notes is a great way to show that we are “number one in Singapore and JB, and some say the world”!