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ARE COLLEGE CAMPUSES OBSOLETE?

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On one recent night, the Intelligence Squared U.S. debate series put forth a motion on Columbia University's campus: "More Clicks, Fewer Bricks: The Lecture Hall Is Obsolete." This is heavily contested territory, as both the setting and the style of the debate reflected. Columbia itself is the owner of quite a few nice-looking bricks, but, only last month, the university



signalled its intention to start producing online courses. The Intelligence Squared events are inspired by traditional Oxford debates, decided by the votes of the audience, but they're judged electronically. The points and counterpoints were streamed and tweeted live, but in tone the evening still evoked the charm of a winsome classroom professor: percussive jazz-fusion tracks piped in before, friendly anecdotes during, and a reception, in lieu of office hours, after.

The four debaters, each one an expert and three of them professors, knew their arguments well—this battle has had many skirmishes. Anant Agarwal, the C.E.O. of edX, an online education platform, opened for the clicks. He conceded that fewer than five per cent of the students in his online course had successfully passed it, but pointed out that so many people had signed up for the course that those five per cent were *still* more than he could teach at M.I.T. in forty years. Columbia's own entrant, Jonathan Cole, the John Mitchell Mason Professor of the university, parried, citing a lack of evidence for any of online education's "messianic" claims and professing faith in the established model. "People learn from each other when they eat together, read together, converse together, *sleep* together. If nothing else, sex will reinforce bricks over clicks on the campus," he said.

Rebecca Schuman, a professor, columnist, and bricks stalwart, admitted that the online courses she had taken in preparation for the debate were fun and educational, but said that she just didn't believe that they could replace the intimate interaction between a teacher and students. That sort of uncertainty, and where it rubs up against the idealism and potential of online education, is at the core of this debate.

Alisha Fredriksson happened to be seated in the audience. Fredriksson, a high-school senior at the Mahindra United World College, in India, has been accepted for the inaugural class of the Minerva Project. When she enrolls, she'll be part of a grand experiment in undergraduate education, a member of a small, globe-trotting cohort whose college experience is almost entirely removed from the traditional campus.

After attending a preview weekend for admitted Minerva students in San Francisco, where the first year of the program takes place, Fredriksson took the same plane east as the program's founder and C.E.O., Ben Nelson. He was en route to Columbia, to argue for clicks onstage. She was headed to visit her older brother, and so she came along to the debate as testimony to Nelson's argument, and, at the very least, as a vote for his cause.

When Fredriksson enrolls at Minerva, she'll begin a modern, digitally enhanced version of the old grand tour, stopping for hyper-immersive semesters in San Francisco, Buenos Aires, Berlin, Hong Kong, Mumbai, New York, and London. Her experience will be mediated by an online learning interface ("Skype on steroids," she called it), which seems to be equal parts panopticon and academic seminar: everyone can see everyone else's face on their screens, and the professor can call on anyone at any time, or rewatch and review any student's session.

As one of the first and most important variables in this educational experiment, Fredriksson and her fellow-students in the founding class won't have to pay tuition. (Subsequent classes will be charged ten thousand dollars for each year.) But the stripped-down cost of the reengineered college, while certainly attractive, isn't what most excites her. "I know how to do well on tests, but that's not relevant," she explained. "Now I want to learn by doing."

What Fredriksson wants seems, at first, counterintuitive. She attends a rigorous International Baccalaureate high school halfway around the world, but says that she hopes to gain a more intensely local experience through this online program. If she does, she'll rely primarily on a remote interface to form close connections with other young people and to navigate her surroundings. As she sees it, her role as a first-year student at Minerva will place her among "the

guinea pigs of guinea pigs”—she’s been promised the freedom to shape her own education in a novel way, even while her classroom activities, like the wider program around her, are closely monitored. (Being a guinea pig, of course, may not be what every student wants from their college experience—Minerva boasts Bob Kerrey as executive chairman and Lawrence Summers was an adviser, but its program is still largely untried.)

Back onstage, the panelists were coming in for scrutiny as well. In a round of audience questioning, the clicks side was asked if, in attempting to separate research from instruction and then package the latter for the masses, they were, “in effect, freeloaders on the university system,” disseminating knowledge without creating it. Others wondered how well the online model could prepare students to enter the job market, and questioned its suitability for less vocational coursework, in poetry, creative writing, or the broader liberal arts.

On this evening, though, the doubts seemed doomed to rearguard action; it’s difficult to argue against technology when the audience is voting instantly and electronically. The crowd, filled with Columbia students and academics who live and work among the bricks of their classrooms, libraries, and dorms, awarded the win to the clicks. For one night, anyway, the lecture hall was deemed obsolete.

Photograph courtesy Intelligence Squared.