large class in a lecture hall at the University of California at Berkeley. The student
government had approved a note-taking service called, for some arcane reason,
Black Lightning. With the professor’s approval, a graduate student would attend
lectures, take notes and type them up, whereupon Black Lightning would duplic-
ate the notes and offer them to students for a nominal fee (and to the professor
for free).

With some trepidation, I agreed. Students wanted the service. I read the first
draw sets of notes and was reasonably impressed. The graduate student in question
evidently knew what he was doing. My thinking looked tidier in his transcription
than in my own notes. In fact, a professor who wanted to regurgitate the same notes
year after year could use those nicely printed notes the next time and the next.

But I soon saw that class attendance was down. Not drastically down, but
down. I was not aware that questions in class were stacking off. I have long
encouraged students to interrupt lectures with questions, partly to raise the plane
of comprehension, partly to keep them thinking, partly to generate arguments.
Enough students normally did pipe up, during an 80-minute period, to enliven
the class. But now that the notes were available in cold black type, the students
were less available in spirit.

So when that semester was over, I stopped giving permission to Black Light-
ning. Some students weren’t pleased. But I didn’t and don’t think that the Uni-
versity of California had hired me to please. Needless to say, in an age when the
Bill of Rights seems to begin with the right to nonstop entertainment, this is a
controversial belief.

Now, it may well be argued that universities are already shortchanging their
students by stuffing them into huge lecture halls where, unlike at rock concerts or
basketball games, the lecturer can’t even be seen on a giant screen in real time. If
they’ve already shortchanged with impersonal instruction, what’s the harm in of-
fering canned lecture notes?

The amphitheater lecture is indeed, for all but the most engaging professors,
a lesser form of instruction, and scarcely to be idealized. Still, Education by
Download misses one of the keys to learning. Education is a meeting of minds, a
process through which the student educes, draws from within, a response to what
a teacher teaches.

The very act of taking notes—not reading somebody else’s notes, no matter
how stellar—is a way of engaging the material, wrestling with it, struggling to
comprehend or to take issue, but in any case entering into the work. The point is
to decide, while you’re listening, what matters in the presentation. And while I
don’t believe that most of life consists of showing up, education does begin with
that—with immersing yourself in the activity at hand, listening, thinking, judg-
ing, offering active responses. A download is a poor substitute.

I can’t comment on the quality of the notes posted at StudentU.com, the
new, advertising-supported Internet venture. When I tried to register yesterday a
message came back that my ZIP code in lower Manhattan was unrecognizable to
the machine in charge.