Education as Commodity:
The Ideology of Online Education and Distance Learning
by
Douglas J. Cremer

INDEX:
- Abstracts: [English] French | German | Italian | Japanese | Spanish |
- PDF Files
- .01. Introduction
- .02. Consumerist Ideology and the IBM Report
- .03. The Student and Professor Online
- .04. Moving Technology Assisted Learning Away from the Consumerist Paradigm
- .05. Conclusion
- .06. Notes

.01. INTRODUCTION

It has now been a number of years since historians and others began teaching with the enhancements of computer technology. We have often focused on the things that this technology can do for us as professors and what it can do for our students. We have seen web sites created for both research and instruction. We have seen many universities increasing resources devoted to online education, including using such services as Blackboard or WEB-CT, to provide course materials, discussion groups, and exams via the Internet. Some of these materials are developed to assist or augment existing classroom-based courses, but others are used to bring students located far from the university into courses mediated solely by the computer. Most of our discussions concern what technology can and cannot do, what are the advantages and limitations to this or that approach, what kind of resources are available for faculty training in technology, or how can one best put these tools to use in research or teaching.¹

These are and will remain worthy and important questions, but what they avoid are the ideological implications of the embrace of technology in the teaching of history, as well as in the teaching of most other disciplines in the university. One aspect of this technological revolution, online education and distance learning, in its purity of application and its complete dependence on computer-mediated courses, reveals much about some of the ideologies behind the merger of higher education and computing and provides a window into the whole. The consequence of this ideology is the reduction of the academic enterprise to another commodity among the panoply of goods available to the global consumer.

.02. CONSUMERIST IDEOLOGY AND THE IBM REPORT

Market-driven language shifts the focus of higher education to the numbers of students enrolled and courses offered, to markers of quantitative productivity rather than qualitative assessment. A consumerist ideology makes of education just another product delivered by clicking a mouse, sitting at a terminal, and waiting for the package to arrive. It reveals most clearly the political and ideological processes already underway in other areas of the university. Higher education in the mode of distance learning opens the possibility of reducing the student, someone who should be actively engaged in the acquisition and critique of knowledge, to a consumer of intellectual property. Online education has behind it a worldview that would relegate the professor, someone who is among the creators and analysts of knowledge, to a facilitator of this consumption, all in the name of efficiency and increased market-share.² The challenge this ideology poses for those of us committed to the egalitarian, democratic, and empowering potential of online education is to develop an alternative language, an ideology of resistance to the corporate, for-profit, consumerist ideology at the heart of much current distance learning.

From the California Virtual University to the New Promise Internet University and other projects throughout the country, universities are apparently eager to bring more students into their programs. By some estimates, 85% to 90% of all colleges and universities in the United States have established online learning and distance education programs.³ The push towards creating virtual universities comes from a desire to create a consumer-oriented model of higher education that will be more responsive to corporate demands for both specifically trained employees and technology related product markets. It is part of the postmodern push towards efficiency and performance, towards marketing and productivity. It is part of a discourse that frets over the digital divide, not out of a true concern with racial or class discrimination, but in order to place fear in the minds of consumers (and university administrators) that they will be left behind by the technological revolution. It is part of a move to
reduce human interaction, and thus education, to the isolated, manipulable and functionalist demands of a technocratic and consumer society.4

In 1996, a roundtable of educational and business professionals sponsored by Educom and IBM issued a report on the virtual university. This document emphasized the need for "learning-on-demand and learner-based instruction" in order to improve "access and learning while meeting legitimate public and institutional concerns about cost and quality."5 In 1998, another report, sponsored by Microsoft, noted that information technology could solve problems created by the pressure on universities to "control costs, improve quality, focus directly on consumer needs, and respond to competitive pressures."6 Note both the corporate sponsorship and the language: while the concept and quality of learning is important, it is overwhelmed by other references to demand (read consumption), access (read consumers), and concerns about cost (read efficiencies of production). The IBM report, for example, focuses on drawing in thousands of working adults as new consumers of university products, on shifting to a "consumer-centric model" of higher education where students become customers, and on competing with for-profit enterprises who deliver certifications of competencies rather than degrees.7

The assumptions of these studies concerning higher education are based on an ideological assessment of market forces at work in the so-called New Economy. By 2007, the authors of the IBM report argued, corporate mergers and attrition will have reduced the number of colleges and universities, residential campuses will be pricing themselves out of the market, and for-profit providers will have an edge over traditional institutions in the competitive market for students. These students will not be seeking degrees, but competencies, and modularized courseware and electronic delivery systems will customize intellectual product for the mass market. Finally, economic pressures will keep costs for delivering instruction low and demand for financial and academic services high. The results for faculty are a decreasing share of the university's budget, higher faculty-student ratios, and a transformation from content expert to "leader of a learning-process."8

I am not interested here with whether or not these predictions are coming true. Rather, I am interested in how our rush towards the technology and the obvious advantages of the new media has obscured the ideological foundations and ethical issues underlying the move towards technologically assisted education. In order to get to these foundations and issues, I want to broach a number of questions. For instance, what do we know about the people studying online and how does this impact online teaching practices? What are the ideological implications of creating a "facilitated learner-centered environment," one in which students allegedly take a more active role in their learning but where all social interaction is technologically mediated? Finally, how can the possibilities inherent in the technology of online education be freed from its instrumentalist, corporate-consumerist ideology and used for progressive educational goals?

.03. THE STUDENT AND PROFESSOR ONLINE

The majority of online students are working adults with some collegiate experience trying to complete degree or certification requirements. They have working and familial responsibilities far above those of the stereotypical unattached and non-working 18-23 year old college student. Their perspective is pragmatic and functional, and often comes with little time for reading and reflection.2 In many of these respects, however, online students are not that different from the majority of first-generation traditional classroom students encountered by professors on a daily basis, who also have pragmatic and functionalist prejudices towards learning and studying as well as multiple responsibilities outside of the classroom.

The alleged special and different nature of the online student is the first of many fallacies promoted by the online learning industry and its allies in academia. They see online learning and the creation of "learning-centered environments" as a vast opportunity for enhancing institutional income, for standardizing educational content according to quantifiably measurable tests, and for monopolizing intellectual property by turning students into consumers and consumers into a newly-expanded concept of the "learner." Current online theory reinforces this view, especially theories of constructivism and active learning.10 The shift to using the term "learner" in this area of theory diminishes the need for study and reflection inherent in the idea of the student. It tries to replace it with a prejudice for action and other naive ideas of common-sense learning, to the detriment of many online "learners." The "learner" is thus not a far cry from the "consumer" of intellectual property, with all the implications for manipulation and control of both the student and the professor that such a market-driven approach implies.

For example, a recent study of students' distress with online education showed that students' expectations of "prompt unambiguous feedback" translated into a demand for immediate feedback from professors to e-mails and other communications, even though most students worked on the course on the weekends or in the late evenings.11 Assessment of online education comes more and more to resemble customer satisfaction surveys. This is precisely what needs to be avoided: the adoption of a vocabulary and a practice driven more by marketing and sales than pedagogy, by an either/or polarity that posits a narrow choice between teacher-centered study and learner-centered facilitation.

To consider the professor as mere "facilitator" is to surrender to a functionalist term that implies no need for subject-matter competence, let alone expertise, lending itself to the replacement of faculty by administrators eager to fatten the bottom-line of their institutions. In the New World Order of 2007 put forth by the IBM report, only some faculty will maintain the role of content experts. Other will be differentiated into "learning-process design experts" and "process-implementation managers."12 A "facilitator" is here understood as one who assists "learners" in their activities of learning. She or he is not the author of the course "content," merely a conduit from the sole "content provider" to the "learner."
Some courses, such as basic mathematics courses, economics courses, or other lower-division courses driven by textbook instruction, already fit this format. A study done at Cal State Northridge in an introductory statistics course showed that students who learned through distance techniques actually performed better than their counterparts in the traditional classroom. Yet even the author of the study argued that one "must distinguish between the form and the content . . . [distance learning] may only be useful in the abstract, only for certain kinds of classes."\textsuperscript{13} Remedial education and basic skills in computation may be one thing, but higher order critical skills in problem solving, textual analysis, and complex writing seem ill served by this construction of the online medium.

Basic mathematics courses are also a far cry from the reality of most in-classroom instruction where the instructor has prepared class materials from her or his own training and education and created a synthesis of multiple sources that will be to some degree unique to that instructor. If a traditional in-classroom instructor was to merely take "content" provided by another and distribute it to the students, interacting only to critique their work or explain this other-provided content, she or he would be ridiculed. Student complaints about professors who teach only what is in the textbook or who drag out the yellowed lecture notes once a year to read them to the class are legion. The professor who acts as a mere facilitator in the classroom is rightly criticized for regurgitating well-worn information, yet when in the new online modular environment the same act is performed it is hailed as innovative.

.04. MOVING TECHNOLOGY ASSISTED LEARNING AWAY FROM THE CONSUMERIST PARADIGM (Return to Index)

What is to be done to prevent the ideology of online education predominant in distance learning formats from becoming the dominant model for all of higher education? The growth of technological media in the university cannot be reversed, nor should it be. In fact, the development of asynchronous means of education are a great benefit to many who otherwise could not obtain the advantages of a university education. The inherent democratization of the university held within the technological revolution needs to be embraced, but without the diminution of intellectual rigor and the market-driven, consumerist ideology that wishes to package this education as another commodity. Teaching with technology, whether as an adjunct to the classroom or in a distance learning setting, needs to be rooted in a theory of truly collaborative learning between professor and student. It requires faculty to have both a great amount of subject-matter expertise, a facility with responding to student initiatives, and practical comfort with the technology involved. It requires that students take the initiative with their own education in collaboration with the professor and their advisors, not as a customer demanding a satisfactory product to be delivered at their doorstep.

The problem with current active learning theories is that they are described as learner-centered, wherein there is "volitional control of the learning process resting with the learner."\textsuperscript{14} Such a misleading concept gives a false sense of power to the "learner," who can now insist as the consumer of intellectual property that she or he is "always right" and that the course should be tailored to her or his specific needs, like any other customer. What is essential is a collaborative concept of the professor as a fellow traveler and inquiring mind. Although an "expert" in the area of study, the professor is also still a student, studying the material of the course along with the students.

This requires that online teaching practices include a significant amount of synchronous, face-to-face communications, either over a video network or in person in a classroom.\textsuperscript{15} This is essential if the student is to move from a functionalist, consumerist perspective on education to a holistic and intellectual perspective through continual acts of collaboration and dialogue. It requires instructors to guide students from the mere fulfillment of requirements placed as roadblocks to their economic advancement to seeing thinking and studying as ends in themselves. It also demands that the studying of the course be a process that the instructor undergoes along with the students. And it means holding on to the idea that good teaching is an act of subversion. Online education needs to be thought of as capable of developing higher levels of intellectual reflection, not merely technical knowledge. It needs to be flexible enough to accommodate individual learning styles, rigorous enough to challenge students' preconceived knowledge, and indeterminate enough to leave room for creativity, initiative, and individuality.\textsuperscript{16} This is the great challenge. It means that the online environment should force us to reevaluate how we teach in the classroom as well as in distance settings. It means challenging market imperatives to increase class-size and quantitative productivity markers in defense of relational instruction and personal attention. By stressing that higher education is collaborative, not the unidirectional imputing of product into a consumers' mental household in exchange for monetary credits, we can begin to build a counter-ideology to the commodity paradigm of higher education.

This is actually the great benefit of collaboration as a teaching and studying technique. Online education and its related technologies actually make such reconceptualizing easier, if not imperative. By de-centering the "lecturer" and disturbing the apparent passivity of the student, collaboration actually moves the student closer to the goal of reflective self-consciousness and responsibility for her own education and study. True students are never really passive, even if they appear to be merely listening to a lecturer, another way that the educational jargon of "active learning" reinforces learner-consumer prejudices against the hard work inherent in the established educational system. Active learning as an ideology also encourages the belief in easier routes to enlightenment, progress, and above all, promotion and upward social mobility.

Collaboration, by soliciting the students' input in such areas as syllabus construction, subject emphasis and work assignments, actually requires a great deal of flexibility on the part of the instructor.\textsuperscript{17} It also requires a willingness to accept on the part of the student that he doesn't already know what he needs to know both in terms of content as well as in terms of critical questioning and horizon broadening. The instructor must lead the students from their initial ideas and conceptual frameworks into new realms of knowledge and experience. She must take their inspirations and desires and molding them
into new shapes and ideas, while at the same time often accepting the lead of the students on the paths to be demarcated.

.05. CONCLUSION (Return to Index)

The practical question that remains is how faculty will be brought into this process of reevaluation, of ideology critique, and of constructing new models of higher education. Current criteria for tenure and promotion need to be reexamined in the light of online technology and the need for the development of alternative models of instruction.\textsuperscript{18} Development resources need to be targeted to faculty involved in rethinking course design and incentives created to entice recalcitrant faculty into what appears to many as a difficult and time-consuming process. Many faculty emerge from doctoral programs as content experts, and some graduate schools are addressing the need for practical classroom experience, but much needs to be done in the area of technological training. Here, institutions of higher education need to invest resources and create programs for existing and incoming faculty.

Finally, students and faculty need to be addressed in a language that refers to them as individuals, as members of a larger society, and as participants in an intellectual community, with respect and dignity. Speaking of markets, consumers, competencies, learners, and facilitators empowers only the purveyors of educational jargon and their corporate goals of reducing higher education simply to developing skilled workers. It does little to draw students and professors into the possibilities that online education holds for individual development, creative growth, and social empowerment.

When conceived of and executed in a dialectical way, collaboration, even in the venue of online education, is neither a revolution that threatens to replace the brick-and-mortar university nor another way of doing the same old thing. Collaboration is a push to re-think all forms of education by making them neither "instructor-centered," with its traditional hierarchical power structure, nor "student-centered," with its consumer-oriented market ideology. Collaborative learning has its roots in the traditional Socratic sense of students seeking knowledge together. Perhaps this is the revolution in higher education that can be brought about. Not the oft-predicted one of consolidation, regimentation, and standardization that the current corporate-consumerist ideology of online education and distance education seeks, but one that looks back to the models of the past, to a pre-industrial age, while embracing the potentials created by the future, by the technological age.

.06. NOTES (Return to Index)


7. Twigg and Oblinger. 1996.

8. Twigg and Oblinger. 1996.


11. Noriko Hara and Rob Kling. 2000 "Students’ Distress with a Web-based Distance Education Course: An Ethnographic Study of Participants’ Experiences" Center for Social Informatics [http://www.slis.indiana.edu/CSI/wp00-01.html]


Douglas J. Cremer
Woodbury University
7500 Glenoaks Blvd.
Burbank, CA 91510-7846
douglas.cremer@woodbury.edu

© 2001 Douglas J. Cremer
All rights reserved