⚜ NINE ⚜

THE NEW FRONTIER:

Web-Based Education in U.S. Culture

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E-learning has become one of the hottest new training modalities in the United States. More than one third of all 4-year colleges and universities offered some form of distance education in 1997 (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997), and the offerings are on the rise. By the year 2000, more than 56% of those same institutions were offering distance education programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). In 2000, more than 3 million learners were logging in for distance education opportunities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). The growth in Web-based education is an explosion unparalleled elsewhere in the educational enterprise (Daniel, 1996; Jones, 1997), and it is mirrored in corporate training shifts to e-learning. Fueled by fear of open-market competition and recent advances in Web-based design tools, the economies of scale for distance education have become *very* attractive to a variety of organizations. Web-based learning offerings proliferate particularly in America because the enterprise appeals to some

of our most basic, stereotypically American values. This paper explores these cultural assumptions and then discusses the ways in which the rhetoric of democracy espoused by American politicians may not meet the realities of implementation in American e-learning programs today.

America has been perhaps the fastest growing of all international markets with regard to Web-based degree and certificate programs. There are many reasons why this is the case: an open, permeable higher education system; the efficiency value of Web-based degree programs; the independent nature of online learning; the history of vocations in higher education in America, and the myth of the meritocracy. As you read this chapter reflect on the following questions:

- How is the promise of open access being lived out in your experiences in distance learning or e-learning?
- What impact in terms of race, gender, class, and power dynamics results from these open access promises?
- In what ways does the rhetoric of democracy match or mismatch the realities of e-learning in America today?
- What are the possible predictable failures of our current efforts to democratize higher education in the United States through e-learning?
- What sorts of systemic impacts and unintended consequences may result from current implementation for online learning in the United States?
- What ideas do you have for solving some of these problems?

OPEN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

Although Web advocates would certainly take issue with me on this (see Olsen, 1999a), the relatively open and permeable boundaries of the higher education system in America have led to a rapid proliferation of Web programs of varying quality. Many involved in the movement feel that the requirements of governmental and university accreditation bodies are slowing down the potential of Web-based learning. However, because much of the training in online learning is vocational in nature, the need for a name brand university degree may be decreasing in certain areas. It is my view that, increasingly, the need for university certification is less a requirement and more a note of status. Jones University is the first all online university to gain regional accreditation (Olsen, 1999a), which they proclaim prominently on their Web site and in their advertising. Jones University is a large online university offering a wide

variety of primarily master's and bachelor's degrees in business, education, and communications. Their accreditation has caused quite a stir among traditional academics. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) objected strenuously to this accreditation, pointing out that Jones International does not have many of the specific requirements that the accreditation has been enforcing for traditional universities, such as adequate facilities, sufficient numbers of full-time faculty, and established curricula. While the debate may go on, the accreditation has not been revoked, and in fact, it is this openness that encourages many new and entrepreneurial businesses in America to flourish . . . a perceived cause of our excellent economy.

As Web degrees grow, the possibilities for gaining knowledge necessary for vocations will also become less and less dependent on the university for certification. As with any economy where the quality control mechanisms are relatively loose, some unscrupulous entrepreneurs will take advantage of the public. In the case of online learning, this phenomenon easily leads to the problems of diploma mills such as Monticello University, which the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Olsen, 1999b) reported was sued by the state of Kansas for selling doctorates and law degrees online for as much as $8,000. State officials claim that Monticello, headed by a former insurance agent, was in violation of the Consumer Protection Act. However, Monticello countered that the Consumer Protection Act does not apply to businesses engaged in "the dissemination of information," and therefore they had not committed any crime. Whenever there is a lack of consumer protection, there is also the potential for rapid growth and entrepreneurialism in an economic sector (in this case education); however, there is also a corresponding opportunity for unethical and clearly undemocratic capitalist advantage.

Efficiency Value

For many in America, a Web-based education system promises to be more efficient than the traditional system (Daniel, 1996; Jones, 1997). With online learning, there is no more need for travel, there are potentials for streamlining a huge bureaucracy full of administrators and expensive faculty, time is saved, money is saved, and, presumably, the educational goals are met. For a Fordist culture still under the influence of industrial work models and efficiency studies, the idea that this time-consuming endeavor could be less expensive and more efficient is not merely attractive, it is seductive. When the Louisiana legislators learned about Web-based education, they fell into a fiscal love affair

with online learning in the hopes that many professors could be eliminated and the system could be totally automated. Their hopes had backing. In May 1998 Coopers and Lybrand (accounting firm) released a white paper saying, "Instructional software could easily substitute for campus-based instruction, or at least be a substantial part of the delivery system" (Woody, 1998, 1).

Computers are not neutral tools, they express certain values at the expense of others, and one of their primary values is efficiency. In many other cultures, the value of efficiency may be more elusive, or there may be a more balanced recognition that efficiency at the expense of quality of life or effectiveness is not a good bargain. But in America, we almost always seek the most efficient, cost-effective solution. We put family farmers out of business with this value, and we may do the same to our current system of higher education. Perhaps only the educational equivalent of agribusinesses will survive this latest assault of efficiency values. As Berry (1996) writes of the plight of family farmers,

> The governmental and educational institutions, from which rural people should by right have received help, have not helped. . . . They have eagerly served the superstition that all technological innovation is good. They have said repeatedly that the failure of farm families, rural businesses, and rural communities is merely the result of progress, and such efficiency is good for everybody. (p. 410)

It is not important to us that the overall impact of this choice may be to homogenize our dietary or educational products, or that we may eliminate a way of life for a treasured segment of our society. Where distance education is concerned, we don't even seem terribly concerned that there may indeed be differences between face-to-face modes and distance education. We have tried very hard to convince ourselves that, in fact, it is the same experience—even though fundamentally everyone does understand that it is different. The debate as to whether it is better or worse could go on for decades, and probably will, but the idea that it is no different seems wholly disingenuous. A recent Sloan Consortium (proponents of online learning) press release touts, "Online learning is as good as being there" (Sloan Consortium, 2003a). The complete report (Sloan Consortium, 2003b) surveys academic leaders and administrators and indicates that "a majority of academic leaders (57 percent) already believe that the learning outcomes for online education are equal to or superior to those of face-to-face instruction" (p. 3). Meanwhile, faculty everywhere toiling away with heavier workloads because of online learning programs question whether

or not the experience is really the same or really superior. The tools have indeed improved dramatically over the past decade, but the experience of being in a face-to-face experience cannot so easily be dismissed. As Sclove (1995) points out,

> Even nascent or hypothetical new electronic media that convey a dimension-ally richer sensory display are not a substitute for face-to-face interaction, because electronic media implicitly choose how to decompose holistic experience into analytically distinct sensory dimensions and then transmit the latter. At the receiving end, people can resynthesize the resulting parts into a coherent experience, but the new whole is invariable different, and in some fundamental way less than the original. (p. 108)

Why would we accept an educational system that is in some fundamental way "less than the original"? It is likely that we are able to overcome our concerns about the quality issues because it is seen as a highly efficient system that allows each of us to pursue our own goals individually. It is inter-esting that so many academic leaders and administrators have such faith; in my experience, it is not so wholeheartedly mirrored among their faculty counterparts.

Independent Nature of Online Learning

We, in America, love our independence. There is almost nothing that is more precious to us than the ability to determine our own individual des-tinies and to pursue them with all vigor, potentially alone. The recent rise in libertarianism may be a hallmark of the sort of culture that fosters a reticence toward increased governmental or communal action to the benefit of many (sometimes at the expense of a few). Libertarians eschew all sorts of governmental intervention and control over our everyday lives. It is not my aim to credit or discredit libertarianism, but the nature of such a movement, and its growing popularity along with the growth in mainline politics of a "smaller government/less intrusion" attitude in America, is on the rise. We *like* our independence. We want to be able to carry guns even if that causes lethal errors. We want to allow bizarre performance art to exist (as long as tax dollars do not pay for it) as a statement that anyone in America can do as they please. Online learning is directly in line with this stereotypical

American value. In Web-based education, you can select from among many consumer-oriented choices and pursue your dreams. You can work all by your-self, and you can attain your success completely independently. It is not impor-tant that the American Psychological Association recently reported that all this independence usually also leads to isolation—even from your own family—or that recent reports suggest that the Internet can even be addictive.

However, this independent learner that we are quite interested in encour-aging may experience negative feelings of disconnectedness. This has led to a good deal of scholarship raising questions about the building of community within online learning spaces (e.g., Lock, 2003; Lindner & Murphy, 2001; McCarty, 1999). In addition, we are looking for all sorts of different *tools;* technological tools, naturally, to create community where there really isn't a natural tendency toward community. We look to Web logs, discussion boards, bulletin boards, text messaging, chat rooms—anything that we think might reconnect us without actually bringing us into direct contact. Nevertheless, the lack of community has caused increased feelings of isolation and eventual withdrawal from online learning programs (Rovai, 2002; LaRose & Whitten, 2000; Wegerif, 1998).

Here again, the immutable nature of technology manifests itself. It is not a neutral tool that can create anything. I am reminded of a recent Star Trek episode in which the beings of a certain planet capture a sick creature and keep it alive just enough to take advantage of its ability to form itself into any shape or thing that is desired by those around it. In the end, there is terrible pain for the creature that has a specific nature and is trying to please those around it by becoming a neutral tool for them. In the long run, is incapable of this because it has an underlying nature which is muted when it is manipulated in this way. It reminded me of online learning. We start with a tool that is all about effi-ciency and information dispensation; that is what it is good at—computation, dispensation, and so on. We discover certain efficiencies and decide it may be a useful tool for learning, even though there is nothing about its nature that causes us to believe this. After exploring this possibility, we find that the tool is useful for information dispensation, but not so useful for other forms of learn-ing, and that, in fact, it tends to disconnect people rather than connect them. So we try to retrofit the basic nature of the thing so that it *can* connect people. The basic nature of the tool, however, the existential nature of the experience of online learning is isolating. It is more isolating than if you were to go to a class-room and attend face-to-face learning experiences.

VOCATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION

The history of American higher education has been a tale of evolution away from liberal education and toward increasingly vocational goals. Abraham Flexner (1930), in his strident and remarkable review of universities in England, America, and Germany points out the vocational nature of American higher education with great disdain:

> Is it strange that the general American public is utterly at sea as to what education is, as to what purpose the college serves, as to where the line should be drawn between mere tricks, vocational training, practical experience, and intellectual development . . . (pp. 66–67)

> Some of the reasons for the low quality of college education I have already given, but there is one more, reflective of the tone and spirit of American life that is especially important. The American wants to get ahead . . . It is no exaggeration to say that most college students look upon college as a means of getting ahead in life, for them the college is largely a social and athletic affair. Intellectual concentration would take too much time; it would restrict the student's social contacts. . . . There is another strange feature that keeps our colleges down to a low intellectual level. As a nation we believe in initiative, as all pioneers must. . . . Almost no one at the top has been deliberately trained for his post; anybody may, if really able, become anything—banker, executive, general, diplomat, scientist, editor—what not. (pp. 72–73)

This rather scathing critique of the system of higher education as it existed in America in 1930 has certainly only increased over time. The extent to which our football coaches are paid more than our university presidents speaks rather directly to the athletic angle that Flexner takes, but the increase among vocational degree programs, and the consequent decline among undergraduates majoring in philosophy, comparative literature, and sociology speak clearly to the importance of getting ahead in America. College students in the United States are wooed by the promise of human capital. Not surprisingly, online education offerings are almost exclusively vocational. One of the hottest topics and fastest growing online degree program areas today is within the field of information technologies. Everything from management information systems to Web mastery to network administration is being offered online in increasing numbers.

Robert Reich recently suggested on National Public Radio that many large corporations are asking for more and more foreign nationals to fill positions in

the high tech industry claiming that they cannot find qualified workers in the United States. Dr. Reich explained that while we have many programs in these areas available at universities, there is little interest among undergraduates to pursue such degrees not because starting salaries are too low, but because there is no real way to get ahead within that industry—at least not to the satisfaction of traditional undergraduate students. He suggested that if corporations would offer a sincere attempt at increasing wages over time and developing career paths that make work increasingly satisfying, there would be far more interest among our own undergraduates and less of a need for foreign nationals to labor in these areas. I would add to this argument the position that expecting relatively poorer students (who cannot afford to quit their jobs and who, there-fore, enroll in online courses) to take positions in such an industry creates a classist or two-tiered system. In this case, those with degrees from face-to-face or traditional institutions will have more opportunities to advance and to have enjoyable work lives, while those with degrees from online institutions will suffer with vocational skills that do not serve to advance them to the highest salaries and leadership positions.

MYTH OF THE MERITOCRACY

In general, Americans believe in the myth of the meritocracy—it is perhaps one of our most powerful shared beliefs. This myth essentially states that, as Flexner suggested earlier, anyone can become anything in America. Nothing is really needed except dedication. One need not be born into money, or endowed with innate intelligence or talent. Anyone can become anything in America . . . it is one of our most treasured beliefs and the reason why so many immigrants hope to come to America. A recent report from ABC News' *20/20* exposed some of the fallacies of this argument in an extensive examination of nepotism. The reporters kept lamenting that what is fundamentally American is that anyone can get ahead, and that those with privileged backgrounds do not enjoy any more breaks than those with poor backgrounds—not so in nepotism they remind us. Certainly, the idea of a meritocracy is close to some people's fundamental understandings of what a democracy is. If we threaten the foundation of this myth, for many in America, we essentially threaten democracy. Programs that seek to create more level playing fields, such as Head Start, are sometimes supported but are often seen as an attempt to bring those with advantage down to a level even with those who have not applied due diligence in trying to move out of disadvantage.

We have, as a society, been frustrated over the years by the apparent failure of the meritocratic system. IQ and SAT scores, college admissions, and subsequent income levels are too strongly linked to family wealth and parental education levels. This stymies our belief in the myth of the meritocracy but we hope that technology will offer us a new way out of this conundrum. For example, former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley stated in an address to the National Conference on Educational Technology,

> Most of you are pioneers in this area. You've seen first hand how teaching and learning that uses technology effectively really can make a difference in the lives of students. You know how it can open doors that would otherwise be closed for many—the economically disadvantaged, the disabled, and those who live in rural areas far away from large libraries, museums, or universities.

We see that technology may be a way to *really* allow anyone to become anything. Online learning programs generally speak to this underlying belief. However, the menu of online learning programs does not include all the degrees necessary to "get ahead" in America. For instance, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Ginsburg raised great suspicion with regard to the pursuit of online law degrees. Objecting to an all-online law degree granted currently by Concord University, a subsidiary of Kappan Testing Service, Justice Ginsburg said,

> I am uneasy about classes in which students learn entirely from home, in front of a computer screen, with no face-to-face interaction with other students and instructors. So much of legal education and legal practice is a shared enterprise, a genuine interactive endeavor. The process inevitably loses something vital when students learn in isolation, even if they can engage in virtual interaction with their peers and teachers. (Mangan, 1999)

Thus, you can become anything you like, except possibly an attorney, a CEO, a medical doctor, or other highly paid professional. Most fields would feel as Justice Ginsburg does, that something may be or is lost in the process of putting their field online. Those with power will fight this movement to maintain high standards for their discipline.

However, the politicians see technology as the way to appease many factions in America who are unhappy with the current system of education. Corporations gain because many "lifelong learners" are learning vocationally oriented skills during their off hours, sometimes funded by their employers, but more often funded by themselves or the federal government. Perhaps the

most corporate friendly aspect of current U.S. online learning policy is the apparent shift in the financial burden for training corporate needs from private to public dollars. The nature of federal funding as contributing to a shift from private training dollars to public monies is perhaps most clearly exemplified in the move by the U.S. federal government to include online learning programs at the same level of assistance as traditional programs. Thus, someone who is enrolled in an online learning program can apply for the same grant and loan programs available to any other student in the United States.

Corporations may be happy about this shift, but the politicians are also finding ways to make the general American public happy about it. American politicians are only too quick to extol the virtues of technology and the promise of democracy as delivered through this "open access" medium. In a 1998 speech to the 15th International ITU (International Technology University) Conference, Al Gore said,

> We have a chance to extend knowledge and prosperity to our most isolated inner cities, to the barrios, the favelas, the colonias and our most remote rural villages; to bring 21st Century learning and communication to places that don't even have phone service today; . . . to strengthen democracy and free-dom by putting it on-line, where it is so much harder for it to be suppressed or denied.

It may be true that there isn't the same level of direct control on the Internet that mass media enjoys; however, there is really no evidence that the Internet will democratize our political discourse—or even facilitate it (Winner, 1998). It is only through careful and conscious design that we might be able to create democratic uses of technology, (Sclove, 1995) and thus far, the online learning system in America has been anything but consciously designed to advance democracy.

Perhaps we should be glad that online learning is not really a part of Bush's policy agenda. His official technology agenda (White House, 2004) focuses on promoting innovation and competitiveness through a number of corporation-friendly policies, including a moratorium on Internet taxes and speedier depreciation schedules for technology investors. These policies are consistent with the trickle-down philosophy of the administration in that there is no direct assistance or aid for impoverished American populations in this policy. The expectation, rather, is that breaks for corporations will encourage private investment in technology infrastructure, which will eventually increase

access for all. However, because corporations are driven by profits, they will search for ways to gain the economic advantages offered by Bush's policies while maximizing their own income, thus catering to those who can pay for the services rather than catering to the homeless, for example, who are power-less to contribute to the corporate bottom line.

THE REALITY OF OPEN ACCESS IN AMERICA

Recent figures from the Congressional Budget Office show that the poorest 20% of U.S. households will average $8,800 in after-tax income this year, down from $10,000 in 1977, while at the same time the average income of the richest 1% has more than doubled to $515, 600 after taxes. The nation has lost 1 million manufacturing jobs in the past decade. Average pay for top execu-tives has quadrupled since 1990, but roughly 45 million Americans—including many in low-paid service jobs—lack health insurance (Crary, 1999, p. 3A).

Most public initiatives in America serve certain populations more than others. For example, the Rails to Trails Program—a noble initiative to transform old railway paths into bike trails—really only serves those with bikes and the necessary leisure time to utilize them. On the face of it, there is nothing wrong with this, unless our public officials insist that any given public initiative is aimed at helping the entire public. In the case of online learning and the public expenditures necessary to build the infrastructure and support students in their pursuit of higher education, not all the public will be served. What is most incon-sistent about the rhetoric and the reality, however, is that the politicians and advocates of online learning are insisting that this system will help the "least of our brethren." Always pointing to the poor and underprivileged, politicians insist that open access to educational opportunities is delivered through Web-based education. However, this system cannot truly serve our most needy. I have never been in a homeless shelter or soup kitchen that had Internet hookups available to the patrons. In fact, the concept is ludicrous. What shelters and welfare workers need is not online education opportunities for the homeless. Solving the poverty problem in America may be too much to ask of Web-based education admittedly, so let's look at who is actually served.

Recent reports indicate what many of us suspect: More wealthy people than poor people have access to the Internet, particularly if you qualify that as in-home access, which is critical to the "anywhere-anytime" learning advertised

in most Web-based education marketing. As of 2001, more Americans were online than were not; that is, more than half the U.S. population (54%) was using the Internet. However, in April of 1999, the College Board released a report indicating that the government should endeavor to close the gap between haves and have-nots as they proceed with online learning. In their report, they indicate that it is impossible to know who can benefit from online learning because currently no tracking of enrollees or their characteristics is maintained. The report indicates that while online learning shatters barriers of time and space, it erects new barriers that are primarily financial. It states:

> Students who come from low-income and minority backgrounds are less likely to have been exposed to computers and computer networks at home and school. Not all students have equal access to computers and the Internet. In fact, there is evidence that students with the greatest need get the least access. (College Board, 1999)

This is continuing to be the case with most recent reports in 2001 indicating that 85% of households with incomes over $75,000 have Internet access, while only 14% of households with incomes between $5,000 and $9,999 have access. What is also interesting about these statistics is that there are very little other differences in terms of other demographics such as rural or urban—the primary determinant of access in the U.S. today is income levels. We also know that issues of gender and age enter into access and comfort levels with online learning which must be addressed. Issues surrounding cultural impediments within America to accessing online learning have not yet even begun to be addressed, but they are certainly an issue. In the end, a publicly funded "open access" system is serving relatively more white young working male adults with some financial advantage and relatively fewer minority, female, homeless, or poverty-stricken members of our society.

CONCLUSION

Corporations need to fill their high-tech jobs. And they would prefer to fill them with lower paid employees if they can find them. Those who are pursuing online degrees are often working in jobs that are less attractive than those sought by new college grads from traditional programs. They may be more willing to accept a lower paying service sector job that will serve current corporate needs. Now this is not to suggest that no one who gets an online degree

will ever make it to the highest ranks. Our wealthiest American is a Harvard dropout after all, but public policy is not made on individual anecdotes; it is made based on the vast majority of the populace and their experiences and expectancies. In many cases, these policies are friendly to capitalist ventures and corporate needs; in some cases this may be good, but in others, it may serve to control rather than liberate. As Dorothy Nelkin (1997) suggests,

> Advocates of electronic democracy fail to see the difference between the inundation of information and reflective political exchange. And computer advocates fail to see the broader issues of manipulation and loss of political accountability as problems; to them, the technology appears to enhance individual choice. (p. 25)

Certainly I would wager that Al Gore believes technology will indeed enhance individual choice—and it *may*. The issue is that we have to carefully design it to do that; otherwise, it will serve the purposes of the most powerful factions in American society. The innate nature of technology will serve our American instincts for efficiency, individualism, and vocation rather than liberation, democracy, diversity and community. A careful study of unregulated markets and deregulation in America may serve to help us predict failures and design online learning technologies that *truly* advance democracy.

This has been only a brief review of some of the recent rhetoric and realities of online education in America as seen through the traditional, stereotypically American beliefs that have contributed to the rapid proliferation of online learning programs. As one of the most powerful forces for corporate colonialization (McDonalds and Wal-Mart infiltrating all corners of the earth), I cannot imagine the cultural impact of aggressive American online learning programs on a global economy. Should the movement create an open market in which American universities can compete, they will—and they will probably—do very well. American higher education has brand name appeal and an excellent reputation, ripe to be sold on the Internet wires. And we should expect predatory marketing techniques, digital diploma mills, shoddy products for cheap, better products for high expense, and all the other ills and benefits of any American success story. However, with that expanding system of online education goes a whole set of cultural beliefs (some of which we have reviewed here) that may be passed on to online learners worldwide: There's no better method to expand the American Way and the American market.

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