The online campus

Abstract
This chapter draws a balance sheet of the experiences, high stakes, high hopes and deep fears that surround ‘e-learning’ in Britain, the EU and America. The article faults McDonaldisation as an account of the on-line campus, and situates it within a wider critique of irrationally pessimistic forecasts about Information Technology in general and digital universities in particular.

Key-words: higher education, e-learning, innovation, Internet, brands

INTRODUCTION

In June 2001 the Open University announced that it would put up 360 Web sites for each of the 360 courses it offers its 120 000 online students. It will publish in eXtensible Mark-up Language, or XML, a programming system that allows course presentation to be separated from course content. Coupled to a Dutch content management system and suitably amended, XML should

1. allow academic staff to write courseware for the Web in Microsoft Word
2. speed workflow, re-use, version control and the selling on of courseware to other institutions
3. allow large courses to be broken down into smaller ones with ease
4. make courses more accessible from TV and – significantly – from mobile phones.

Dave Meara, head of online applications at the OU, foresees large savings:

> 'We will be able to handle a bigger volume and turn things around quicker, as there will be less editing needed as course materials will come in tidier. XML forces a structure.' [i]

Britain's Open University is not alone. Against longstanding OU practice, Barcelona's UOC, the Open University of Catalonia, insists that its 20 000 students need attend only examinations in person. [ii]

So: might IT conspire and so be complicit in the McDonaldisation of lectures, seminars and tutorials ? In his *McDonaldisation Thesis*, published in 1998, George Ritzer argued: 'various non-human technologies… not managers… control employees'. [iii] Meara's remark that XML 'forces a structure' upon academics seems to vindicate that argument. Moreover in *Thesis*, Ritzer continued:

> '… universities are using some of the advanced technology associated with the new means of consumption (especially television home shopping networks and cybermalls) by beaming courses to television sets or computers in satellite campuses or even in student homes.' [iv]

Like Big Mac's cousin Domino's Pizza, Ritzer remarked, 'universities are increasingly in the business of home delivery'. [v] Barcelona's UOC would again seem to bear him out.

This chapter begins by reviewing the IT dimensions of the paper that Ritzer first delivered at Staffordshire University in 1996. Then, by reviewing both more recent authors on the online campus and some of the real practice in the field, I look at two questions that Ritzer did not directly suggest in the less IT-obsessed world of 1996, but which now seem logical extensions of his ideas.

In 1996 Ritzer said that universities, out to attract and please student-consumers, would want to 'go to the students', eliminate as many barriers as possible to obtaining degrees and so accelerate the inflation of student grades. [vi] My first question is: *how much of a role does IT play in the dumbing down of higher education ?* As for my second question: Ritzer wrote in 1998 of 'the new American menace' – standardisation and control – in Europe. [vii] Also, in her chapter of this book, Caroline Persell asks if IT sneaks market values inside the university's walls. So: *how much is IT a Trojan Horse, already within the hallowed portals of European scholarship and pedagogic excellence, for rampant American standardisation, control and branded commercialism?*

'McUniversity' meets IT: high-tech, low-cost, low class – a media brothel everywhere you go

For Ritzer the university would want to attract students and parents who had consumer expectations of education. To *appear high-tech* to students, it would opt for the ATM, the cybermall and the home shopping network. [viii] Also, those technologies promised, at a time of relative decline in the funding of HE, to *lower the cost* of higher education. [ix]

Ritzer suggested that new technology would make learning a remote affair. Students would not need to go even to geographically local, 'satellite' university campuses. Education would become national 'and even international' in scope; the electronic transmission of courses would alter the time and space surrounding higher education dramatically and in post-modern style. [x]

Ritzer saw the advent of the online campus pessimistically, if idiosyncratically. His was a future which was 'class-linked': rather than the poor being excluded from IT (what has now come to be termed the 'digital divide'), only Harvard and Oxford would offer most of their education on traditional, physically-based campuses. [xi] It was a future that would be

- hyper-real: universities could field far-off academics of great renown – whether alive or dead [xii]
- full of instructors more rule-bound, more on-message and thus more in McJobs than ever before [xiii]
- bent on reproducing existing knowledge, not engaging in original scholarship and research [xiv]
- one in which students worked harder, yet had to transact business impersonally, by smart cards. [xv]

In his treatment of firms as a model for universities, Ritzer made an important distinction:

> 'It is one thing to turn to prestigious industrial giants like IBM and GM; it is quite another to look to the seemingly far humbler McDonald's or Disney. Universities continue to look to industry for innovations (eg TQM – Total Quality Management), but the contemporary university is *not* primarily a means of production and therefore has more in common with, and to learn from, the new means of consumption.' [xvi]

For Ritzer the prime mover behind the online McUniversity was not the branded capitalist corporation in general, but the media multinational in particular: it consisted of those firms with the production values appropriate to the 'computerized, televised images' universities would be 'circulating in hyperspace'. Such firms certainly included Big Mac and Disney; but, in Ritzer's vision, they were more to do with MTV and CNN. [xvii] In a general, Baudrillardian media brothel of signs, then, the online campus would ensure that

> 'Since education will be everywhere, since everything will be educational, in a sense nothing will be educational.' [xviii]

Such would be the logical conclusion of dumbing down.

Assessing Ritzer's vision

Ritzer was very prescient. He anticipated the British and the Spanish Open Universities' move into home delivery. Today, European universities certainly vie with each other to appear high-tech. They also have to compete with American universities online, as education has indeed gone international.

Digital universities would indeed rather globalise branded academic media stars and today's dubious credentials than encourage original research and insight. If students in Britain and America have shown the same resistance to smart cards as retailers in those countries, students certainly register online more and register in person less than they did in the past. If there is no higher education media brothel everywhere you go, and the influence of the Disney Channel, MTV, CNN or Home Shopping Network on education remains modest, the advent of digital television in Britain and, with it, channels such as BBC Knowledge, has enabled education to penetrate new milieux.

Does, however, the modern university use the Web to 'go to the students' and win them over ? Not really. First, the Web remains a consumer 'pull' medium, not a corporate 'push' one. In a footnote, Ritzer observed that Internet companies like the PointCast Network were 'broadcasting their messages to the consumer's video screen' rather than waiting for surfers to come to them. [xix] But PointCast, Spielberg's pop.com and many ventures like them have collapsed. Universities are indeed out to attract and please student-consumers. Failure to run a decent Web site will count against them competitively. But universities have been and are likely to remain unable to use IT to 'go to the students'.

Second, the online campus has not, so far, been enough in the British student's face to attract him or her, in Ritzerian style, with the delights of high tech. Clubbing attracts students to a particular university more than its adroit use of the Web. A Web presence is merely a university's ticket to enter the competitive race.

What about the use of IT to eliminate as many barriers as possible to obtaining degrees – eliminate what Ritzer terms 'negativity' ? Well: oddly enough, there is plenty of 'negativity' around the student use of IT. There are the costs of

1. hardware and software.
2. compatibility problems
3. maintenance and repair
4. online subscriptions
5. what the inkjet printer industry describes as 'consumables' (paper, ink).

Clearly, parents and *students will have to undertake more paid work to meet the costs of 'IT and HE'.*

In addition, anyone who has experience of IT knows that it can often lead to more work, not less. The forecasters Gartner Group say that most users of IT spend about a third of their time with it reformatting documents and images. All these things make the online campus full of barriers as far as students are concerned.

Ritzer could have been speaking specifically of IT when he wrote: 'students will be forced to do more of the labor within the new means of education… Students do this work for free.' [xx] Today, more work from 'consumers' – a pattern first set for shoppers in the 1920s by America's pioneering Piggly Wiggly supermarket – means that, for students at the electronic McUniversity, *there is more labour to do around IT; but a greater and greater proportion of that labour is devoid of academic benefit*.

Self-service in a supermarket or in a McDonald's outlet is not the same as eating the food. By the same token, students who spend a lot of time fiddling about with the poor interfaces and compatibilities that surround IT will be dumbed down in the process.

In believing that IT could cut *university* costs, as distinct from student ones, Ritzer has been shown to be charmingly naïve. Like companies getting serious about the Web, universities the world over have discovered that programming, design, authoring tools, training, upgrades and downtime around the Web make it a hugely labour-intensive affair. Nevertheless, in 1997 the doyen of American management theory, Peter Drucker, repeated Ritzer's mistake. Already, Drucker argued, universities could 'deliver more lectures and classes off campus via satellite or two-way video at a fraction of the cost' of traditional methods. That was why big university campuses would, Drucker forecast, be 'relics' by 2027. [xxi]

So: the British electronic McUniversity, at least, is not that high-tech, not that attractive because of its IT, and not really low cost. It has also yet to involve the lower classes by the million: it is Ivy League universities that have been the most aggressive in promoting the Web. Similarly, at Barcelona's UOC, an amazing 96 per cent of students are in full-time employment. [xxii] Last, the electronic McUniversity has done little to ensure that students experience time and space in a new way. I can remember late nights in a windowless, fluorescent-lit computer room at Sussex university in the early 1970s, when Fortran and COBOL were the programming languages. Today, apart from those few students working from home using Web sites that originate in distant time zones, the weird and wonderful student approach to space and time seems only to have changed quantitatively, not qualitatively.

IT hasn't all been bad…

Is, however, IT everywhere and always a force for dumbing down, standardisation and social control ? For a start it is worth asking what Ritzer meant by 'non-human' technologies. All technology is made by humans; all, too, as the result of human labour, can never be anything else but 'non-human'. As it happens, the Web and Web-based videoconferencing have the potential to be perfectly 'human'. Although I favour 'didactic' forms of teaching, and in particular the formal lecture, I very much approve of the Web as one among many dialogue-based supplements to lectures (I also approve of seminars).

However, in a famous article published in 1997 by the peer-reviewed Internet journal *First Monday*, David Noble, a distinguished historian at Toronto's York university, announced that IT was indeed a universal force for evil in HE. He ridiculed North American universities as 'digital diploma mills' in which an unholy alliance of corporations and university administrators put students and professors back into an old, coercive era of automation, mass-production, standardisation and commercial interests.

For Noble, IT commoditised instruction into courseware that could be owned and bought and sold in the market. [xxiii] The domination of the university classroom by the boardrooms of companies in IT, edutainment and publishing – a triad that recalled the kind of media pimps lambasted by Ritzer – would revive 'traditional labor issues'. Why ? Because 'as in other industries', IT was 'being deployed by management primarily to discipline, de-skill and displace labour'. Noble continued:

> 'Once faculty and courses go online, administrators gain much greater direct control over faculty performance and course content than ever before and the potential for administrative scrutiny, supervision, regimentation, discipline and even censorship increase dramatically. At the same time, the use of the technology entails an inevitable extension of working time and an intensification of work…' [xxiv]

Faculty could expect IT to assist in the usurping of their intellectual property rights. Students could expect the same to happen to them, as well as to pay for costly IT that would track their every move as guinea pigs in 'product trials masquerading as courses'.

Noble's emphasis on market commoditisation and the theft of intellectual property showed a debt, perhaps, to an uncredited Marx – although Marx faulted capitalists, not technology, for the theft, not of ideas, but of surplus value. Despite his references to long hours and intense labour, the attention Noble gave to the *control* of labour, rather than its *exploitation*, showed a debt to a reviser of Marx whom Ritzer, in his own treatment of McJobs, explictly acknowledges as an inspiration: Harry Braverman. [xxv] Finally, Noble's emphasis on corporations unethically endangering students' privacy by tracking them through IT showed, if not a debt to Foucault, then perhaps one to the communitarian father of anti-capitalist paranoia about IT, Howard Rheingold. [xxvi]

But if Noble differed from Ritzer in attributing high costs to IT, he carried through the logic of his predecessor's argument in his charge – made in a final footnote – that IT had won 'no significant gains' in 'pedagogical enhancement'. That was too sweeping.

In a riposte to Noble, Frank White, library director at Marygrove College, Detroit, notes that Web-based instructional tools and applications include

1. Virtual Reality Modeling Language
2. Multipoint video conferencing
3. Teleconferencing
4. Digital video and audio broadcasts
5. Interactive multimedia, self-instruction modules
6. Audio-text lectures
7. Audio-slide presentations
8. Plain text applications
9. Computer-mediated conferencing ('by far the most popular of all higher education tools'). [xxvii]

One does not need to be a booster of IT to believe that, given the right curricular and research directions, some of these tools have, in a minority of cases, brought real pedagogical benefits.

As White accurately notes, Noble failed to adduce real evidence of pedagogical failure with IT. Indeed, while Ritzer felt IT to be a positive attractor of students, Noble's evidence for pedagogical failure was the argument that 'students want the genuine face-to-face education they paid for not a cyber-counterfeit'. That argument has not been borne out by events, for, as Ritzer predicted, students now expect education to be online. But in fact Noble's real lapse was worse.

Apart from a few remarks, Noble neglected the whole issue of *pedagogy* in IT-assisted education. His focus on ideas being ripped off, on traditional labour issues and on student privacy failed to address the key question: if IT dumbs students down, how exactly does it do that ? Yet refusal to discuss in detail the pedagogical merits and demerits of IT is, with Ritzer and a few other honourable exceptions, very common. Britain's Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), for example, wants to make an e-University operational by the end of 2002. [xxviii] But why ? In its *Strategies for learning and teaching in higher education: A guide to good practice*, HEFCE's treatment of the 'Strategic implementation' of IT makes no reference, across four bulletpoints and three case histories, to improved pedagogy. [xxix] Nobody ever asks: at the online campus, is the highest task is to cut and paste bits of the Web and present the result as an original essay ?

From the anti-capitalist side, Naomi Klein has directly stigmatised IT as a collaborator in 'the branding of learning'. [xxx] Though she notes the invasion of schools and campuses by corporate brands such as McDonalds, Klein does not touch on university Web sites as a conduit for ads. But when schools and universities 'pretend they are corporations', she argues, the deployment of IT that goes alongside this corporatisation of teaching has sad results: 'as many education experts have pointed out', she announces, 'the pedagogical benefits technology brings to the classroom are dubious at best.' [xxxi]

Now: it is true that the historical evidence *for* pedagogical success with IT, like that for economic productivity with IT, is limited – whatever IT's boosters say. After all, the Web is still in its infancy, and nowhere more so than in HE. But it is poor scholarship to think that one has marshalled all the evidence *against* pedagogical success with IT by means of a Noblesque footnote or, in Klein's case, an unsubstantiated assertion. IT is a powerful mediator; the arguments around it need to be mediated if they are to be powerful.

Here we will touch on a few very simple examples of the pedagogical benefits available through IT.

It is only a trite point, but the fact that Noble published on the Internet aided the discussion of his ideas. The wider access to education that the Web can open up does not, by itself, inevitably result in dumbing down. It does not, either, inevitably result in a better debate; but First Monday alone has sponsored serious discussion of the online campus, and this paper – which is not published on the Web – has benefited from it.

More substantively, T Mills Kelly, who teaches an undergraduate course on Western Civilization at the history department of Texas Tech University, has concluded that students who access learning resources on the Web display a higher level of recursive reading than those with access only to paper materials. [xxxii] Primary sources on the Web were 'just a click away': three in every four students went back to them, while just one in every four did the same with documents supplied in a course pack.

That gain was significant. But students engaged in this sort of recursiveness, Mills Kelly reports, did so almost exclusively when assignments were designed in such a way that returning to earlier sources would obviously improve student papers. As Mills Kelly concludes of his research:

> 'Thus, when *properly designed*, web-based learning resources and assignments do encourage recursive reading among students in an introductory history course in ways that the very same assignments in a offered via print do not.' [xxxiii]

Nothing is guaranteed with IT: putting rubbish in leads to rubbish coming out. But at the level of research, the success of the Human Genome Project depended, in part, on international collaboration mediated through the Web. That was not dumbing down.

So much for IT's historical record. What about its future potential ? Ritzer hints in his chapter of this book that IT could impart a sense of the spectacular if lecturers could use it 'live' in lecture halls to interrogate students and be interrogated by them. This must be true. The right lecturer, buttressing his oratorical technique with the right IT, could engage students, improve their curiosity, and put pressure on them in terms of their preparation for the 'event'. This would not be dumbing down.

… but most of the IT introduced into higher education tends to reinforce uncritical attitudes

Where Ritzer was emphatically right was in his forecast that turning education into a consumer experience would dumb it down. And the sad fact is that IT has, in the current climate, mostly acted so as to accelerate this process. That IT has often been used and vaunted as a force for *customising* the experience of study, rather than simply *standardising* it in the way predicted by Ritzer and Noble, paradoxically confirms this. There is a strong *tendency* for the real educational potential of IT to be squandered in regressive pedagogy.

In 2001, as part of an excellent book of papers about online communities, Timothy Luke evoked his experience of the Cyberschool at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. [xxxiv] In an otherwise fairly balanced paper, he upheld IT both for the 'more open, egalitarian, and consensual' decisionmaking he says it can bring to university administration, and for the 'fresh modes of discourse' it promotes in pedagogy. Let's assess these two claims.

The claim that IT adds to democracy on campus need not detain us long. IT cannot be a force for democracy, because democracy is a political and not a technical question. The problem with IT is not, as Luke suggests, that 'there are at least two billion pages on the Web, but the best search engines only capture only about 300 or so million of them'. [xxxv] Rather, as Chris Werry, one of Luke's co-editors, records in a still more recent paper,

> 'The argument that the digitization of education will democratize learning is often at odds with the idea that in order to move quickly in the Internet-age, deliberative democracy within the university itself must be lessened.' [xxxvi]

But what about the Web as an encouragement to fresh modes of discourse ? The Web cannot just be dismissed as advanced technology associated with new means of consumption. It can form an extra channel – no more, but no less either – for research, experiment and teaching. Like all its predecessors back to the Gutenberg printing press, the Web is never the independent driver of social developments; to believe this is to indulge in technological determinism. But the Web has some special logics of its own, even if it shares much of them with other technologies.

The Human Genome Project shows how the Web offers people a special chance to build *collaborations* on academic matters that are genuinely constructive. However, even here it is worth noting the words of Dr Stephen C. Ehrmann:

> '*Most factors affecting the value of technology for collaborative learning do not directly relate to technology.* They are the factors that block or encourage people to collaborate. If people don't want to collaborate, or can't, the technology is of no value. If, on the other hand, they are hungry to collaborate and are good at it, the very same technology can be of enormous educational value. If we had tried to evaluate the technology just by studying the technology, we'd have missed much of what was actually going on.' [xxxvii]

Unbridled technophilia about the collaborative possibilities in the Web serves little purpose.

As a force for *interaction and participation*, the Web is, again, often over-rated: both clicking through images and blabbing through chatrooms can be mindless. Any good lecturer with chalk and talk can be fully interactive, and encourage participation, without the aid of the Web. It is however the way in which it allows students to '*customise'* learning that may prove to be the special characteristic of the Web that turns out to be most dangerous from an educational point of view.

With every kind of IT, the process 'tail'– clicking through forms and tick-boxes – can today all too easily wag the outcome 'dog' of studying, reflecting and acting upon genuine content. So today, when most students approach educational customisation in the literal manner of customers, they will suffer. Using the Web in a sensible, *guided* customisation of educational content to one's own research interests will be the exception, not the rule.

Claire Fox has contended that 'the great celebration of expanding knowledges' in education today neglects knowledge as mankind's 'unique capacity to strive towards truths through the application of reason'. [xxxviii] She is right; and the Web chimes all too easily with those uncritical, relativist theories, now so fashionable in education, that she attacks. I have argued elsewhere that the Web, like post-modernism, can fragment inquiry and indeed become a substitute for it; that there is a general 'crisis of content' around IT. [xxxix] Since the publication of Howard Gardner's *Frames of mind: the theory of multiple intelligences* (1993) and Diana Laurillard's *Rethinking University Teaching: A Framework for the Effective Use of Information Technology* (1993), educationalists have set a context for the Web that exacerbates its tendency to dumb things down.

The modernising educationalist's agenda with the Web today begins by contrasting it to lectures gone by. [xl] They were 'one-way' and 'broadcast' in nature, unrelated to students' needs and often alienating to students. What is now required is a recognition that learning is a joint, interactive, construction of and dialogue between the student, his or her peers, and the teacher. Learning cannot be one-way, it cannot concentrate on the linear, printed word as the sole mode of discourse, and the Web is on hand to ensure that these problems need exist longer. Instead, learning must and can now address the needs and educational pace of each individual student; must and can, in a phrase, be 'student-centered'.

This is a beguiling doctrine, not least because a lot of the old lecturers *were* boring. But the fact is that, mediated by those managers whose role Ritzer dismisses, the student-centered pedagogic approach today converges with 'user-centred' IT not just to facilitate the control of university employees and students, but also to dumb them down. Werry sees the claim that online is 'student-centered' as

> 'camouflaging shortcomings in models of online education... it isn't clear that this necessarily empowers students, provides for a better educational experience, or is really in line with constructivist pedagogy'. [xli]

His only error is to see an opposition between constructivist pedagogy and the 'student-centeredness' of online. Constructivists put the different lines of enquiry and forms of discourse that students customise for themselves on the same level as the accumulated wisdom of professors – now renamed 'coaches'. They are bound to take an uncritical attitude to the Web and ensure that it plays its part in dumbing people down. The canon is no more; the customising Web takes its place. As Norman Clark, an assistant professor at Appalachian State University, notes of the US educational portal supplier Campus Pipeline,

'by customizing each page for each student, Campus Pipeline is actually ensuring that students will have less and less in common to discuss.' [xlii]

Mills Kelly, who as we have seen is by no means unsympathetic to IT, has eloquently brought out what uncritical attitudes it encourages among students:

> '…students in my courses, despite going through very specific assignments designed to help them use the web as a research resource, remain disinclined to apply any sort of critical analysis to the sites they visit. Even the very best students simply do not think very much about whether or not a site is a good source of information. The only test most students impose on the sites they visit is a visual one – if the site appears to be very professional, then the information it contains must be valid.' [xliii]

HEdLines, the higher education part of the forecasting services provided by Gartner Group, also makes some commendably sane remarks about how, in education as elsewhere, there is indeed a crisis of content around IT:

> '… digital delivery technologies have matured much faster than those involved in the production and distribution of content.
> '… as higher education's focus passes from delivery infrastructure to content management…e-learning content – the digital resources, whether commercial or homegrown, that add instructional value to network-delivered courses, including instructor-developed materials, electronic textbooks, library collections, simulation software, and even dynamic online interactions — will help determine both the pedagogical and the economic success of e-learning.
> 'At the same time… institutions must maintain a sense of proportion … Even the best content, whether traditional or electronic, cannot automatically make students learn. Perhaps more than ever, institutions must highlight the services they deliver: selecting material, defining programs, setting standards and creating dynamic interaction — all of which make learning happen.' [xliv]

Too right ! Universities, not students, must take the lead in selecting Web materials, defining programs and setting standards. The 'bottom line', as Gartner properly notes, is that 'long-term investment in content will far exceed that of delivery infrastructure'. For the moment,it observes, Web content for higher education is a matter of 'Caveat Emptor'. Likewise, it notes:

> 'the e-library is a great idea and digital collections are growing. Yet we are years away from digital libraries that will support basic higher-education degree programs…' [xlv]

IT, then, has not *caused* a dumbing down of education. But, within today's context of bleak educational philosophy, it has given that process extra momentum. IT does not 'conspire' or act in a way that is 'complicit' in dumbing down. IT lacks, after all, human willpower. But as it is deployed today, IT is an excellent mediator for the forces of relativism in higher education, and boasts its own crisis of content there.

The precautionary principle and the online campus

Let's not go too far.

The dot.com era, from 1995 to Spring 2000, meant 'cash burn', banner ads and passing fads. The subsequent mood-swing about IT – from what Alan Greenspan called 'irrational exuberance' to what has been termed 'irrational pessimism' about it – is also an example of short-term thinking. Since the millennium, many people have mistaken a decline in the price of technology stocks as a decline in the potential of IT to work as a force for good. Thus although the online campus has, more or less, helped mediate the process of dumbing down higher education, to conclude from current practice that IT is intrinsically fated to degrade the pedagogical process would be a mistake. It would betray thinking about IT that was as impulsive as Ritzer's hated 'fast food' is fast.

Yet that short-term thinking about IT – a kind of alienated response to the alienation it induces – is quite prevalent among educationalists. In 1999 Michael Milken, the junk bond king, Paul Allen, a co-founder of Microsoft, and John Chambers, chief executive of Cisco Systems, all announced that they could make money from online education. Since that time, online education has gained a treatment from academia that is indifferent when it is not hostile.

Joanna Addison has shown that the American Association of University Professors regards IT as merely a delivery mechanism; it neglects IT's wider potential as a supplementary learning environment – one that academics must play a part in designing modifying, even if companies supplying distance education technology would rather they didn't. [xlvi] The Universitas 21 global online university consortium, which at the time of writing is in negotiation with the US firm Thomson Learning, has been hit by the withdrawal of two founding universities, Toronto and Michigan, that were worried that Thomson might abuse their names. [xlvii] The watchword is likewise evolution, not e-revolution, with Sir John Daniel. Vice-chancellor of the OU for 11 years, now assistant director-general for education at Unesco, he broadly applauds the way in which assessments of online learning turned 'more sober' after the collapse of the dot.com era. [xlviii]

Frances Cairncross is management editor of *The Economist* and the latest chair of the Britain's prestigious Economic and Social Research Council. In her famous 1990s paean to IT, *The death of distance: how the communications revolution will change our lives,* she pronounced:

> '… in rich countries, more and more higher education and training will probably be delivered long-distance…. Distance learning may not have the cachet of a good university name, but it will be as good as, and less expensive than, a mediocre one.' [xlix]

Now, in an article titled 'Net froth is red herring', her tone has changed.

> 'None of the elaborate projects that has sprung up in the United States in recent years to deliver online university education has yet come near to recouping the hefty costs of doing so.'

For Cairncross, online *teaching* is no match for the application of IT to university *administration*:

> '… although it is certainly possible to teach people things online – sometimes with better results than in conventional classes – the main benefit to universities of the communications revolution is unlikely to lie in that area. Instead, for the foreseeable future, the main effect of new technology will be on the administration of universities.' [l]

Werry is also pessimistic. He concludes his recent survey of 'the age of the e-college' with a call to be cautious and slow in adopting online techniques. [li]

To be fair, it is only Werry and some of his collaborators who, by targeting the consumerisation of the university in a manner akin to Ritzer, make a critique of the Web's effect on pedagogy. Elsewhere, the spread of a kind of precautionary principle in 'IT for HE' is founded not on such a critique, but on a faddish, superficial posture against IT.

Although it appears the exact opposite of short-termism in higher education, the precautionary principle neglects the long-term potential of IT. Instead, it makes the worldly-wise observation that IT must be accompanied by other teaching methods. Yet to dismiss IT as merely the 'clicks' that must at all moments be accompanied by campus-style 'bricks' and faculty 'face time' is to abdicate responsibility for research and action around the right question to ask about IT.

That question is simple. What, by itself and in conjunction with other technologies, pedagogical advantages does IT offer ? The right answer is: *given good content and design* – it is a big given at the moment and looks like continuing to be one for some years yet – IT *can within strict limits* be a force for constructive collaboration, interaction, participation and customisation.

I turn now from the question of dumbing down to that of commercialism.

Branded Americana and the rise of the corporate university

We have seen in our look at customisation that the move by corporations into the university world is not merely an economic one to do with standardisation and control. As Clark notes of Campus Pipeline, its 'revolutionary' aspect is that it has

> 'found a way to convince people in academia, who are traditionally somewhat reluctant to commercialise, to actively participate in the transformation of their community into a consuming audience.' [lii]

Clark observes:

> 'When email from a professor comes with an advertisement attached, how much easier does it make it for students to connect consumption with education, to see knowledge as just one more thing that can be bought ?' [liii]

This is a proper objection to the cult of the market on the online campus.

The online campus is not just about US-led e-commerce commoditising instruction, or 'Michael Milken's plot to eat our lunch'. It will also be about the EU trying to sustain its competitive advantages in telecommunications by bringing European education to foreign markets. HEFCE, for example, looks forward to a 'future outcome' in which 'demand for HE programmes both in the UK and overseas' expands through Britain's e-University. [liv] Barcelona's UOC concluded an agreement in 2000 with the Planeta publishing house to offer Spanish-language degree courses throughout Latin America. [lv]

When I notice such developments, I conclude not that IT is a Trojan Horse for brash American commercialism, but rather that IT spreads a pedagogic ethos which, emanating as much from the European public sector as from American corporations, seems bent on dumbing down the whole planet.

Following Farrell, Werry and my colleague at De Montfort university, Stephen Brown, it is possible to classify online universities into different types. [lvi] The chart below attempts to do this.

Type	**Characteristic**	**Example (originating firm or university)**	**Websites**	**Remark**
Mega/Global	More than 100,000 students, many of whom study abroad	OU, UK		20,000 of OU's 150,000 degree students study in 100 countries outside the UK
Broker / Course aggregator	No courses of its own	Western Governors' Hungry Minds	www.wgu.edu www.hungryminds.com	Consortium of 11 western states in the USA, plus Simon Fraser, Vancouver
Commercial	Private supply of education by universities or firms. Firms offer • courses • networked informal presentations of work done by students or teaching assistants • free education – and a conduit for ads, sales and the collection of customer data…. • outsourced portals for educational and administrative services	Phoenix Melbourne NYU California Texas Worldwide Learning (News International) Jones International FT Knowledge Sylvan Learning Systems InstantKnowledge Campus Pipeline; eCollege	www.uophx.edu/online www.muprivate.edu.au http://www.nyu.edu/virtual www.california.edu www.utsystem.edu www.worldwidelearning.com www.jonesinternational,edu www.ftknowledge.com www.instantknowledge.com www.powered.com	Jones was accredited in 1999
Corporate	In-firm provision of educational services; sometimes, firm delivers to B-school, or forms consortia with more than one to develop courseware	See text below		See text below
Consortia	Partnerships – with other universities or with private firms – to create critical mass and spread risk	Unext Eurospace 2000 Universitas 21 Fathom	www.unext.com	Unext includes Columbia, Stnaford, Chicago, Carnegie Mellon, LSE. Backed by Michael Milken and Oracle CEO Larry Ellison. 'Gold standard' in MBAs
Hybrid	Normal university offers some or all of particular courses. Sometimes branded but non-accredited	Hybrid. Carnegie Technology Education Columbia's Morningside Ventures Inc	www.dlcoursefinder.com www.carnegietech.org	More than 50,000 courses from 65 countries

Perhaps the most important development has been that of *online corporate universities*. Top ones exist in North American corporations: at Anheuser-Busch, Bain, the Bank of Montreal, Cisco, Dell, General Motors, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Intel, Milliken, Motorola, NCR, PeopleSoft, Sprint, Sun Microsystems, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and Xerox. But corporate universities are also a European creation, and are to be found at ABB, ABN Amro, Alstom, BAE Sytems, BT, Cap Gemini Ernst & Young, DaimlerChrysler, Fiat, Lloyds TSB, Lufthansa, LVMH, Old Mutual and Volvo. Altogether, their numbers have grown over the past 15 years from 400 to 2000, with the possibility of 3700 being around in 2010. On average, each uses about 80 staff to train, for nearly 40 hours a year, 4000 employees out of a typical corporate workforce of 26,000 employees. About one in four employees train online, although this figure is set to rise to one in two by 2003. [lvii]

Corporate universities try to develop their own revenue streams, and keep their own intellectual property. They are in the business of growth, acquisitions and, significantly, the business of educating customers. The Disney Institute is among them; but the list above shows that it is not just Ritzer and Noble's media concerns, but what Ritzer exonerated as 'prestigious industrial giants' who are likely to determine much of the agenda in online higher education in future. Already, their influence in business schools is considerable.

However, *it is not so much corporations that bring e-commerce to education, as that education has become a corporate discipline like finance, sales, operations and IT before it*. But what kind of discipline is it ? If the British case is anything to go by, corporate universities reveal the prejudices of public sector educationalists just as much as they exhibit the vulgarities of market forces.

Human Resources departments inside British corporations are very keen on promoting knowledge management. But the cadre for this work frequently hails from the public sector in general and higher education in particular, if only because the education of adults remains a much bigger enterprise in the public sector than in the private one. Backed by a Government committed to lifelong learning and the educational merits of 'human capital', corporate educational policies betray all the faults that now afflict mainstream universities.

At the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development, an 80,000-strong membership organisation for UK professionals in human resources, e-learning expert Martyn Sloman upholds a 'new paradigm' of 'learner centered intervention'. The CIPD runs workshops that use music and other performing arts to develop 'The listening manager'. Likewise the Industrial Society, a longstanding group of UK companies in favour of fair, partnership-based management, helps train company employees with a dozen separate 'video dramas' on workplace subjects as varied as AIDS, bullying and negotiating. In short, the educational agenda in corporate universities is student-centered, thespian, therapeutic, and infantile. It is about soft skills, IT skills and the winning of credentials. Like higher education, it does not need IT to modularise or customise, in the manner of McDonalds, the choice of sustenance it has to offer.

So: the answer to my second question is that, *even inside corporations, IT will act as a Trojan Horse for a perfectly British corruption of education. That corruption ultimately emanates from the state, not the market.*

Conclusion

What is on the IT-style 'menu' at the online campus today can amount to a triumph of style over substance. Already there are one or two great dishes; but for some time the feast looks like being very movable. The electronic McUniversity fills people up – but, like a Chinese takeaway, it leaves them feeling empty inside after no time at all. It is indeed no substitute for the charismatic lecturer or the proper library of hard-copy books.

The Web is a special monument to collective human ingenuity. But so long as it remains the subject of both irrational government dumbing down and the misplaced fears felt by myopic anti-capitalists, its potential will be squandered. Worse still: to the extent that the Web is associated in the public mind with dumbing down, it risks becoming the object of ridicule.

I am indebted to Stephen Brown, Jason Burton, Claire Fox, Frank Furedi, Dennis Hayes, Toby Marshall, Caroline Persell for their inspiration and help.

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ii. Gabriela Aldea, 'The virtual university campus', *Connectis*, July 2001, p13.

iii. George Ritzer, *The McDonaldisation Thesis*, Sage, 1998, p7. See also Ritzer, *Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Revolutionizing the Means of Consumption*, Sage, 1999, p87.

iv. Ritzer, *Thesis*, p11.

v. Ibid.

vi. Ibid, p156.

vii. Ibid, Chapter 6.

viii. Ibid, pp151-4.

ix. Ibid, p154.

x. Ibid, p157.

xi. Ibid.

xii. Ibid, p158.

xiii. Ibid.

xiv. Ibid.

xv. Ibid, pp161, 160

xvi. Ibid, p153.

xvii. Ibid, p159.

xviii. Ibid, p160.

xix. Ritzer, op cit, p162.

xx. Ibid, p161.

xxi. Drucker, in *Forbes*, 10 March 1997. Cited in Chris Werry, 'The work of education in the age of the e-college', 2001. See http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue6_5/werry/index.html

xxii. Aldea, 'The virtual university campus', op cit.

xxiii. According to Noble, the 1973-4 oil crisis and intensified international competition opened up a first phase in which university research in science and engineering was commoditised from knowledge into intellectual property. A second, current phase is the commoditisation of instruction. David Noble, 'Digital diploma mills: the automation of higher education', 1997. See http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue3_1/noble/index.html

xxiv. Ibid.

xxv. Harry Braverman, *Labour and monopoly capital*, Monthly Review Press, 1973.

xxvi. Howard Rheingold, *The virtual community: finding connection in a computerized world*, Secker & Warburg, 1994.

xxvii. Frank White, 'Digital diploma mills: a dissenting voice', 1999. See http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue4_7/white/index.html

xxviii. HEFCE, *Strategic plan 2001-6*, Report 01/43, July 2001. See http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/

xxix. HEFCE, *Strategies for learning and teaching in higher education: A guide to good practice*, Report 01/37, June 2001. See http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/

xxx. Naomi Klein, 'The branding of learning: ads in schools and universities', chapter 4 of *No Logo: taking aim at the brand bullies*, Flamingo, 2000.

xxxi. Ibid, p88.

xxxii. See http://www2.tltc.ttu.edu/kelly/Pew/Portfolio/welcome.htm.

xxxiii. Ibid.

xxxiv. Timothy W Luke, 'Building a virtual university: working realities from the Virginia Tech Cyberschool', in Chris Werry and Miranda Mowbray, editors, *Online communities: commerce, community action and the virtual university*, Prentice Hall, 2001, pp163, 168.

xxxv. Ibid, p167.

xxxvi. Werry, 'The work of education'.

xxxvii. Stephen C. Ehrmann, PhD, 'Studying and Improving the Use of Technology to Support Collaborative Learning: An Illustration of Flashlight Methods and Tools', 25 April 2000. See http://www.tltgroup.org/resources/F_Illustrative_1.htm

xxxviii. Claire Fox, 'Knowledge without wisdom', *Times Educational Supplement*, 15 September 2000.

xxxix. James Woudhuysen, *Cult IT*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1999.

xl. See, for example, the influential work of Georgetown university's Randy Bass, and in particular his *Engines of Inquiry: A Practical Guide for Using Technology to Teach American Culture*, a publication of the American Studies Crossroads Project, sponsored by the American Studies Association, first edition, revised, February 1998. See also http://www.georgetown.edu/crossroads/ctl/

xli. Werry, 'The work of education'.

xlii. Norman Clark, 'Education, communication and consumption: piping in the academic community', in Werry and Mowbray, *Online communities*, p143.

xliii. See http://www2.tltc.ttu.edu/kelly/Pew/Portfolio/welcome.htm.

xliv. R Yanosky, 'HedLines: Finding "Contentment" with e-learning content', Gartner Research Note COM-13-6450, 15 May 2001. See http://www3.gartner.com/Init

xlv. Marti Harris, 'The E-Library: No Shortcuts to Quality', Gartner Research Note TG-13-46331, May 2001.

xlvi. Joanna Addison, 'Outsourcing education, managing knowledge and strengthening academic communities', in Werry and Mowbray, *Online communities*, pp176, 187.

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xlviii. Sir John Daniel, 'Evolution not an e-revolution', *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 18 May 2001.

xlix. Frances Cairncross, *The death of distance: how the communications revolution will change our lives*, Orion, 1997, p274.

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li. Werry, 'The work of education'.

lii. Norman Clark, ‘Education, communication and consumption’, in Werry and Mowbray, *Online communities*, p145.

liii. Ibid, p148.

liv. HEFCE, Strategic plan 2001-6.

lv. Aldea, ‘The virtual university campus’.

lvi. See G M Farrell, ed, *The Development of Virtual Education: A Global Perspective*, Commonwealth of Learning, 1999; Werry, ‘The work’, and Brown, op cit.

lvii. Figures from Corporate University Xchange, quoted in Linda Anderson, ‘Tailor-made for life-long learning’, *Financial Times Survey on Business Education*, 26 March 2001, p1.