

Curbing our enthusiasm: the underbelly of educational technology

Peter Sawchuk argues that e-learning has a place, but it must be kept in its place

Arguably, the most pressing issue of technology in post-secondary education today is online distance education, or e-learning. Indeed, its development has stimulated vital debate, and it continues to hold significant potential for supporting educational goals. But I hope to renew a call to re-think the enthusiasm that has captured so many post-secondary educators and leaders.

Love or hate it, David Noble's *Digital Diploma Mills: The Automation of Higher Education* (Between the Lines, 2002,) is perhaps the best starting point for this re-thinking, raising issues the e-learning enthusiasts rarely acknowledge. Noble marks as an important turning point the 1990 amendment to Canadian patent law that gave universities ownership of the outcomes of federally funded research. It is against this backdrop, as well as creeping under-funding, that new profit-centre strategies have pragmatically emerged in both American and Canadian universities. These new strategies are expanding to include the appropriation of copyright control and the commodification of teaching and learning, which threaten to re-shape educational institutions, the purposes that shape our curriculum, and much, much more.

As Noble argues, "copyright is the sine qua non of the digital diploma mill." Over the last decade in the United States, the copyright issue has been central to new university-corporate arrangements establishing private and semi-privatized ownership of online curriculum (and interaction records). This, in turn, has created additional pressure to establish an army of non-permanent instructors who are asked to sign new copyright agreements as part of their employment contract. We might ask ourselves in this context: Does it make sense for profitability to determine what gets taught?

An equally important question is, "What is the effect of e-learning on education? It's true that research has established that satisfaction levels in e-learning are about the same as in traditional learning. Yet we must also recognize that, as engaging as either synchronous or asynchronous e-prose may be, the fullness of human communication and, through it, the collective accomplishment of rich "learning experiences" are largely absent in e-learning environments.

This critique is supported all the more when we admit that e-learning can't help but isolate students from the kind of informal, collective "campus-life" learning that many students find fundamental to a full education. Although, certainly, one can serendipitously "meet" new people in cyberspace, how can these social experiences not pale in comparison to the emergent circles



of friends and co-learners found face-to-face on campus?

E-learning options can and do make acquiring a credential more convenient. But we should think carefully about the financial backdrop of this convenience, which supports the downloading of costs to individual students in two principal ways. First, while some students might choose to complete their education from home, this must be seen, in some part, as a coping behaviour in response to an inadequate grants system that does not allow students to experience the fullness of formal and informal educational life. Secondly, there is the well-established phenomenon in

the research that, in fact, e-learning more often serves those marginalized by lack of time, rather than by distance. Where does this time-crunch come from? Are rising tuition

and the need to perform more paid work not connected? No research proves that e-learning produces better results in head-to-head comparisons. We should admit that the enthusiasm for e-learning in the administrative halls is connected to under-funding.

Does all this mean that e-learning has no place in education? Hardly. E-learning has a place, but it must be kept in its place. As support to bricks-and-mortar education it has value. However, even under the most progressive of conditions, this calls for serious inquiry into faculty collective bargaining over workload; intellectual property rights; support for new forms of faculty training; student funding; the role of e-learning in the shaping of curriculum through corporate partnerships; and, lest we forget, careful attention to the fullness of educational experience. **AM**

As support to bricks-and-mortar education, e-learning has value

Peter H. Sawchuk is a professor in the Department of Sociology & Equity Studies in Education, at the Ontario Institute for Studies on Education/University of Toronto.