Lost in a Cyber Campus

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Lost in a cyber campus

The danger of online learning is that higher education could be turned into a commodity, sold on the Internet like movie tickets. The pursuit of knowledge deserves more, says Jonathan Zittrain

Traditional institutions of higher education are on a roller-coaster as they digest the possibilities of distance learning. The first phase of the ride is comfortable denial; the second is fearful paralysis; the third is inebriated gold rush – universities punch-drunk with the entrepreneurial abandon of a dotcom. One might wonder whether the inevitable fourth phase is thus a hangover, but even more unfortunate than failure at imitating a dotcom could be success. At stake is the very soul of higher education.

Phase one: denial. Until at least 1994, university administrators largely ignored the global Internet that their computer science departments were steadily building. They weren't the only ones to miss it. Commercial businesses also saw little of interest online, many even failing to reserve their own domain names at a time when the names were free for the taking (and even free of charge). The World Wide Web changed all that, as a point-and-click browser replaced arcane file transfer commands with a user-friendly view of the network.

Phase two: paralysis. As dotcom and its global counterparts burgeoned and mainstream consumer sites began to abound on the World Wide Web, many universities remained ˙ cool. Entrepreneurial ventures like eBay and Amazon.com propelled the Net beyond mere information delivery and into commerce, while universities largely satisfied themselves with the mincing steps of a brochure-style presence on the Web, creating departmental home pages and small sites for prospective students.

Fear has transformed mere complacency into paralysis as dotcom more recently turned its attention and capital to the market for education, blazing a path into actual teaching over

the Net. Whether it's Concord University School of Law – an online correspondence course in American law offered by a division of Kaplan Educational Centers – or American Global University – a for-profit online venture that generates bachelors, masters and doctoral degrees – the engine that has given us movies, groceries and airline tickets over the Net has now devoted itself to the commodity of education.

Some colleges now worry that to forego an Internet teaching strategy is not only to miss out on a great money-making opportunity but to begin a process of attrition among their own bricks-and-mortar students, who may be wooed away from residential studies by sophisticated and flexible Internet teaching tools.

Thus can the fear give way to phase three: entrepreneurial abandon. Knowing well the power of brand, some dotcom ventures are forging partnerships with regular universities to sell their wares online. Pay a visit to ecollege.com, for example, and you'll see one-stop shopping for students, faculty and universities who want to get into the distance learning arena. Even elite universities – presumably with the least to fear from wholly online competitors – are tempted to get in on the action, sponsoring everything from executive education programmes to full-fledged online MBAs. The theory seems to be that if we can't beat them, we can join them.

PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE – AT A PRICE
This idea is seriously and frighteningly flawed, and it is all the more pernicious because it could very well work. Consider the lot of the typical public or research library, once a first stop on someone's way to learning about a particular subject. Libraries have been stuck in the denial or fear phases of

the Internet story: when people go online for information they turn to Ask Jeeves or Yahoo! to get started. No wonder, then, that the world's libraries – whose very currency is information – paradoxically worry about obsolescence in the current information age.

How did this happen? Libraries were slow to awaken to the Net's possibilities, settling at most for placing their card catalogues online, and now they find themselves routed around. Yet the critical difference between a library and Yahoo! isn't that the latter is more fleet than the former. It is, of course, but the real difference is in values: a public library stands for distribution of information on a nondiscriminatory basis, and the sorting and presentation of information without ulterior motive.

A search engine like goto.com makes no bones about its business model, in which search results are simply auctioned off to the highest bidding seller. This is antithetical to the librarian who, whatever biases he may entertain, makes an effort to connect a patron with helpful information even if it is unpopular, off the beaten path or unable to afford a sponsorship slot.

For a library to attempt to compete online with dotcom search engines on their terms would entail either failure or a success for which the resulting enterprise would be no better grounded in information values than former competitors were. Libraries are beginning to awaken to the idea that they need to embrace the power of the Internet, but on their own sober terms, with their own values front and centre: witness the *Keystone Principles* percolating within the Association of Research Libraries. The key for those who hold more than dollar signs dear is a path that eschews both paralysis and dotcom me-tooism.

A new entrant in the field is fathom.com, an online "interactive knowledge site" set up by Columbia University, the London School of Economics, Cambridge University Press, The British Library, the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History and the New York Public Library. The group has said it seeks to disseminate information widely, but it is too early to judge the success of its model, either on financial or ethical grounds.

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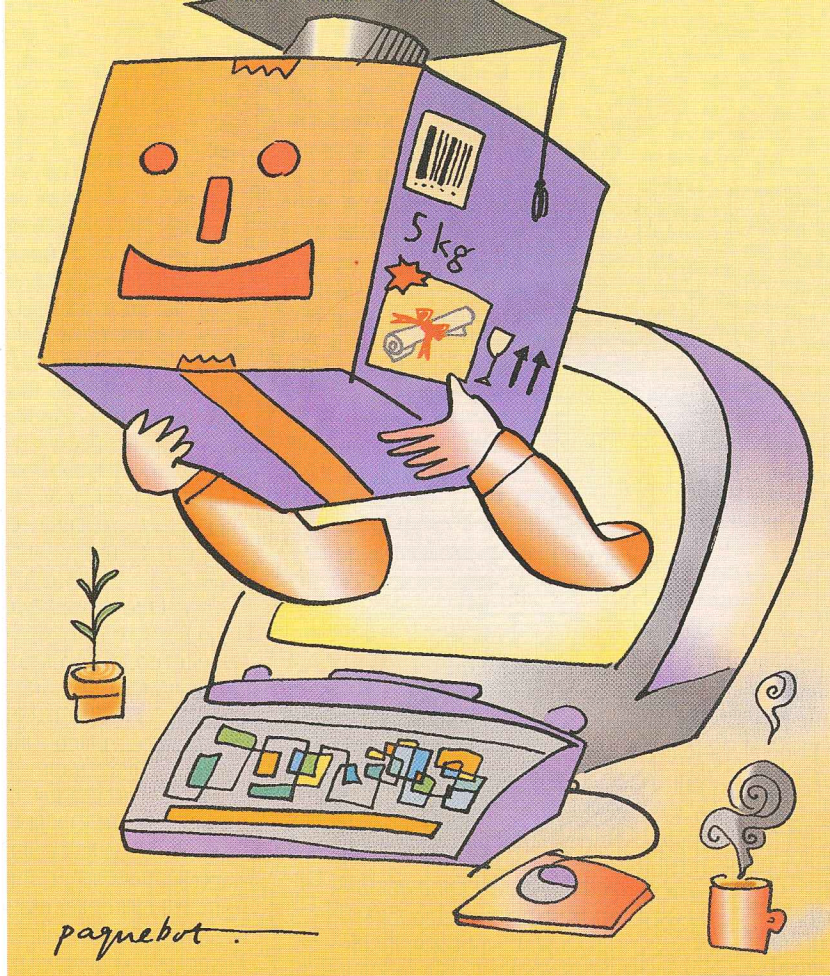
Universities, libraries, and anyone else in the "knowledge business" whose core values aspire to more than profit – while still respecting financial solvency – would do well to reflect on how those values can play out in cyberspace. The lure is clear: the Internet boom has underscored the value of information, or more generically, "content". In a digital environment, content can readily be commoditised, packaged and distributed, whether in exchange for cash in a transactional model or for attention in an advertising-based model.

This culture of commoditisation is becoming pervasive. Perhaps in response to the free classroom notes made available at sites like versity.com, last fall Harvard College sent out a warning to its students not to sell their classroom notes, on pain of expulsion. The underlying message seems to be that classroom activities have value, and colleges want a piece of anything derivative to these activities, including note-taking. What, then, does a university stand for: parsimoniously doling out knowledge to those who pay for it and who agree to abide by restrictions on their use of it, or bringing knowledge to the world at large, including tuition-paying students among many others?

My fear is that the response to that question is increasingly, unthinkingly, one of raw profit. Schools that embrace a public interest mission in "real" space suddenly turn to cyberspace as an unaffiliated cash cow, a licensed concession like the university-run hotel or snack bar that simply fills coffers. Such a view not only cheapens the spirit of a university's activities, but threatens it. Cyberspace and realspace won't be separate spaces for long, and the values expressed in the former can infuse the latter, turning education into just another production line: efficient but soulless fee-for-service. It works for movies and groceries, but is an unseemly way to treat the kindling of knowledge.

The platforms we build for distance learning can be built in the workshops of dotcom technology companies, or they can be kindled within the universities themselves. The computer science departments who brought us the Internet itself – and elected not to patent its fundamental protocols –

can be re-engaged to generate new technologies for teaching and learning that reflect the openness and generosity of spirit we have held dear. The "content" generated by faculty members can be work-for-hire purveyed by university storefronts to high bidders, or it can be freely shared precisely because of its value and interest. In other words, a university's wealth can be driven by up-front sale of content products, or it can be driven by gifts and, yes, general tuition from those who respect its reputation and wish to participate in its community.

As we emerge from our fear, then, we are at a crossroads. We can go the dotcom route, and many of us may hit a home run there. The Stanfords, Sorbonnes and Oxfords of the world represent competitive brand advantage in a market where consumers value reputation and credential. That way lies great fortune, at the price of lost soul.

Let us instead consider a route that reinvigorates dot-edu in its own right, allowing commercial interests as partners, as universities bring knowledge to the world on terms that are consonant with their values. Schools can offer classes online that do not frown upon students bringing guests or sharing what they learn even as they might pay to participate; that network with other universities as collaborators rather than competitors; that run on platforms designed for collaboration as well as profit, and for which the schools hold the intellectual property rights – rights shared freely with others

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so long as they themselves do not proprietise what they do.

Commerce and education have much to offer each other. What good is a global business without a knowledgeable workforce, and what good are schools without the fruits of entrepreneurial labour? A herd of dotcoms bearing gifts and lucrative (if exclusive) marketing and content arrangements is knocking on university doors. Will they be masters, or partners? ■

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