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DOES THE ONLINE UNIVERSITY NEED FACULTY, ADJUNCTS, OR CLERKS?

1. You have no doubt read academic job descriptions in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the MLA Job List, or a similar publication. You may have experience with hiring or tenure committees, or been involved in conversations with colleagues that sought to define what faculty do. Ads and conversations often focus on course load and content area, such as "we are looking for someone to teach in the area of nineteenth century British literature." Once hired, faculty are expected to be expert in their content area and to consequently decide what to teach in their courses. Almost without exception, faculty are vigilant about academic freedom and about creative choices in regard to what they teach or research. Ironically, more than a few of us teach postmodern views such as those of Foucault who tells us that "there is no knowledge without a particular discursive practice" (183). This means that how something is done largely determines what it is. In the last few years, computer technology has profoundly changed how many faculty teach and how they keep academic records. Because these changes affect how the university operates, rather than what is taught in classes, they have escaped formulation as policy issues for faculty discussion. Instead, it has more often been the case that administrators have felt compelled "to fit the university to the demands of technology" made by commercial software vendors (Cornford 111). The consequences are profound for both the institution of the university and for the historic role of faculty. In *Steal This University* (2003), Ana Marie Cox says that "pursuing corporate models" of higher education, such as the University of Phoenix model that she condemns, "could be the end of higher education as we know it" (Cox 28). This may seem exaggerated but nearly 65 percent of community college teachers are adjuncts and the trend seems to be to employ only adjuncts (AFT's "Portrait of the Adjunct as an Older Man"). This short paper will consider how computer technology used in two areas—distance education and academic management—threatens to change, if not subvert, the nature of the university and the role of faculty.

2. In 1948 Dwight Eisenhower accepted the presidency of Columbia University. In his first speech to the faculty he expressed his pleasure at meeting the employees of the university whereupon he was interrupted by a famous physics professor, I. I. Rabi, who corrected him, saying, "Sir, the faculty are not the employees of the university, the faculty is [the] University" ("Comments from James Hopkins"; there are other versions of the story). Rio Salado is very different from Columbia University. One of eleven Phoenix (Maricopa County), Arizona community colleges, Rio Salado employs 26 full time faculty and "over 700 adjunct instructors each semester" to teach 300 Web courses to 20,000 students. The Rio Salado campus serves only as an administrative center. Faculty have no offices and no classrooms. They are freelance entrepreneurs, almost anonymous and interchangeable adjuncts, whose contracts are for a single class and whose tenure is for a semester. Generally making less than $3,000 per class, adjuncts

are part-time help. The Organization of American Historians reports that part-timers earn "in the neighborhood of $15,000 annually, which involved teaching three or more classes per semester." Professor Isidor Rabi—a Nobel laureate involved in defining national science policy—was far too august to serve as a model for the adjunct faculty at Rio Saldo. But the question is whether online course facilitators at schools like Rio Salado are faculty at all. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) considers "virtual learning nothing more than a scheme to eliminate much of the teaching faculty" (Maeroff 240; see also the AAUP's "Statement on Distance Education"). Many of those involved in distance education via the Internet come to conceive the mission of the online university as information delivery (Cornford 42). This reduced understanding of teaching or instruction, as essentially a commercial service—the downloading of information—causes distance education to adopt "a far more corporate structure capable of coordinated action with formalized roles and standardized practices" that reduce faculty to interchangeable hired help (Cornford 76). In *Digital Diploma Mills* (2001) David Noble summarizes the characteristics of academic "commodity production: speedup, routinization of work, greater work discipline and managerial supervision, reduced autonomy, job insecurity, employer appropriation of the fruits of their labor, and, above all, the insistent managerial pressures to reduce labor costs in order to turn a profit (4). General Eisenhower may have been prescient in assuming that university faculty are simply corporation employees, knowledge workers, and that an Army General is likely to possess the requisite skills to manage the enterprise.

3. The Chronicle of Higher Education reports that the "explosion in distance-education enrollments" will likely cause many colleges to buy ready-made courses from commercial vendors. The author suggests that "institutions may eventually buy courses the way they now purchase textbooks" (Carnevale). Blackboard offers what it calls course cartridges "prepared by professional authors, editors, and publishers for use as online course materials" (Blackboard). WebCT also collaborates with book publishers to offer what it calls e-Packs, which are ready-made online courses. Cox reports that "numerous universities have started using their control over course content to license and then sell courseware to for-profit online entities." Half of David Noble's book describes recent battles at UCLA and UC Berkeley over this issue. Cox says, "This sort of arrangement is a familiar pattern at [the University of] Phoenix, where tightly structured, centrally developed lesson plans allow Phoenix's administration to dictate how a professor spends time, right down to fifteen-minute intervals…. What's more, streamlined courses are easier to shop out to low-paid adjunct professors" (Cox 22).

4. MIT is both participating in online course development and giving the results away—although what they are giving away is questionable. MIT's president says their Open Knowledge Initiative will make "the primary materials for nearly all of our 2,000 courses available" to anyone who wants it (Vest). Like "the open-source-software-movement," MIT "permits the reuse, modification, and redistribution of content" developed by their faculty (Unsworth). But this is not a "turn-key" resource that will allow instructors to easily import a course to their school's server and save them the trouble of course development. The course I looked at in technical communication offered little more than a reading list of sources that remain inaccessible at the site because they are copyrighted. Faculty designing a course like this are looking for pages that offer case study materials, then pages that illustrate examples of how a technical document might solve the case by using the materials (including graphics and tables), and still more pages that analyze why particular solutions are effective and why others are not on the levels of document design, rhetorical effectiveness, organization of data, usability, and other factors. This much planning and work, to produce perhaps a dozen Web pages to deal with one assignment, suggests why commercially produced distance courses are likely to be "starter shells" rather than finished or "turn-key" courses. If, as Noble suggests, distance education via the Net repeats the shoddy history of correspondence education, then exemplary online course content will remain invisible for some time. Noble explains that correspondence education was largely focused on recruitment to get non-refundable tuition money. Even at reputable universities like Columbia the dropout rate was 80 percent (Noble 14). At the University of Wisconsin it "was roughly 55 percent and 'dropout money' was the name of the game" (Noble 15). Amid all the interests of correspondence education, there was virtually none to create quality content because the

economics of the venture "dictated the opposite, to concentrate all efforts upon recruitment and next to nothing on instruction" (Noble 8).

5. When Professors discover that what they teach in online courses is likely to be dictated by commercial vendors, they face two problems in asserting their academic freedom. Few professors are expert enough in computer use to design, develop, and teach their own courses. At Northern Arizona University the English department has thirty-seven full time faculty. Seven teach Web courses but only two are dedicated to using the Web as a primary medium of instruction even though the development of distance education is a stated university goal. If faculty decide that the stakes in developing their own course are worth the effort, they typically find lots of help from "support specialists"—course designers and trainers expert in instruction or platform programs, such as WebCT and Blackboard; graphic artists and Web designers; "new" librarians who offer to help with electronic sources; compliance experts who give advice about the visually impaired; marketing advisors who give recruitment advice; assessment experts who advise faculty about "best practices" for Web courses; and media experts who suggest that every good Web course includes video and audio clips, and is perhaps best rendered as a game. (For example, see the help offered at UCLA).

6. When I took WebCT training one of the technicians displayed an undergraduate course in social studies rendered as a word game. I thought it might be used in an elementary or junior high course. It was offered as an exemplary three hour undergraduate course. The pride of the technician who demonstrated the program suggested the clash of values between support staff and the faculty they were helping. Faculty are dedicated to the content of their courses and curricula. Support staff are dedicated to their professional methods, which renders the computer medium as both an interesting technique and as an end in itself. I am sure the technician thought I was being obstinate when I suggested that the graduate technical writing courses I teach are probably not the best candidates for such innovative methods. Months later I was surprised by an assessment of one of my online courses, which I had submitted to a WebCT exemplary course competition because I had worked hard to create the course and because students gave me perfect marks in course evaluations. I was told that "WebCT has many powerful tools" and that I should use them all, including "the incorporation of audio and video." I did not ask the obvious question *why?* knowing that the answer would involve asserting their support staff interests, assumptions, and techniques over my faculty concerns. At about the same time I was involved in a demonstration of WebCT's Vista program that was touted as the solution to the problems encountered in using the Campus Edition (at a cost of $500,000 and redesign of all of our existing WebCT classes). When we identified problems that Vista still did not seem to solve, the product developer in Vancouver told us that we should concentrate on what the program could do.

7. In these cases the "experts" giving advice about online course design and delivery knew nothing about the content of various courses. They simply offered a sales pitch for a "one size fits all" commercial product they could not use in the same way that faculty use the program. More generously we might acknowledge that support staff are committed to values grounded in their own professional activity, but as boosters and salesmen, who may have an M.A. in educational technology, they do not return the favor. They believe in their commercial product. It is not entirely comforting to know that "over 80 percent of public institutions have a faculty technology center available to help faculty develop courses" (Campbell). Many faculty are skeptical of such help seeing it as a strategy to disaggregate the skills involved in teaching so that "the job of instruction is assigned to a team of designated specialists in course design, development, content, delivery, and distribution" (Noble 88). Many of us also scoff at the debased and warped results that offer elements of commercial entertainment and require sophisticated computer techniques that mock or ignore our professional dedications.

8. If professors succeed in fighting off most of this well-meant pedagogy and assessment advice, and acquire enough computer skill to build their own courses, they face a second problem explained by George Landow who spent thirty years at Brown University where administrators found his Web work to

be interesting but insignificant as publication or as indications of professional work. Incredibly, Landow says his various literature websites received "as many as 8 million hits" a month and were "endorsed by the ministries of education" in several countries. Nonetheless, when he brought his work to the attention of administrators at Brown as something they might use for recruitment or to demonstrate faculty research, he reports that the university leadership was uninterested. Landow continues, "I suggested to one senior administrator that we could publicise either a proposed department of digital culture or the entire university by putting a statement of Brown sponsorship in each document. I even offered to hand over management of the sites to a committee, a group of editors, whatever. This proposal was not deemed worthy of a response" (Landow 112-3)!

9. In *A Classroom of One* (2002), Gene Maeroff writes that "one obstacle to faculty involving themselves more extensively in learning the ins and outs of online courses has been the slowness with which the academy has recognized such tasks as worthy of consideration in evaluation procedures leading to promotion and tenure" (Maeroff 243). Department chairs and administrators above that level are unlikely to have developed or taught an online course. Consequently, they have little experience in making judgments about the quality, creativity, or time involved in producing and teaching Web courses. Indeed, their managerial interest is likely to be in employing adjuncts "who are paid less and lack the academic credentials of the average faculty member." After courses are developed or bought, the administrative interest may be to "dispense with regular faculty in online courses" (Maeroff 238).

10. Edward Ayers, a prominent historian, laments the slowness of his colleagues to produce online research, because "not many institutions, despite encouragement from the Modern Language Association and the American Historical Association, have aggressively broadened tenure and promotion procedures to encourage the risk taking of digital projects. How should those projects be evaluated?" he asks. "As teaching? Scholarship? Service?" For the moment it seems easier to leave the question unanswered and to wait for some direction from elite schools other than Brown. Meanwhile, Ayers says, potential young faculty "look at the job ads and note that positions require exactly the same credentials as a quarter-century ago" (Ayers). Ayers infers that humanist scholars avoid investing their time and effort in technology. I think this investment is expected but not explicitly recognized, expected but not counted in an assessment of professional skills. Few universities offer credit courses in typing or word processing because these are assumed to be minimal competency skills. Faculty Web construction skills seem to be thought of in a similar fashion as competency skills that do not rise to the level of being recognized as professional skills except, perhaps, in cases where faculty teach Web design and development. Evidently unaware of the furor caused in 1997 when UCLA required "computer websites for all of its arts and sciences courses" (Noble 25), my university just announced that "WebCT shells will be built for all courses, regardless of delivery mode" so that faculty will have dedicated Web space to develop resources for even traditionally delivered courses (Fischer). How long will it be before department chairs begin to inquire why some of their faculty are not using this resource? Public universities report that in 2003, "48 percent of their courses had an associated Web page" (Campbell). In the academic year 2000-01, 56 percent of two- and four-year colleges offered distance education courses to nearly 3 million students (Tully).

11. Most of my university colleagues do not recognize the details of how distance education methods are quietly subverting, or at least changing, the nature of the university and the status of faculty. They do, however, recognize the territory of their traditional classrooms and perceive that it is increasingly a contested area that requires them to do more than shut the door to control what goes on. Many complain about the expectations to develop an online syllabus or a few Web pages for their courses the way they complained a decade ago about having to learn how to deal with email. Faculty are much less aware of how enterprise-resource-planning (ERP) software is redefining academic management until they are forced to participate. These systems are developed by vendors like PeopleSoft and Oracle, who make only cosmetic changes in their commercial software to manage the course bulletin, registration, class rosters, grading, transcripts, and advising. For example, to get to my class rosters in the PeopleSoft program I first

choose a hyperlink called "SA Self Service," which is undefined and meaningless to virtually everyone who uses the system. I then choose "Learning Management" that has "Management" as a subset! In the classroom, where I teach professional writing courses, I am used to critiquing such errors in logic and audience analysis. But when I do academic data management, I have no choice but to learn the program and follow its cues.

12. Even though students are customers only in an inessential sense, officials at Cornell university say they are to going to strive to minimize their modifications to PeopleSoft "and use the application as delivered," not only because custom changes are expensive, but because they "want PeopleSoft to support it." They say, "That's the whole idea of purchasing this kind of package." Their decision involves more than outsourcing university services and paying for them—an estimated $663 million to convert the California State University system to PeopleSoft (Olsen). The online program forces faculty to spend more time clerking to do personnel work imposed by ERP programs. No wonder this incenses many humanist scholars; because the process operationally demands a kind of simple reading and minimal writing that mocks their professional talents to write and analyze complex texts.

13. Faculty are compelled to learn computerized management and assessment techniques and to spend a significant part of their time clerking to passively follow what ERP software dictates. These programs foster a kind of tunnel vision because "everything not already included within the system appears disordered," unnamed, and irrelevant to the vocabulary of assessment (Cornford 65). Cornford and Pollock argue that ERP software does not simply reveal "an established problem" that it solves. Instead, like any analytic technique, the software creates as much as discovers the problems that it solves (61). They also argue that ERP software creates a "'direct pressure' to spend more effort on 'management and administration', and to provide more data and information on 'relative performance'" of students and programs (55). Because the program can produce more varied measurements, we devote more time and effort to shuffle these bureaucratic papers.

14. As Professor Isidor Rabi suggested to General Eisenhower, the organization of the university has been recognized for centuries. The university exists in order to teach and the faculty are trusted to know how to teach because they have demonstrated a mastery of professional techniques that students aspire to learn. Administrative and management functions have been ancillary and supportive of the teaching mission. If it is true, as Maeroff says, that "the best teachers in colleges and universities get plaques and commendations, but their teaching skills alone seldom win them promotion or tenure," then what is the point of so much increased interest in assessment and reporting (Maeroff 26)? What are we measuring with ever increasing frequency? Whatever it is, the concern has been foisted on the university by commercial software vendors and their partisans. As always, technique is more important than, and contributes to, what we purport to measure. ERP management and assessment has two relevant effects. First it contributes to the Frederick Taylor-like project of objectively defining what faculty do so that this can be packaged as "coordinated action with formalized roles and standardized practices" for commercial delivery via the Internet (Cornford76). In the area of curriculum and instruction this is called making a program "teacher-proof" (Russell). Secondly, ERP software provides techniques and vocabulary shared by administrators, faculty, staff, and politicians. This allows all four communities to conceptualize the university as a commercial service using "a set of priorities that are 'known' and seemingly 'understood' by everyone" (Cornford 58).

15. Most faculty will acknowledge the necessity to report what we do in something like the formal methods required by ERP software, but we also typically qualify this to ourselves, and perhaps to our colleagues, as largely a waste of time and resources because we think it so badly misses the point of what we do. We think of such assessment as imposed by those who have different values and agendas than ours. And now the business world is defining categories to assess what faculty doin the university. I am reminded of Milan Kundera's short story "Nobody Will Laugh" about an art instructor who is motivated to teach his class at the university in an underground manner to evade a bothersome and persistent amateur

art critic. The teacher is also an art journal editor who hopes to duck the amateur rather than "tell him in two sentences that" his submission is "crap" (Kundera2196). The rejection letter becomes a symbol for assessment, institutional reporting, and accommodating to a bureaucratic regime. Because the teacher refuses to crush the illusions of the amateur by filing the report, which would allow him to appear in class at the expected time and place, he loses his job and is told, "you'll be glad if they'll let you in some gallery as a clerk" (Kundera 2214).

16. Since the Renaissance, when Boccaccio and Rabelais began to imagine what the university might be and to propose it in place of the monastery as the incubator for a new world, the university has offered something different from a commercial service. In another brouhaha over a joint university and commercial venture to sell academic content, the University of Washington faculty declared that their university "is a vital resource to our community, not a factory, not a corporation, not a software package" (Noble 53). The university has both prepared students for jobs and professions, and served as an alternative and refuge from the so-called "real world." Now with the simultaneous erosion of support from state legislatures for higher education and with commercial vendors offering software to define the terms and techniques for both academic management and online instruction, the nature of the university is imperiled as never before. In part this is because the threat is unperceived, seeming to affect only how the university operates rather than what it is. Those of us who teach Foucault and other postmodernists should recognize that how things are done largely define what they are.

17. Hubert Dreyfus, a famous UC Berkeley philosopher predicts that "distance learning will produce only competence, while expertise and practical wisdom will remain completely out of reach" (Dreyfus 49). By practical wisdom Dreyfus means the kind of knowledge one acquires from first being in the presence of an expert who performs some difficult skill and then trying to imitate the skill while being coached by the master. In contrast to this model, Dreyfus suggests that online learning does not even download information; it simply provides an opportunity for a kind of elevated gossip and catharsis. Some of the first advice offered by university technology centers to help faculty prepare online courses is that they will function more as facilitators than as traditional classroom teachers. Many courses rely on asynchronous discussion posts. The similarities between posting comments to newsgroups or writing email and posting academic judgments to course discussion areas often make it difficult for students to see the difference that Dreyfus has in mind. In humanities classes we study texts because we believe that they illustrate a paradigm model of clarity, style, or values grounded in some other context. A teacher analyzes various texts of a disciplinary canon to exhibit their excellence to those who aspire to become members of the profession. In contrast, we easily imagine students in online classes to be sitting in front of monitors with hands poised on a keyboard ready to express their opinions. The consumer and commercial metaphors informing much of distance education, evident for example in characterizing students as customers, suggest that many online courses merely offer opportunities for self-expression. The term facilitator implies both that the purpose of the class is to express one's opinion and that everyone's opinions have about the same merit. Dreyfus uses Kierkegaard's thought to predict that the amorphous character of our online experience would form "a detached world in which everyone had an opinion about and commented on all public matters without needing any first-hand experience and without having or wanting any responsibility" (Dreyfus 76).

18. I can imagine some in academe—for example, those who agreed with Allan Bloom and Bill Readings' accounts of how the university was degraded by bourgeois attacks in the twentieth century—will take a kind of aristocratic comfort in suggesting that these forces most affect community colleges and non-research state universities that have (they believe) already compromised academic standards. If students at these second tier schools lose a physical campus and classroom, and contact with faculty who have scant sense of research, it hardly matters. Ana Marie Cox uses the familiar Wal-Mart analogy to ask, "Could a nonprofit [university] become as cost-effective as the University of Phoenix, [by] wiping out residential features, libraries, and such?" She says, "It seems impossible at a large state school, but what about a small private commuter college? Or a community college? These two types of institutions are Phoenix's

real competitors and are schools that stand to lose the most students when Phoenix or a company like it moves into town" (Cox 27).

19. From Princeton University, Professor Katz opines that "too much of what is now being called distance education at most institutions is not an educational idea; it is a business idea" (Katz). He would likely agree with Ana Marie Cox's highly critical analysis of the University of Phoenix as a virtual fraud ("for-profit institutions like the University of Phoenix are the Enrons of higher education") that "has done more than almost any other education enterprise to shift the meaning of college from that of a process one goes through to a product one buys" (Cox 23, 16). The effect on education policy is to increase the contrast and distance between elite education, where students are coached and mentored by world-class researchers and academic stars, and plebian education, which increasingly resembles commercial training taken via the Web and facilitated by anonymous adjuncts. Cox agrees, but puts her emphasis on the for-profit model of higher education as the misguided policy rather than on computer techniques, saying, "The rise of the for-profit has merely exacerbated this divide, precisely because in the for-profit future, only the richest private universities may thrive" (Cox 29). I have suggested that the for-profit model of the university is better recognized in the commercial software used for distance instruction and academic management than in policy issues offered for analysis, discussion, and choice. Those techniques and methods, which define how the university works, may well doom most of those who aspire to teach to adjunct jobs as facilitators and clerks.

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