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Digital Diploma Mills: The Automation of Higher Education
by David F. Noble

I felt a sense of déjà vu throughout *Digital Diploma Mills*, and not just because I taught my first officially "computer-enhanced" course last fall. My first flashback was to my job teaching English at a conversation school in Japan. After a few weeks on the job it was obvious that while the quality of the teaching wasn't important, extracting money from the students was. Unsurprisingly, all of the [now defunct] school's effort was devoted to signing up students to expensive, long-term lesson plans while a comparatively tiny sum was devoted to teachers, training, textbooks, and facilities. When the students' initial enthusiasm for the lessons inevitably wore off there were no refunds available. As the students fell away more could be signed up without hiring more teachers, and the "dropout money" from lapsed students was pure profit.

This type of degraded for-profit exploitation is historian David Noble's nightmare of the future of the technology-based education, and he demonstrates that this idea is not as farfetched as it might initially seem. One of the strengths of *Digital Diploma Mills* is that it puts the automation of higher education into a broader 20th century perspective, recounting the brief love affair of universities with the correspondence school model in the 1920s as a precursor to modern, computer-assisted distance education. The correspondence model, which began in the 1880s as a for-profit vocational training operation, gained academic legitimacy in the 1900s with the imprimatur of the University of Chicago. Correspondence programs spread to 73 other colleges and universities by 1919 and flourished through the 1920s. Then, as now, claims were made for not only the adequacy but the actual superiority of correspondence over in-person education models. Home study, it was claimed, allowed students to "receive individual personal attention," to work as rapidly or as slowly as they liked, and to work with any schedule in any region, and to overcome peer pressure and shyness (10).

The reality, according to Noble, was that although these schools heavily promoted their correspondence courses as equivalent in quality to their regular courses, they relegated correspondence teaching to a "casualized low-status workforce of instructors, lecturers and assistants" who were typically overworked and underpaid because of their marginal and replaceable status (13). Noble believes technology-driven distance education has the same allure for administrators today that correspondence courses did in the 1920s--more "customers," less overhead, and more profit. He also argues that the consequences of this are the same as they were in the 1920s--a "degraded product" produced by a "degraded labor force" (4). Might modern distance education be vulnerable to the same pressures that brought it down in the 1930s, when many correspondence programs were denounced by educators as "diploma mills" and threatened with the loss of accreditation?

Anyone who's been even mildly skeptical of the academy's eagerness to lend a mystical aura to all things computerized will enjoy Noble's criticism of the blind faith in technology to reduce workloads, improve instruction, and generally bring the university to a technological par with private industry. Noble questions what need could justify the enormous share of humanity departments' resources invested in technology from the 1970s onward, a trend he describes as "a technological tapeworm in the guts of higher education"

(23). But despite the book's title, Noble's primary motivation is not anti-technology or even anti-distance learning, and readers looking for a detailed analysis of the varieties of computer-mediated education in North America will come away from the book disappointed. Noble dislikes distance learning because he feels it robs the educational process of the vital component of unmediated personal interaction. But he also argues that distance learning is a symptom of a larger problem, and that computer technology has been one of the most effective viruses for carrying the ideology of private industry--speed, efficiency and rapid obsolescence--into the university. Noble writes that during the computerization of higher education, "[U]niversities were not simply undergoing a technological change. Beneath that change, and camouflaged by it, lies another: the commercialization of higher education" (26).

The real threat that Noble believes underlies much of the technological transformation of education is the transformation of the university into a Taylorized organization obsessed with automating to improve the bottom line. Because technology companies are the major player in big-dollar public/private educational partnerships and, increasingly, in the outsourcing of key university functions (such as PeopleSoft's human resource software or Web-CT's distance learning software), these companies approach university administrations in a particularly vulnerable area. By emphasizing corporate-style efficiency-- Web-CT's jargony marketing materials describing their "courseware" and their "clearinghouse of best practices" are absolutely cringe-inducing--these companies exacerbate problems already eating away at the fabric of the university.

If using cheap adjunct labor was an early step in reducing university overhead, Noble believes the next step is to acquire and package the professors' expertise in a reproducible digital form in order to cheaply and easily resell this commodity to student/customers. In this scenario's most extreme instance a professor's work could be appropriated in a series of multimedia lessons or on-line lectures and resold to students for years after the professor had been dismissed by the university. While these discarded professors are searching for new jobs, their digitized intellectual capital continues to produce pure profit with minimal overhead for their former employer.

Because copyrights are automatically assigned to the original author of a work unless contractually forfeited (typically as a condition of employment), the battle over computerized education is being fought over ownership of products like syllabi and assignments, which are authored by individual instructors while in the employ of the university. While the difference between "reproduction rights" and "distribution rights" may seem like a hair-splitting legal argument, this is the distinction that private companies have exploited in their search for a product to market on behalf of partner universities like UCLA. In one chapter Noble recounts in exhaustive detail how UCLA administrators pushed ahead with their private online distance learning partnership while deliberately ignoring instructors' legal rights to their own teaching materials. The ultimate goal, Noble believes, is to cut professors out of the circle entirely once their intellectual capital has been captured on disk or tape. He claims that this has already happened at York University, where "some untenured faculty have been required to put their courses on video, CD-ROM or the Internet or lose their job. They have then been hired to teach their own courses at a fraction of their former compensation" (33). Thus the professor completes the transition from skilled professional to replaceable content provider.

The deprofessionalization of the professor is not unlike what has already happened in the medical industry, and a disturbing Wall Street coinage would have "EMOs" overseeing education just as HMOs regulate medical care (the EMO movement will be the focus of a forthcoming issue of *Workplace*). Universities sell off their autonomy bit by bit in their search for new funding sources, while private companies can buy public-subsidized intellectual capital with powerful brand names like Columbia and UCLA for pennies on the dollar.

Noble's book is not a thorough analysis of the pros and cons of computer-aided education; that is perhaps too much to ask of such a slender volume. But it is nonetheless disappointing to see Noble so little

engaged with what online education can or can't do, and so concerned with the paper trail of bad or unethical administrative policy decisions at UCLA. It would be useful to see a more complete description of the results of online learning than Noble's common-sensical (albeit unsupported) assertions that personal classroom contact is good and his more questionable claims that Internet usage induces depression. But that would be asking the book to be something other than what it is--a polemic rather than a blandly balanced study. But the book's appealingly direct partisanship also leads to its weakness, since topical books have relatively short shelf-lives. *Digital Diploma Mills* could have been the book of the moment if it had been published three years ago, but in these days of dried-up venture capital funds and vastly diminished expectations for profit windfalls in online education, the online threat the book describes feels much further away than it did in 1999. The private money required for such a massive transformation has largely evaporated (as some of Noble's own case studies inadvertently indicate), and there is a strong chance the days of unlimited capital for speculative Internet development will never reappear. The corporatization of the university that Noble deplores has continued apace in the ensuing years, but that is the subject for a different book.

Written to counteract the overwhelming e-hype of the late 90s, the end-is-upon-us rhetoric of Noble's book is now a little dated, like many of the products of those overheated years. As it stands, large portions of the book exist essentially unchanged from their late-90s online publications. The chapter "The Bloom Is Off the Rose" is particularly musty-smelling, with Noble's muckraking claims that 'these technology companies that promised the university huge profits are not even making money!' Noble scores points for being prescient, but years after the bubble his urgent admonitions seem a bit beside the point.

Noble also fails to distinguish between the majority of these online courses largely intended for continuing education taken by older working people and the minority that are targeting younger undergraduates as an alternative to a "live" education. Noble feels that the inevitable direction of online continuing education courses is to supplant the physical system of undergraduate education, and while there may well be evidence to support his view, it is not supplied in this book. Hundreds of colleges, universities, private firms and venture capitalists have placed bets that online education will inevitably become far more prevalent and profitable than it currently is, and Noble's warning to scrutinize university administrations as they negotiate new copyright relationships for electronic media is an important message. But as long as online education is a useful part of adult extension courses (the use for which it was originally intended), it's hard to see how refusing to serve those who are unable to attend regular classes in the name of safeguarding the primacy of in-person education would be a good thing.

Last semester I taught a "computer-enhanced" (the code for a partly in-person, partly Web-based course) course in introductory literature and composition course that met for a marathon 4-hour session every other Saturday. The Web-based part of the course, which included both an accretive syllabus with research links and a moderated discussion board, proved to be very helpful in easing the gaps between classes. With the long lag time between personal contact, the Web and email contact allowed me to point out new study resources that I had not yet discovered when I prepared the assignments, to give immediate feedback on papers in progress, and to prime students with ideas in an attempt to make the best use of their bi-weekly four hour sessions of interpersonal contact. When one student was temporarily reassigned to California by her company to oversee guidance system production for the war in Afghanistan, she continued to contribute to the discussion board and email her assignments in as though she were in the dorms across the quad. All of the students were either working professionals or aspired to be, and perhaps one or two of them could have taken the course if it were offered on weekdays. Would these students be better off if they had to choose between work and school?

In the end, it is not Noble's scattershot critique of technology that remains with the reader. Rather, his critique of the corporate university, even when squeezed too hard in order to fit a Marxist framework of commodification and alienation, evokes far more chilling speculations about the future of education. Noble decries "the erosion of university culture as campuses have become a closed world of secret deals,

non-disclosure agreements, prepublication reviews--the ensemble of practices that define the intellectual property regime; and about the campus atmosphere of silence, intimidation, and self-censorship that attends these arrangements and signals the demise of academic freedom" (92). The danger that Noble describes is real, and educators would be unwise to take it lightly simply because they disagree with the hyperbole of his argument or the specifics of his technological critique.