Online higher education commodity

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Abstract This article analyzes the current trend towards online education. It examines some of the reasons for the trend and the ramifications it may have on students, faculty and institutions of higher learning. The success and profitability of online programs and institutions such as the University of Phoenix has helped to make the move towards online education more appealing to other institutions, as well as, helped to change how online education is viewed by the public. Reasons such as cost, accessibility and flexibility are often presented as motivations for why many students and institutions use online learning. However, the reasons behind the movement towards more online learning may be more motivated by capitalistic ideals associated with an ever increasingly knowledge-based economy than that of providing quality and more accessible education. The movement towards more online learning coupled with the increased corporatization of higher education may be helping to contribute to the commodification of knowledge and the changing role of institutions and education itself. Thus potentially leading to a state in which education is further transformed into a commodity, students becoming more like consumers, faculty into entrepreneurs, and institutions of higher learning into storefronts for knowledge.

Keywords Online learning · Commodification · Corporatization · Online education

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Introduction

In the last two decades there has been a significant growth in online learning, both in the form of private for-profit online institutions and at traditional brick and mortar institutions. "The number of students taking at least one online course has expanded at a rate in excess of the growth of overall higher education enrollments" (Storey and Tebes 2008, para. 3). Based on a report by the Sloan Consortium, a consortium made up of institutions and organizations with the mission of integrating online education with mainstream higher education, in 2007 there were approximately 3.94 million online students, which marks a 12.9% increase from 2006 (Allen and Seaman 2008, 5). The significant growth in online learning can be seen at all different types of institutions (public/private, non-profit/for-profit, traditional brick and mortar schools/stand alone online schools) and involve a wide range of disciplines (business, criminal justice, health administration, psychology, accounting, information technology, etc.), as well as, educational levels (associates, bachelors, masters, doctorate degrees). As institutions rush to jump on the online learning bandwagon, it might be necessary to step back and examine the reason for this trend and how it is affecting students, faculty and institutions. I argue that the online learning movement is motivated by capitalistic ideals in an increasingly knowledge-based economy whereby education is transformed into a commodity, students into consumers, faculty into entrepreneurs, and institutions of higher learning into storefronts. In this paper, I will provide an overview of the current trends in online education, then discuss how the corporatization of higher education has contributed to the commodification of knowledge and the changing role of institutions and education itself.

Online model

In order to examine online learning, it might be helpful to examine a "successful" online learning institution to help frame some of this discussion about online learning. The University of Phoenix initially started with the goal of tapping into the non-traditional student market, particularly that of working adults who could not attend more traditional institutions often times due to constraints on their time, limited finances or personal and professional obligations. Carnevale and Olsen (2003) claim that there are an "estimated 70 million working adults [who] have never earned a college degree" (as cited in DeFleur and Adams 2004, 151). With such a large number of working adults who have never had a college education, this population presents a largely untapped education market that may be available to institutions of higher education. According to the University of Phoenix website, it was founded in 1978 as a brick and mortar institution and then in 1989 started the online component of their institution (University of Phoenix, "About University of Phoenix: History"). The university claims to be the largest private university in the country with an enrollment of over 200,000 students, with locations throughout the country and internationally, as well as online. David Breneman (n.d.), author of "The University of Phoenix: Poster Child For-Profit Higher Education," claims that

the average profile of a University of Phoenix student is described as being in their "mid-thirties, with an average household income of \$50,000–\$60,000, about 40% of the student population is made up of minority students and about 54% of the overall population are female." Breneman also asserts that the 'focus' of the University of Phoenix is on the "working adult, not the traditional 18–22 year old full-time student" (Breneman, 2).

Since the population the University of Phoenix wants to target is working adults, it is not surprising that the student population tends to be older. Moreover, as education becomes more flexible and includes a population of students who might have been traditionally unable or had limited opportunity to attend school, the statistics on female students is not surprising. Conversely, it is noteworthy that the University of Phoenix can boost such a diverse student body with such a high rate of minority students as part of the student population because as a whole, students of color are traditionally underrepresented in higher education. Therefore for a university to have such a diverse population it is commendable, however, to fully evaluate and understand the relevance of that diversity, there needs to be a further examination into the kinds of students being admitted, more specifically the admission requirements to enter the university.

At the University of Phoenix "all that is required is a high school diploma or a GED to be admitted to the university. Documentation such as grades, standardized test scores, previous college courses 'have very little predictive validity for adult students'" (Breneman, p. 10). Often times when a traditional college student is seeking entrance into a university or college, schools normally are limited to test scores and grades to evaluate prospective students and determine their potential to succeed. On the other hand, adults students who might attend schools such as the University of Phoenix may have been out of school for years which renders their grades and test scores relatively obsolete and irrelevant in assessing the students' ability to learn and succeed in school. Work experience and other criteria become a more realistic and accurate reflection of an adult student's performance and would be more appropriate in assessing whether or not an adult student would be able to succeed at the university. Thus explains the university's policy of allowing students the ability to transfer or earn credit for work experience and have it counted as credit towards their degree (University of Phoenix, "Transfer"). Consequently, this policy allows the students to be able to use their work experience to bypass some of the required courses or accelerate through their programs at a quicker pace depending on how many transferrable credits they have. This ease of admission and transferability of work experience, as well as, the flexibility of the curriculum, particularly in the online format, sets the University of Phoenix to be an attractive alternative to the more traditional institutions that might require a more detailed admissions process or are less flexible in terms of curriculum and/or access.

Online boom

According to Morey (2004) "higher education is a \$231 billion dollar enterprise in the United States" (139). The success of the University of Phoenix in the online

education market is evident by its prominence in the numerous commercials and advertisements that are peppered across people's television and computer screens. It is difficult to sit through television shows or jump from different online websites without seeing a commercial or advertisement for the University of Phoenix. During the 2008 fiscal year, the Apollo Group, the parent company of the University of Phoenix, reported net earnings of over $2.9 million dollars for its University of Phoenix sector alone. In addition in, 2007 and 2006, the net earnings were over $2.5 million and $2 million, respectively (Apollo 2008, 3). These figures are significant because within a 3 year period, the University of Phoenix was able to increase its annual revenue by almost $1 million dollars. Although these figures may be small in comparison with the overall financial earnings of the higher education enterprise that was reported by Morey (2004), the financial success of the University of Phoenix is still substantial. The monetary success of the University of Phoenix and the financial windfall of online learning are not lost on the minds of many traditional brick and mortar schools. According to Hanna (1998), the "adult learning marketplace is increasingly competitive and full of opportunity for both existing and new entries" (70) therefore it is understandable to see the increase in institutions trying to compete for the online and adult learning market that the University of Phoenix has been so successful at taping into.

Institutions such as the University of Phoenix, which was commonly viewed by many inside and outside of academia as being questionable institutions of education simply because it did not provide a traditional education, has now become the leader in online learning and is often cited as being the model of a successful for-profit institution that has been successful in the online education market (see Morey 2004; Breneman n.d.; Gladieux and Swail 1999). There are varied opinions regarding the debate over online education versus traditional education such as the quality of the education received, the acceptability of online degrees in terms of employment and admissions into advance degree programs, and so on. According to Adams and DeFleur (2006), critics of online education tend to believe that the education received online is inferior to traditional education. However, Joy and Garcia (as cited in Adams and DeFleur 2006) claim that online learning is actually equivalent and has potential for being superior to education received in a traditional setting. Even with the debate surrounding online education, many (Morey 2004; Flew 1999; DeFleur and Adams 2004) argue that the online trend will only increase as the demand for it continues to grow, which is supported by large number of students already taking online courses as illustrated by the 12.9% increase between 2006 and 2007 as reported by the Sloan-C report (Allen and Seaman 2008).

Technology is good

With an ever increasing global economy that has become increasingly more reliant on technology, more and more corporations and governments may be pushing for a more "literate" society that is better equipped to function and meet the demands of the changing economy, therefore it is foreseeable that online education will continue to grow and expand. The reason behind the growth might be due in part to the belief

that technology is good thing and embracing technology is a necessary and inevitable thing. Grineski (2000) argues that the reason for this belief is based on Lynch's (1996) notion of memes, "actively contagious ideas" (p. 20) which have a tendency to spread and perpetuate through society. As technology becomes more prevalent in society, the memes of the necessity and benefits of technology grows increasingly salient. According to Neil Postman (1992) new technologies alter the structure of our interests: the things we think about. They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think with. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop. Gladieux and Swail (1999) echo Postman's claim by stating that the "technological evolution from an industrial society to one dependent on information and knowledge has forever altered how we learn and do things" (p. 45). As evident by the large number of online learning courses and the continuing growth in online learning, it is hard not to see that many people have "technology on the brain."

Technology does more than function to change our lives, but it has the potential for changing the way we think, act and behave. Postman goes on to point out how those who embrace Technopoly have a particular view about technology and its role in society:

> Those who feel most comfortable in Technopoly are those who are convinced that technical progress is humanity's supreme achievement and the instrument by which our most profound dilemmas may be solved. They also believe that information is an unmixed blessing, which through its continued and uncontrolled production and dissemination offers increased freedom, creativity, and peace of mind. (Postman 1992, p. 71)

If technology is viewed with such a deterministic and utopian perspective then anyone who does not feel "comfortable" in Technopoly or are critical of it may likely to be seen as going as something that is meant to be good and something that can help to create a more egalitarian society. It is through this utopian view of technology that has allowed higher education and society to be appropriated by the corporate world. If Postman's assertions about technology are true, then this move towards online learning has the potential of altering learning and the landscape of higher education.

Postman (1992) argues the experts of Technopoly will serve the desires of their gods, a "god that does not speak of righteousness or goodness or mercy or grace. Their god speaks of efficiency, precision, objectivity" (Postman 1992, p. 90). When institutions start to function more like corporations and change from being in the business of education into being in the education business, higher education will no longer be the grounds for where students can be educated to critically think and questions what exist in society and learn to be citizens. Lynch (2006) argues "what is happening in the universities is that they are being asked to produce commercially oriented professionals rather than public-interest professionals" (p. 2). She argues that higher education will be transformed into a training ground for future workers who are given certain skills that help to ensure efficiency and productivity. Subsequently, education will no longer be about learning but rather reaching economic goals that are set by the "experts" with an increasing number of them

acting more like corporate executives than educators. Therefore, many of the players involved in the growth and push for more technology both in and outside of the classroom are the ones who might have very little to do with education but more to do with profits and capitalistic mantras.

Bottomline

Under the conditions of Technopoly, "our granting inordinate prestige to experts who are armed with sophisticated technical machinery"(Postman 1992, 90) signals society's willingness to fall under the leadership of those who are better able to lead it into this new technologically advanced world. Many of these experts can be found in the corporate world which helps to explain why many institutions of higher education have found themselves turning to the corporate world to find business executives to join their administrations or have formed partnerships with corporations in attempt to have access to those experts. Bartley and Golek (2004) claim that many businesses and institutions of higher learning have started to come together to join forces in creating and educating a workforce that can better compete in the global economy (169). This increased cooperation between the corporate world and higher education may be due in part to the fact that schools have traditionally served as the training ground for future workers. However, as corporations become more involved and schools become more like businesses, the lines between the corporate world and higher education becomes blurred.

Giroux (2003) references the hiring of John A. Fry at the University of Pennsylvania as executive vice-president in illustrating an example of the increasing practice of hiring former corporate executives into positions of power at academic institutions. He argues that Fry was hired because he "embodied a new, corporatized Penn: tactical, innovative, not tied to tradition," (Giroux 2003, p. 185) even though the new executive vice-president had no prior experience working at a university. This trend towards hiring former corporate executives is not only limited to the recruitment of business personnel outside of the institutions, there is also a movement towards the promotion of corporate talent within the ranks of higher education. For example, Mangan (1998) reports that "a growing number of presidential searchers are 'looking for leaders who can bridge business and academe' resulting in a large number of business school deans being offered jobs as college or university presidents" (as cited in Giroux 2003, p. 186). This move towards the hiring and promotion of more business oriented administrators may serve the institution to pursue goals and agendas that might be more consistent with those found in the corporate world. The mixture of business and higher education may be driven by the need to stay competitive within the education business.

Hidden business

According to Giroux (2009) who cites Pearlstein (2003) in stating:

> The once hidden curriculum of many universities—the subordination of higher education to capital—has now become an open and much celebrated policy of both public and private higher education. Increasingly, reference to higher education as a valuable commodity or for-profit business have become all too common (Giroux 2009, p. 677).

Both Pearlstein and Giroux touch upon the idea that although higher education might have always had a "hidden" connection with capitalistic models and practices that many people knew existed but it was something that was not meant to be spotlighted. Higher education has never been a place that has been removed or beyond the reach of business. Even in its purest form, education and particularly higher education is a business similar to any other business. Without students, there would not be a demand for schools, therefore as long as there are students there will be a demand for schools. Additionally, as the population of "students" fluctuates, the schools will work and compete to supply that demand. However, Giroux cautions against the movement towards corporatization of higher education by stating that "colleges and universities do not simply produce knowledge and new perspectives for students; they also play an influential role in shaping their identities, values, and sense of what it means to become citizens of the world" (p. 674). Although institutions of higher learning are in the business of teaching, it has not and should not be treated as a business because the main goal of the institution is to educate and to prepare students to become critically aware members of society. However, as more and more institutions of higher learning become more and more like corporations, the lines between educating and training start to blur. Although the goals of producing future citizens of the world, may be overshadowed by need to produce workers for the market.

Allen and Seaman (2008) argues that during bad economic times, higher education is most likely to benefit as more people feel the need to go back to school for retraining or improving their skills in order to make themselves more competitive (8). They claim that many institutions of higher education usually view economic downturns as potentially playing a positive role in affecting enrollment. Conversely, in economically bad times, people tend to have fewer resources to spend on higher education, thus making online education an appealing alternative. Expenses related to travel time, fuel cost, time away from work and home that would be normally be associated with traditional learning, is less of a factor in online learning. Therefore, many institutions nowadays view online education as a necessary part of their long term strategy. An estimated 58% of institutions surveyed by the Sloan Consortium in 2007 stated that online education was critical [*emphasis*] to their long-term strategy (Allen and Seaman 2008, p. 11). With the increased role of technology and the growth in online learning, many institutions in some form or another may realize that ignoring online education might not be fiscally sound and may hurt them in the long run if they do not seriously consider the use of online education in some fashion.

Many institutions that once scoffed at the thought of online learning have started to be persuaded of the benefits of online education, particularly under the financial constraints that many institutions face with all the budget cuts that have been

occurring in last few decades. For example, an estimated $4 billion dollars was cut out of the 2009 budget for higher education at the state level (Education Portal 2009, para. 3). It is through this setting of smaller educational budgets that has spurred on the rush towards online learning. Dolence and Norris (1995) support this claim that there are some, particularly those in higher education, who believe technology will "save them from an uncertain future" (as cited in Grineski 2000, p. 20). Institutions are rushing to make themselves more competitive and more marketable to the students they already have, as well as, potential students. The connection between fiscal concerns and motivation for online learning is further illustrated when over 40% of the Chief Academic Officers surveyed reported that online learning was important for earning additional income for the institution (Allen and Garrent 2008). It would appear that the motivation for pursuing online learning may be heavily based on fiscal concerns more than providing an alternative space for learning.

Critics of the corporatization of higher education claim that institutions are moving towards being training centers instead of places of learning. Giroux (2002) argues that when "curricula are modeled after corporate culture it has been enormously successful in preparing students for low-skilled service work in a society that has little to offer in the way of meaningful employment for the vast majority of graduates" (p. 188). He is basically arguing that as institutions move towards following a corporate approach with their pedagogy and curricula, it is helping to ensure that only certain skills are being taught and that students' employment options will be guided and shaped by the skills they are being taught. El-Khawas (1999) supports this claim when she states that "no longer is there a sense that certain areas of study 'ought' to be offered; if the market and the financial gains are not sufficient for a certain field, new providers will quickly make the decision to discontinue that offering" (p. 13). Consequently, the movement towards online learning may led to a scenario in which students are being "trained" in certain skills and not others and that decision will be guided by the capitalistic principle of supply and demand which some institutions may be more than willing to cater to.

Mass production, mass education

Chapman (as cited in Grineski 2000) states as the "lines between education and training is blurred there is a greater risk of corporations asserting greater control of higher education and its students through way of proprietary product." (p. 22). Moreover, the training model causes "teaching and learning to become decontextualized, simplistic, and mechanistic; void of human relations" (Grineski 2000, p. 22) because it is too focused on the bottom line and profits. As institutions become less like institutions for higher learning and more like corporations, knowledge and the producers of knowledge start to become individuated and separate. Online classrooms allow institutions the possibility of reducing cost through the reduction in the fees associated with maintaining facilities, hiring more staff, money for extra hours associated with extra teaching loads or extra office hours, and so on.

Online learning allows courses to be crafted and packaged into one central location whereby the student may pick and chose which course to take. It is through this process that Noble (2003) warns that could lead to the "alienation of ownership of and control over course material" (p. 46) and therefore move towards the commodification of learning. Noble claims that "commodification of instruction leads invariably to the 'proliterianization' or more politely, the 'deprofessionalization' of the professoriate" (p. 46). By making courses a commodity available in the marketplace, we remove ownership of that course and turn the course into a product to be sold and consumed without any regard to the creator of the course or the quality of the product. Therefore, the profession of education will drastically change and the role of educators will also change. Blair and Monske (2003) claim "that quite often in this trend towards online learning, faculty are made out to be the 'weakest link' in the equation because as institutions and students become more concerned with the product itself, faculty members are but invisible players in the market" (p. 446). Much like how goods are made and consumed, the consumer normally has no idea where the goods come from or who made the goods. The only important thing is that the good is available and it is a product that the consumer wants. Consequently, in the realm of online learning, the educator is no longer involved as he/she is nothing more than just a worker on the "assembly line" of online course work that needs to be designed and created. The product gets packaged and sold in the institution which serves as the storefront and the "maker" of the course is removed from the "visible" part of the transaction.

According to Blair and Monske (2003), faculty members are being pressured to put more effort into creating, designing and developing courses that can be placed in the marketplace, but also are having to the deal with the increased workload as wells as increased work hours that comes with facilitating a class online. All the extra work involved with online education often times is not "counted" as worthy of promotion or tenure but rather a required component of being part of the faculty. Conversely, sometimes faculty members are forced to give up their rights to their course and have to transfer those rights to their institutions therefore causing the faculty member to lose their agency and ownership over the course. For faculty, it becomes either a matter of survival or an issue of defiance when it comes to online learning. The course is no longer intellectual property nor can it be claimed by the faculty as their creation because in terms of the production of the good, they are not entitled to that acknowledgement, at least not if online learning is to become a mass produced commodity.

With the increasing view of education as a commodity that can be packaged and sold, educators are forced into the role of merchants who will have to follow the rules of a market that is dictated by the demands of the consumer students and the competitive demands of their institutions. The cliché "time is money" is a concept that might able to be divorced from the motives and trend towards online learning. The time constraints of a more traditional education is removed and students falsely believe that their instructors can and should be available at any time because if learning has become a good and students are consumers then faculty members are viewed to as nothing more than services providers that need to be at the beck and call of the consumer. Moreover, institutions become less like places of learning but

rather storefronts with a display of goods to be sold and consumed. Time becomes less of a factor with online learning because it opens up the doors for the possibility of course being available 24 h a day 7 days a week without the additional cost that might come with not having to hiring additional staff and faculty or maintaining/ providing facilities. Consequently, the learning market can stay online and available at any time, any place, and in some case in a variety designs and prices. The notion that online learning can happen anywhere at any time might be what makes online learning so appealing for many people and institutions. 'Distance education is an alternative for individuals for whom on-campus learning may be unavailable or more importantly undesirable" (Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt 2006, p. 577). Students, current or perspective, jump on the idea that online learning allows them to maximize their time and profits.

Digital divide

According to Selfe (1999), "battles are being waged over computer technology and its relationship to various social agendas…Americans continue to struggle with the government's responsibility for providing access to technology and with the corporate sector's responsibility for remaining competitive … "(p. 4). Many are being told and lead to believe that in order to compete and succeed in this technologically advanced global economy, they need to be as competitive as possible and technology is the key to that success. This competition involves not only being more proficient in technology but also means the increased use of technology which may requiring obtaining more education and/or training in order to compete or stay competitive. However, this belief falsely leads many segments of the population who have traditionally been left out to continue to be left out of the competition because just like there were power relations and societal factors that prevented equal access to everyone in society, technology creates the same problems.

Flew (1999) asserts "the problem accentuated by course design that presumes the availability of personal computers but a range of technologies required in online and virtual learning" will help to widen the division between the 'have and have nots'" (p. 40). The term commonly used to describe the division Flew describes is the "digital divide." The "digital divide refers to the socioeconomic inequalities between communities that have access to computers, Internet connections and information technologies and communities that do not" (Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt 2006, p. 593). As the push towards more technology and the false notion that online learning makes learning more accessible to everyone becomes more salient in society, it masks the reality that not everyone has access to a computer and/or the other equipment and technology needed to fully utilize and benefit from online learning. Thomas Booth, president of the Canadian Association of University Teachers argues that "people who have less education to begin with are less likely to have access to the tools and services they would need to study online and those students who would normally be excluded from higher education are those who might be the most dependent on face-to-face interaction" (Parker 2004, p. 392) that

is normally available at traditional institutions. Consequently, the rhetoric of online learning and the discourse of its benefits is an elitist one, whereby the poor and minorities will be left to buy into but not necessarily benefit from it in reality.

In his discussion of the "digital diploma mill," Noble (1998a, b) asserts that "quality education will not disappear entirely but it will soon become the exclusive preserve of the privileged, available only to children of the rich and the powerful" (p. 47). Nobles claim that with the rise of the digital diploma mills, the quality of education will decrease and that the great equalizing promise of online learning has the potential to create an even greater divide between the classes. Those students who can only afford certain education packages will be relegated to choosing institutions and/or online learning that fits their budgets and therefore traps them into the packaged education that is given to them. While the students who come from more privileged backgrounds have the ability to expand their options and are better able to ensure that the learning that they receive not only meets their needs but expands their knowledge. Regardless of the situation of the student or the background they come from, the force that is driving this boom in online education is intrinsically connected to capitalistic ideals. Education, regardless of the form, for many people is seen as a means to get to where one needs to go whether it is personally, professional, academically, and so on. Although technology is espoused as this necessary thing, many of the same old problems that exist such as social inequalities and different social agendas illustrates how the push towards technology and online learning is not so straightforward and might not be completely a neutral and empowering endeavor.

Quality

As more and more institutions move towards online learning and newly established online schools expand their reach, the question of the quality of the education becomes ever more problematic. Unlike traditional brick and mortar institutions, information regarding the quality of online schools still relatively sparse or at a stage in which it is not possible to fully determine the quality of the education and the institution. Noble (1998a, b) makes a very convincing argument against the online learning movement when he references Reid's study of American Degree Mills that was done for the American Council on Education, where he outlines some of the characteristics of a degree mill. According to Reid (as cited in Noble 1998a, b), some of the characteristics of a diploma mill were: "(1) no classrooms, (2) faculties are often undertrained and nonexistent, and (3) the officers are unethical self-seekers whose qualifications are no better than their offerings" (p. 47). Many of these characteristics that were once used to describe the diploma mills can be used to describe what can sometimes be found in online learning courses. Similar to how many diploma mills functioned in the past, students taking online courses never have to set foot in a classroom but yet can still receive a degree from the comforts of their own home. Additionally, for some online students, especially those taking asynchronous courses, the delay in communication and limited real-time interaction that often occurs basically renders their classmates and instructors invisible during

part of their online education. Thus for all intents and purposes, some online students go through the online learning experience by themselves and because of the delayed nature of the interaction and communication are provided limited access to trained faculty, knowledge, and assistance. Finally, with regards to Reid's third characteristic of diploma mills, with the Internet and the increase in online learning, there may be greater potential for diploma mills and fraudulent online programs and institutions in the digital age. "Diploma mills have been around hundreds of years and they are still flourishing around the world" (Bear and Bear 2003, p. 257) and the Internet may be helping to further exacerbate the problem of diploma mills. Ezell and Bear assert that diploma mills constitute a billion dollar industry (as cited in Pina 2010, p. 124) and with the relative ease and low cost of creating a professional looking website that resembles other legitimate online and brick and mortar educational institutions, the number of diploma mills may grow as the trend towards online learning continues.

Noble (1998a, b) suggests that in the past "distance education [similar to how online education is viewed as offering] provided a kind of intimate and individualized instruction not possible in the crowded, competitive environment of the campus," (p. 47) however in order to be profitable they needed to reduce cost, which means a degrading of labor which translate into a degraded product. It makes one wonder, has society changed its view on learning or is society going through another wave of mills that is waiting to be studied and critiqued or has the corporatization of higher education helped to ensure that this critique not happen? In the push for more cost effective ways to educate students, institutions run the risk of not only reducing the quality of their faculty but also the quality of the education. Thus could explain the reason why even with the rise in online education, there is still a certain level of ambivalence regarding the quality of the education that is available through the online format and the quality of their students.

According to DeFleur and Adams' (2004) survey of graduate school administrators, over 50% percent responded in stating that they were unlikely to or definitely would not admit students who had obtained a degree by solely taking classes online. Candidates that received their degrees from taking a mix of traditional and online courses fared better, however, not much better. Less than 50% of the administrators responded that they would recommend such as candidate, 43% had reservations regarding admission, and 11% were unlikely to admit to the applicant to their program. Adams and DeFleur's 2006 survey regarding the acceptability of online degrees with employers in terms of obtaining employment further reiterated the question of quality that is often associated with online learning. Adams and DeFleur (2006) found that 95% of employers would chose an applicant who had a traditional degree over an applicant who received an online degree and 75% of employers would hire an applicant with a traditional degree over someone who had a mix of traditional and online education. These figures may be disheartening for working adult considering the reasons that are often cited for pursuing an education, is to get further education as a means of furthering their careers. However, probably the most surprising information discovered from the survey was that "institutions that have the most experience in developing, implementing, and administering online degree programs were less likely to accept

applicants with online degrees into their degree programs" (DeFleur and Adams 2004, p. 158). If the institutions or businesses, who have experience and are most knowledgeable about the design and implementations of online education courses do not believe in the quality of the education then how can others be expected to view online learning as a quality product?

Conclusion

As higher education moves towards a market view of education, it runs the risk of turning education into a commodity that can be sold and consumed. Many institutions are finding that their curricula and function are shaped and altered under the hands of outside influences that have no interest in education, but are only interested in the bottom line. In the push to be more competitive, higher education has found itself entering into dangerous territory. By turning education into a commodity, it changes the role of higher education and those involved in education. Students are no longer viewed as learners, but rather consumers of a product and educators play the rule of merchants, while the institutions function as the malls in which these consumer students can do their shopping. Grineski (2000) eloquently points out in his question, "if higher education is viewed as just another commercial industry and teaching and learning sold as commodities to students with the most competitive bids, what will it mean to be educated" (p. 27)? Many would argue that this change toward making higher education more responsive to the needs of its students as something necessary and a part of the changing demands of the global economy, however, it is yet to be seen whether or not the benefits outweigh the drawbacks in the shift towards commodification of knowledge and corporatization of higher education.

Scholars such as Henry Giroux and David Noble call us to be more critical of the change in the higher education but at the same time they also acknowledge that it is still possible to reclaim and bring it back to the role that it is supposed to play in our society. Giroux reminds us that students are not consumers but rather learners, learners who through our institutions of higher education learn not only knowledge that can be useful and helpful in getting jobs but also knowledge that helps them to better understand and make sense of the world in which they live. Therefore, we may need to slow down the online learning bandwagon and take time to reexamine our reasons for promoting online learning and make more salient the issues that are being left out of the discussion when it comes to online learning.

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