

## The Promise and Peril of the Virtual University

*Ali Shehzad Zaidi*

“They do not ask themselves: how well can this thing be done? but: how large a market can we ‘tap’? And to this end they have brought into existence all the manifold powers of machinery and advertisement – a vicious circle; for the more the human race is degraded by industrialism, the larger is the market for inferior articles; in order to teach a larger and still larger number of buyers you produce a lower and still lower quality of goods.”  
Eric Gill, 1931

At its inception three decades ago, digital learning seemed to promise access to quality higher education. The physically disabled (i.e., a paraplegic vet who could commute to local colleges only with difficulty) would be able to take online courses at home. Adults with little leisure time (i.e., a single mother with two dead-end jobs and no daycare for her children) could earn a college degree at night, on weekends, or between work shifts. But while it gave instructors flexible schedules, no work commutes, and the opportunity to teach in pajamas, online education also allowed administrators to lower faculty salaries. If a mere one thousand dollars could not induce anyone within fifty miles of a college to teach a certain course, then instructors might now be lured from farther away. In addition to lowering labor costs, online education allowed universities to forego expenses for maintenance, energy, and physical plants.

During the nineties, early boosters of virtual education proclaimed the dawn of a new era. As David Noble observes:

Promoters of instructional technology and “distance learning” advanced with ideological bravado as well as institutional power, the momentum of human progress allegedly behind them. They had merely to proclaim “it’s the future” to throw skeptics on the defensive and convince seasoned educators that they belonged in the dustbin of history. The monotonal mantras about our inevitable wired destiny, the prepackaged palaver of silicon snake-oil salesmen, echoed through the halls of

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academe, replete with sophomoric allusions to historical precedent (the invention of writing and the printing press) and sound bites about the imminent demise of the “sage on the stage” and “brick and mortar” institutions. (50)

A case in point is Peter J. Denning, whose seminal article appeared in 1996 in the *Educom Review*, the flagship publication of Educause, an organization that advances business interests in higher education. In an article titled “Business Designs for the New University,” but which might as well have been titled “Business Designs *on* the New University,” Denning warns: “Make no mistake about it, the market and political forces are conspiring to generate a new design for universities. The only questions are who’s in, who’s out, and who new is going to show up and compete for our customers?” (23).

Politicians duly parroted the belief that technological change is both necessary and good. In 1999, William Weld, the former Republican governor of Massachusetts and member of a group of investors in for-profit education, enthused: “Changes in education are coming as surely as the Berlin Wall went down” (qtd. in Wyatt A27). A year later, Bob Kerrey, then a Democratic senator from Nebraska and chairman of the Senate Web-Based Education Commission, expressed a similar sense of inevitability: “We must immediately put to rest the notion that full development of Web-based technology is a choice” (qtd. in Burniske 10). Kerrey subsequently served as president of the New School whose online programs rapidly expanded under his leadership from 2001 to 2010.

With the rise of the for-profits, Denning’s prediction, that some universities would either transform themselves or be replaced by educational organizations specializing in entrepreneurship and management, came to pass. However, Denning misreads the future when he claims that “educational organizations will be highly responsive to their customers and will deliver value commensurate with or exceeding the costs. This does not necessarily mean that costs will go down; it certainly means more value, more effort to deliver the educational promises to the student, less overhead, and less administration” (26). On the contrary, the ranks of administrators and support staff have grown in the past two decades to the point where they now outnumber full-time faculty (Ginsberg). Students are getting less value for their money. Student loan debt has risen to more than 1.2 trillion dollars (Foster, “A Robin Hood”).

Public and private universities alike divert funds to marketing and executive pay while skimping on faculty pay and instruction. It is *only* from his vantage point as an administrator at George Mason University that Denning can conclude: “The opportunities for us are unprecedented. We can participate in changes that can produce enormous satisfactions and benefits. There couldn’t be a better time to be an educator” (30). Tell that to the adjuncts and non-tenure track faculty members who now comprise three quarters of the professoriate. Or to the 25% of part-time faculty that now depends on at least one public assistance program (Jacobs, Perry, MacGillvary 3).

The humanities have been the first casualty of the virtual university. Frank Donoghue, parodying the parlance of technospeak, notes that

the humanities simply do not lend themselves to “codified knowledge and algorithmic skills” that *can* be “granulized” (101). This is not to suggest that the internet has not enriched the humanities. Digital archives now provide general access to cultural resources that had been available to only a few scholars. Colleges can now provide textbooks on the web for free. The State University of New York (SUNY) recently began such a project (<http://textbooks.open-suny.org>). Despite these welcome developments, the internet has proved less than a boon to student learning.

In an essay published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, philosophy professor David Rothenberg laments the general shoddiness of student research papers that rely on the web for sources. Rothenberg argues that most students are unable to properly evaluate the thousands of references that appear in response to a query in a search engine:

Instead of books that you have to check out of the library, read carefully, understand, synthesize, and then tactfully excerpt, these sources are quips, blips, pictures, and short summaries that may be downloaded magically to the dorm-room computer screen. Fabulous! How simple! The only problem is that a paper consisting of summaries of summaries is bound to be fragmented and superficial, and to demonstrate more of a random montage than an ability to sustain an argument through 10 to 15 double-spaced pages (A44).

Students who conduct internet research typically suffer from endemic laziness. According to Mark Bauerlein, less than 1% of Google searches go beyond the first page of search results, and Wikipedia prose, with its “flat, featureless, factual style,” has become the intellectual standard for students (114, 117-18). Ted Gup also mourns what is lost through shoddy internet research: “We settle for information at the expense of understanding and mistake retrieval for exploration” (A52).

The internet has transformed more than just research. As playwright Richard Foreman notes, “the complex, dense and ‘cathedral-like’ structure of the highly educated and articulate personality” has been replaced by “a new kind of self – evolving under the pressure of information overload and the technology of the ‘instantly available’” (qtd. in Carr 196). The digital age has reconceived what it means to be a teacher. The advent of email has placed professors on constant call, as David Ainsworth observes: “If one is not careful, e-mail can be like weeds in a lake. Their tendrils will grab you and pull you under. E-mail is becoming one of the bigger stressors in professional life, and it takes almost a brutal effort to make it work for you rather than against you” (7). Faced with online teaching that is both draining and time-consuming, instructors often find it tempting to resort to multiple choice exams and automated grading.

Although it has vastly expanded our access to knowledge, the internet endangers the university as a site of culture and knowledge, especially with regard to libraries. As Krishan Kumar observes, “Universities bring people together. They allow for a cross-fertilization of

minds on a scale and in a manner not possible anywhere else in society. Teachers can aid this process; libraries can extend it. But it is the function of teachers and university libraries that is most under threat in the information age" (29). As paper books disappear, college libraries have come to resemble internet cafes in which librarians serve more as information consultants than as cultural curators.

A couple of years ago, many students and faculty at SUNY Canton complained when librarians dumped thousands of books in recycling bins. I discovered that this had happened when I could not find a dictionary of proper names that I had previously used. It had been discarded along with other books based on their year of publication. Their relevance to students or faculty seemed pretty much lost on the librarians who appear determined to substitute electronic resources for paper books. As Rothenberg recalls, "Libraries used to be repositories of words and ideas. Now they are seen as centers for the retrieval of information... The computer screen, the gateway to the world sitting right on their desks, promises instant access – but actually offers only a pale two-dimensional version of a real library" (A44). Although it frees up library space for social interaction and study, the elimination of paper books deprives students of a wealth of discoveries in the library stacks.

The rapid growth of virtual education came about at a time when public universities were being privatized. As companies consolidated, textbook prices sharply rose. Health care costs and tuition soared well above the inflation rate, forcing students to work long hours or be priced out of an education. Student grants dwindled and were replaced by loans. Civic engagement declined as the humanities, necessary to a democratic society, became increasingly instrumentalized, and often *eliminated or downsized*. Tenure track positions vanished as courses were farmed out to adjuncts. Corporate executives and attorneys sought university trusteeships, not out of altruism, but to leverage universities and swing deals that enrich their corporate overlords and themselves. As corporate partnerships spawned new technology centers and industrial parks, universities ceased to be places where students could develop a meaningful philosophy of life, understand environmental predicaments, and respond to social challenges.

At first, virtual education seemed to be a cost-effective solution to the financial crises at public universities. By 2000, 79% of four-year colleges in the United States offered online courses (Ohmann 101). Like other state universities in dire financial straits, SUNY initiated online degree programs partly in response to austerity. In 1988, SUNY received 90% of its operating budget from the state but by 1996 it received just 45% ("Sommer"). SUNY is moving into distance learning in a massive way. As of the 2015-16 academic year, OPEN SUNY offers no fewer than 406 degree and certificate programs that can be completed entirely online.

There exists little evidence that digital instruction has slowed the rise in tuition and student debt or that it has improved learning. Notwithstanding the early euphoria concerning online programs, many universities witnessed poor returns on their investments. California Virtual University, which began in 1997, ceased operation a

couple of years later. Temple University closed down Virtual Temple, its for-profit online venture, in July 2001, a mere year and a half after its creation. SUNY Buffalo shut it down its E-MBA program in March 2002 less than two years after initiating it (Hafner G1, G8). Ultimately the for-profits prevailed with their winning formula that consists of cutting instructional costs and forcing unqualified students to take out loans that they often cannot repay. When students drop out, the for-profits keep their tuition and are spared the cost of further instruction.

During the mid-nineties, Emily Weiner became among the first to obtain an online bachelor's degree from Empire State College, a SUNY institution designed for working adults. In an essay in the *New York Times*, Weiner praised both her mentor and her online learning experience, but nonetheless remained wary of digital learning's expansion:

Despite my excitement about new electronic educational opportunities, I'm concerned that others seeking convenient on-line degrees won't have the opportunities to find programs that nurture them intellectually and emotionally. Individual course requirements can certainly be completed by exhibiting competence on tests or by sending in papers or by using new interactive computer programs. But will there be a person on the other end of the line who is watching to see that students are stretching themselves, choosing appropriate courses, struggling with new ideas, overcoming personal obstacles, getting smarter? I'm concerned that feedback will be limited to course work itself, and that the fuller relationships that develop between students and teachers on a college campus will be missing. I'm concerned that part-time instructors will be hired course-by-course but won't be paid enough or be on staff long enough to be available to guide students through the full process (42).

When Weiner completed her degree, SUNY had yet to experience the full brunt of the disinvestment in public higher education. The relatively few online students still received attentive mentoring at Empire State College which favored a tutorial approach for independent and mature learners. It is questionable whether students at Empire State College presently receive the same degree of personal attention as did Weiner back in the mid-nineties.

With the rise of for-profit institutions, Weiner's fears for the future have come to pass. Online learners generally receive little more than hurried and impersonal instruction at institutions where a profiteering model of education inhibits student-teacher relationships and where vocational training replaces critical analysis and cultural understanding. Market demand, more than student need, shapes administrative decisions. Furthermore, as David Noble observes, the distinction between non-profit and for-profit higher education providers has blurred (83). Many nonprofits have adopted the marketing strategies of the for-profits, spending heavily on heightening their profiles in search engines and online directories, on pay-per-click advertising campaigns, and on call centers to respond to inquiries from internet surfers (Blumenstyk).

From the outset, online education threatened academic freedom. Administrators began to pay instructors one or two thousand dollars to create online courses to be taught by adjuncts who were often unable to introduce their own instructional material and texts. Academic integrity was also endangered, for instructors typically had no idea who was doing the work in their courses. In many instances, the “students” were in fact the students’ friends or relatives or employees of companies that were hired to complete online coursework.

During the early boom in online learning, faculty and students across the United States began to resist the commodification of higher education such as at Drexel University in Philadelphia where administrators tried to deprive faculty of ownership of their courses (Young A31). In 1997, California State University administrators granted four companies, including Microsoft, the exclusive right to install and develop software and telecommunications technology at the university system’s twenty three campuses. Students rallied at San Francisco State University to protest the deal, which was known as the California Technology Initiative. At Humboldt State University, students replaced signs at the university’s entrance with ones that read “Microsoft University” (Flynn D3).

Notwithstanding these pockets of resistance, the corporatization of public universities proceeded apace as they began to design online programs for partner corporations. In 2002, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that business professors at the University of Texas were creating an online M.Sc. program in science, technology, and commercialization for IBM employees working on company projects. Meanwhile, Oregon Health & Science University began to customize an online M.Sc. in technology management for Microsoft employees (Carnevale, “Colleges Tailor”: A36).

As the gold rush into online learning gathered steam, James Perley and Denise Marie Tanguay, members of the Committee on the Accrediting of Colleges and Universities of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) cautioned against accrediting online institutions that lack full-time faculty and shared governance. To accredit them, they argued, would be to turn higher education into “a collection of marketable commodities” and modules designed to produce “predictable and measurable ‘outcomes’ that fit uniform assessment tools” (Perley and Tanguay B4). Another voice of wisdom and reason to speak out against the virtual university was that of J. Bernard Machen, the new president of the University of Utah, who at his inauguration in 1998 stated:

It inherently limits the broader, more interactive aspects of a university education. Spontaneous debate, discussion, and exchange of ideas within the classroom are essential in developing the mind. Poetry must be heard, interpreted, and discussed – with professors and classmates...Let us not succumb to the temptation to force a college education to its lowest common denominator” (qtd. in Biemiller A32).

That very year, 1998, Kaplan Educational Centers opened the online Concord University School of Law, prompting Supreme Court

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg to remark, “So much of legal education and legal practice is a shared enterprise, a genuine interactive endeavor. The process inevitably loses something vital when students learn in isolation, even if they can engage in virtual interaction with their peers and teachers” (qtd. in Mangan A36). Many students who sought an affordable online legal education were soon disappointed. In summer 2004, the unaccredited online Saratoga University School of Law, licensed by the state of California, suddenly closed, leaving its students unable to obtain refunds or transcripts (Carnevale, “Online”: A46).

In 1999, Jones International University (JIP) became the first solely online university to win regional accreditation, widely regarded as the gold standard of respectability for universities in the United States. The AAUP sent a letter of protest to the North Central States Association for accrediting JIP because it was concerned that fifty four of JIP’s fifty six faculty members were adjuncts, and that the university lacked libraries and research laboratories (Kirp 251; McCollum A33). As competition grew, JIP’s enrollment dropped 55% from 2011 to 2014. In April 2015, JIP announced that it would close within a year (Chuang).

Overall, however, for-profit universities remain lucrative operations. The University of Phoenix (UofP), owned by the Apollo Group went public in 1994. It profits handsomely from the federal student loan program by admitting large numbers of unprepared students and typically leaving them heavily in debt. UofP spends lavishly on executive salaries and advertising while exploiting online instructors almost all of whom are adjuncts. It has no library; and its bookstore carries only textbooks.

UofP became so successful that its enrollment reached 150,000 students by 2002 while the value of Apollo stock shares increased 368% between March 2000 and March 2003 (Kirp 241, 252). UofP lavished \$155 million for the naming rights to a Super Bowl stadium in 2006 (Klara). By 2010, 475,000 students were enrolled at UofP, more than at any other university in the United States (“Enrollment”). Soon afterwards, a Senate investigation found that the UofP spent three times as much on marketing as on instruction, that 66% of its students never graduated, and that in 2010 88.7% of its revenues came from the federal student loan program (Klara). The negative publicity, together with growing competition, caused UofP student enrollment to dwindle to a still-considerable 213,800 students by March 2015 (“Enrollment”).

Besides helping mediocre educational institutions to thrive, the Internet has spawned hundreds of fake schools that have fleeced would be students out of billions of dollars. These diploma mills typically sport images of jubilant students in graduation gowns, clutching diplomas or tossing graduation caps aloft. Because accreditation differs from country to country, it is often hard to know whether a virtual university is legitimate. Diploma mills often claim accreditation from a fake agency or simply claim not to need accreditation (Bear and Bear 41-43). Previously diploma mills had operated from mailboxes and advertised in print publications. The internet has greatly extended their reach.

Beginning in the 1990s, one diploma mill, known as the University Degree Program, raked in over four hundred million dollars by sending spam that read, "Obtain a prosperous future, money-earning power, and the admiration of all" (Bear and Ezell 82, 201). More recently, another gargantuan scam was perpetuated by the Pakistani technology firm Axact which created hundreds of websites for fake universities and accrediting agencies. In May 2015, Pakistani authorities arrested the chief executive of Axact only after tens of thousands fake degrees had already been sold.

For educational institutions in the United States, accreditation entails recognition from an agency approved by the Department of Education. Accreditation gives access to the federal loan programs that enable the for-profits to thrive. Regional accreditation, the most desirable kind, usually comes with rigorous standards and oversight. Many virtual institutions seek instead national accreditation from either the Distance Education Accrediting Commission or the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools. In California, higher education institutions, for now, need not be accredited but can operate with state authorization. Previously, permissive laws in states such as Louisiana, Arizona, and Hawaii allowed substandard colleges and diploma mills to proliferate. Later those states tightened their laws, forcing some institutions to close and others to migrate (Bear and Bear 34-37).

One such institution, Preston University, founded in Pakistan in 1984, opened a branch in the United States in 1998 and attracted a few foreign students to its headquarters in Cheyenne, Wyoming. As digital learning began to flourish, Preston created online programs that enrolled degree seekers worldwide. In 2001, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that it had contacted two professors listed as Preston faculty members on the university website and that both had denied working for Preston (Foster A34).

Some government officials and businessmen from Malaysia, Hong Kong, and elsewhere, were criticized for their unaccredited Preston degrees. Negative publicity ensued in Asian newspapers such as the *Straits Times*, in part because many failed to understand that in the United States an unaccredited institution might not necessarily be a diploma mill. Preston was forced to depart Wyoming after it required accreditation for all higher education institutions in the state. Preston moved to Alabama in 2007 but departed after that state tightened its laws. Preston then moved to California but recently that state's Bureau for Private Postsecondary Education denied its application for a license.

I first taught online in 2009 when I created an online pilot course in first-semester Spanish for students enrolled in the online dental hygiene program. At my request, the college administration initially allowed only dental hygiene students to enroll. After the initial registration period all students could enroll. The administration disregarded my advice that only students in online programs and distance learners living outside St. Lawrence County should be allowed to enroll in online language courses, and permitted students to enroll in any online language course that they pleased. Soon online language courses began crowding out regular ones. Liberal arts majors

living on campus began to take Spanish and French online. Native speakers of Spanish would enroll in first-semester Spanish online courses along with beginners in Spanish.

The SUNY Canton administration pays professors one thousand dollars for the rights to their new online courses for a three-year period. The college keeps all tuition revenue for courses taught during the summer and winter sessions; and its School of Business and Liberal Arts uses part of that revenue to generate funds for professional development. This enhances the allure of online learning for both faculty and the administration.

By the 2013-14 academic year, roughly 90% of advanced English courses were taught online at SUNY Canton. The only two first-semester French courses taught during the fall 2013 semester were online; none were offered in a regular format. Of the nine students enrolled in my second-semester Spanish class that semester, six were former students from my first semester Spanish regular class, while three were Spanish heritage speakers. There was not a single student who had taken first semester Spanish online; indeed, no online first semester Spanish student has ever gone on to take a second semester Spanish course with me.

The college's precipitous move into distance learning can be explained, at least in part, by the decline in the pool of local high school students. St. Lawrence County's eighteen school districts lost 2,000 students in less than a decade (Sommerstein). Many first-generation college students at SUNY Canton lack the self-direction needed to learn online. They need the close mentoring that colleges such as SUNY Canton are still able to provide even in the face of repeated and steep budget cuts.

The process of socialization that enriches education is vanishing. I cannot recall the faces or voices of any of my online students any more than they can recall mine. As students flit by like phantoms in campus hallways, absorbed in their electronic devices, I wonder: where are the students who used to toss Frisbees on the quad? Where are the students flirting and sunning themselves in the grass? Where are the campus polemics and debates? Where are the chess players? Towards what kind of cybernetic nightmare is higher education headed?

The rush into distance learning threatens to turn the professor into a spectral presence. With the automation of higher education well underway, language instructors may soon morph into holograms. But will this improve student learning? A 2009 study found that 70% of faculty believes that "student learning outcomes" (to borrow the behavioristic professional jargon now in vogue) in online courses are inferior compared to regular classroom instruction (Jenkins).

Some corporations are profiting handsomely from online learning. There was widespread consternation in 2005 when Blackboard, which had already cornered 40% of the market in online course management, purchased WebCT, which controlled 46% of that same market, thereby giving Blackboard monopolistic dominance. Shortly afterwards, Blackboard sued a competitor, Desire2Learn, for patent infringement of online course-management technologies (Donoghue 106-107). In 2009, Blackboard purchased Angel. Two years later,

Blackboard was purchased by a private equity firm. In summer 2015, SUNY Canton phased out the use of Angel for online courses as it transitioned to Blackboard.

There is growing concern over how virtual education enables administrators to standardize curricula. In 2011, the trustees of the City University of New York (CUNY) imposed a new General Education framework, known as Pathways, on unwilling faculty and students. The Pathways initiative mandates a 30-credit Common Core and a uniform curriculum for all CUNY colleges that makes all General Education courses transferable between colleges. The Professional Staff Congress (PSC), CUNY's faculty union, criticized the implementation of Pathways by administrative fiat. In a 2013 referendum organized by the PSC and overseen by the American Arbitration Association, in which nearly two thirds of CUNY faculty participated, 92% of the faculty voted no-confidence in Pathways (Vitale; "What Is").

Pathways augurs a future in which corporate giants control course content, testing, and even instruction of college courses. A similar initiative, Seamless Transfer, is being implemented at SUNY and its overall effect will be to make courses transferable between colleges and to move students from regular courses into online ones. Recently SUNY Chancellor Nancy Zimpher announced plans to introduce Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in the university system. In response, Frederick E. Kowal, president of the SUNY faculty union, United University Professions, expressed his concern over the SUNY administration's plan to introduce MOOCs in partnership with Coursera, thereby increasing enrollment by one hundred thousand students without increasing the number of faculty. Kowal cited studies indicating a completion rate of less than ten percent for students who enrolled in MOOCs (Kowal).

The prospect of MOOCs replacing traditional courses dismays many educators. Daniel F. Sullivan, a former sociology professor and former president of St. Lawrence University, took one of the thirteen courses offered by JumpCourse which were recommended for credit by the American Council on Education. Sullivan chose a course in his own discipline, Introductory Sociology. He was disappointed to find that the course, with its multiple choice and fill-in-the-blank practice tests, failed to deeply engage the student or develop reasoning skills (Sullivan). Unlike many online courses that provide for discussions, the MOOCs tend to consist of digitized lectures and information downloads that limit critical analysis.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the cookie cutter education propounded by the creators of MOOCs and online courses has as its aim the one described by H. L. Mencken:

The most erroneous assumption is to the effect that the aim of public education is to fill the young of the species with knowledge and awaken their intelligence, and so make them fit to discharge the duties of citizenship in an enlightened and independent manner. Nothing could be further from the truth. The aim of public education is not to spread enlightenment at all; it is simply to reduce as many individuals as possible to the same safe level, to

breed and train a standardized citizenry, to put down dissent and originality. That is its aim in the United States, whatever the pretensions of politicians, pedagogues and other such mountebanks, and that is its aim everywhere else.

Mencken's description of public education may not be universally valid, but the exceptions to it are few. If present trends continue, students may someday be limited to a virtual simulation of education.

Corporations invest in politicians and advertising in order to transform how we work and learn; those investments also shape the course of digital learning. As Guillermo Grenier points out, "work innovations first and foremost are intended to exert efficient control over the workers of a specific work site. This control is exerted not only over their behavior while on the job but also, when the design works well, over their attitudes about their work and how they feel about what they do all day and their inability to change it" (xvii). In general, virtual education deprives teachers of workplace autonomy, which accounts in part for its powerful corporate backing.

Ultimately, the overriding profit-motive at colleges determines why, as Tara Brabazon explains, "money is being thrown at technology in education, not education in technology" (145). The conflict over the role of technology in higher education is in part illusory, as Marc Bousquet observes, for it serves to conceal the changes wrought by the commodification of higher education (58). Bousquet further notes;

Management dissemination of technology has been used to surveil, punish, regiment, censor, and control faculty; to direct how they allocate time and effort; to cement administrative control over the curriculum; and to impose supplemental duties, including technological self-education and continuous availability to student and administration via email. In some cases, technology has even displaced living labor entirely with automated learning programs tended by software maintenance and courseware sales personnel. (59)

Indeed, the automation of learning is steadily expanding. In 2009, Edexcel, a British school examination board and subsidiary of Pearson, announced plans for a computerized system to grade student essays (Carr 223-24). More recently, in 2013, EdX, a nonprofit co-founded by Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, devised a software program to grade essays which it will share with other institutions (Markoff A1, A11).

Neil Postman terms our present state "technopoly," which he describes as "the deification of technology, which means that the culture seeks its authorization in technology, finds its satisfactions in technology, and takes its orders from technology" (71). As corporations harness technology to their own ends, curricula are rewritten and teachers brushed aside, for technopoly, Postman observes, "requires the development of a new kind of social order, and of necessity leads to the rapid dissolution of much that is associated with traditional beliefs" (71). Virtual education dissolves the bonds be-

tween students and teachers, such as the kind sentimentalized in inspirational films such as *Dead Poets Society* and *Goodbye Mr. Chips*, spelling the end of shared governance, civic commitment, and critical thinking.

In general, virtual education facilitates conflicts of interest, corporate consolidation, and faculty powerlessness. It alters, perhaps irremediably, the relation between faculty and students, and between faculty and administration. It threatens shared governance which presupposes deep and sustained involvement in the institutions in which we teach and work. Shared governance remains an ever-elusive goal and a polite fiction in part because a system of rewards and punishments circumscribes what faculty may do and say.

Educational institutions that lack shared governance tend to be academic sweatshops that implement self-destructive strategies to contain costs. Rather than educating students to become informed citizens, administrators promote vocational training to create an atomized, docile, and dispirited workforce. Even when flush with cash, they increase class sizes, hire more adjuncts, force secretaries and custodians to work more for less pay, and cut academic programs. Administrators who plead poverty with regard to student instruction, graduate stipends, and faculty salaries tend to magically find the funds for new athletic centers, executive bonuses, technology parks, the renovation of presidential mansions, and even more vice presidents.

Austerity, that artificial and purportedly everlasting crisis, is meant to intimidate labor. Students who work long hours to pay off skyrocketing tuition, debt, and health care costs, have little time for learning, let alone activism. Overworked teachers hardly have the time or energy to address the causes of their professional crisis. And yet, they must find the courage to speak out and act if our universities are to become anything more than corporate annexes.

College trustee boards need students, faculty, alumni, and local community members in order to become broadly representative. We need to relate the rise of the corporate virtual university to the worldwide crisis of democracy. Democracy is a concept as American as apple pie and we must frame the debate over shared governance accordingly. Only participation in power will reclaim our universities and colleges for those who work and study in them. A concession here and there over course content, token involvement in governance, or the rights to courses until they are sold, misses these points: faculty are responsible for what is taught and how it is taught; and education is not a commodity.

Professors are rarely given to insurrection or incendiary rhetoric. Reasoned discourse is the very measure of our professionalism. However, this is no time to be polite. Unless we imagine alternatives to austerity budgets, unless we articulate the democratic possibilities of shared governance – in short, unless we find our voices – our predicament will recall the words of an anti-military-recruiting sticker that goes, “You can’t be all that you can be if you are dead.” Some may rise to the challenge and be swatted aside like gnats, but others may overcome corporate power and free universities from their spiritual death spiral. To this end, in 2007, I co-founded, with

John Asimakopoulos, the Transformative Studies Institute which publishes a quarterly, *Theory in Action*.

If, in spite of our best efforts, corporate power prevails and shared governance remains unattainable, then we must start anew. Two decades ago, my thesis advisor, Robert ter Horst, said to me that our universities were beyond redemption and that we had to start from scratch. He envisioned smaller scholarly institutions in which teachers would take turns as administrators. Such an institution might withstand corporate takeover. Ultimately, however, only a new social order will release universities from the corporate death grip. Towards this goal we must strive. The time for revolt is at hand.

### Note

<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to Marc Bousquet for this observation.

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