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Digital Content Delivery in Higher Education: Expanded Mechanisms for Subordinating the Professoriate and Academic Precariat

Abstract:

This paper suggests that the latest digital mechanisms for delivering higher education course content are yet another step in subordinating academic labor. The two main digital delivery mechanisms discussed in the paper are MOOCs and flexible option degrees. The paper advances the argument that, despite a relatively privileged position vis-à-vis other workers, academic cognitive laborers are caught up within and subject to some of the constraining and exploitative practices of capitalist accumulation processes. This capture within capitalist circuits of accumulation threatens to increase in velocity and scale through digital delivery mechanisms such as MOOCs and flexible option programs/degrees.

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 - "The Enclosure and Alienation of Academic Publishing: Lessons for the Professoriate." tripleC - Communication, Capitalism & Critique, no. 2 (2012).
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Introduction

As was the factory, so now is the university. Where once the factory was a paradigmatic site of struggle between workers and capitalists, so now the university is a key space of conflict, where the ownership of knowledge, the reproduction of the labour force, and the creation of social and cultural stratifications are all at stake. This is to say the university is not just another institution subject to sovereign and governmental controls, but a crucial site in which wider social struggles are won and lost.¹³²

Although the metaphor of the knowledge factory (as first articulated by Stanley Aronowitz) may not map on perfectly to the university as an institution, I suggest that some of the latest digital mechanisms for delivering higher education course content are yet another step in achieving best fit and moving us closer to the Taylorist organization of work in the academy.

Most of these new types of digital educational content delivery, which can loosely be grouped under the rubric of open education, seek to harness the power of contemporary information and communication technologies and high-speed networks to share knowledge, ideas, teaching practices, infrastructure, tools, and other resources both within and beyond institutions of higher education. These new modes of educational content delivery are typically celebrated by their proponents for their purported ability to eliminate the spatial, temporal, and financial constraints of the traditional models of instruction in institutions of higher education in ways that facilitate multiple and lifelong learning opportunities for students.

What tends to be less discussed in the literature and celebratory hype are the labor and labor process implications for university faculty (including adjuncts) that attach to digital delivery mechanisms of higher education.¹³³ This paper seeks to respond briefly to that lacuna by interrogating two types of digital education, namely massive open online courses (MOOCs) and flexible option programs. Stated briefly, the paper advances the case that, despite a relatively privileged position vis-à-vis other workers (albeit one increasingly under attack), academic cognitive laborers are caught up within and subject to some of the constraining and exploitative practices of capitalist social and production relations.

In developing the arguments below, the paper will first briefly elaborate the broader structural context of the contemporary neo-liberal academic ecosystem. The following section will outline the basic characteristics of MOOCs and flexible option programs. Having established this broader structural and technological context, the penultimate section of the paper interrogates critically the implications digital delivery mechanisms portend for faculty work products and processes. By way of conclusion, the final section highlights the major ethical issues excavated by the preceding analysis.

The Neo-Liberal University

In order to obtain a firmer critical purchase on digital education, we need to first elaborate the broader structural context of the contemporary academic ecosystem. As interrogated by a growing corpus of scholarly literature, neo-liberal policies over the previous three decades have imprinted an unambiguous stamp on the nature and functioning of tertiary education. In part, these developments have been facilitated by the opening up of many university boards and other top-level governance structures to members of the corporate community. Similarly, there has emerged an increasingly unquestioned acceptance by legislators and top university administrators of the apparent need to apply private sector business practices to what is often contemptuously dismissed as being a slow, reactive, and inadequate institutional structure mired in antiquated structures of shared governance. Among other things, the effects of neo-liberalism can be seen in the severe reductions in government spending on higher education and the consequent scramble by administrators and some faculty to secure alternative financial sources, which typically come from corporations and private philanthropic organizations.

132 Federici, Silvia, and Caffentzis, George: "Notes on the Edu-Factory and Cognitive Capitalism." 63

133 A notable early exception to this was Noble, David F.: "Digital Diploma Mills: The Automation of Higher Education."

But as a number of commentators point out, close alliances between universities and corporate funding partners are often accompanied by a number of associated quandaries, including: the generation of conflicts of interest within the university; restrictions on internal collaboration within the university; loss of academic freedom; deferral of publication and other information withholding practices; loss of objectivity; emphasis on applied research at the expense of basic research; student exploitation; pressure on faculty to concentrate disproportionately on commercial activities instead of other duties such as teaching; and, abuse of the researcher/physician-patient relationship in the case of clinical trials.¹³⁴

Concomitant with these developments there also emerged the now well-established 'truth' among many governments that economic growth and development depend upon the ability of private enterprise to commercially apply and exploit the knowledge and innovation developed in educational institutions. Thus, universities have increasingly come to be viewed as fundamental components in an underlying innovation infrastructure that is imperative to the expansion of contemporary capitalism; a situation that has led some observers to speak of the 'edu-factory'.¹³⁵

The general point that needs to be made based on this brief account is that the discipline of funding cuts coupled with the expanding emphasis on commodifiable research projects has helped normalize neo-liberal values within academia in a way that has metamorphosed institutions of higher education into sites increasingly characterized by obeisance to and subsumption by capitalist accumulation imperatives. From a labor perspective, such trends have been made manifest in the increase and intensification of faculty teaching and administrative loads and the proliferation of non-tenured and precarious adjunct appointments, all of which might be further exacerbated by digital education delivery mechanisms.

MOOCs and Flex Option Degrees

MOOCs have been heralded as one of the latest technological responses to the spatial, temporal, and financial constraints of the traditional models of content delivery in institutions of higher education. Originally developed by open educators such as George Siemens, Stephen Downes, Dave Cormier, and Alex Couros, MOOCs were followed relatively quickly by open courses from universities (e.g., Stanford) and other Internet-based initiatives from both non-profit and for-profit entities such as Coursera, Udacity, and edX, all of which seek to enrol substantial numbers of students.¹³⁶ Yet, the academic rigor of MOOCs remains questionable, even among those faculty members who have designed and delivered such courses. In a recent survey of 103 faculty members engaged with MOOCs, although 79 percent believed that this form of content delivery is worth the hype, only 48 percent considered their MOOC to be as academically demanding as the versions they teach in the classroom and only 28 percent thought that students should receive academic credit for completing the MOOC. Moreover, 81 percent of respondents thought that teaching the MOOC had caused them to divert time from research, service, or traditional course delivery.¹³⁷

The Flex Option Degree is a new mode of education delivery that started in Fall 2013 at the University of Wisconsin (UW) System, which claims to be the first public university system in the United States to offer this kind of competency-based, self-paced learning option. The UW Flexible Option is designed for nontraditional adult students who will be permitted to earn college credit by demonstrating knowledge they have acquired

134 Bekelman, Justin E., Yan Li, and Gross, Cary P.: "Scope and Impact of Financial Conflicts of Interest in Biomedical Research: A Systematic Review." Bok, Derek Curtis: *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education*. Krinsky, Sheldon: *Science in the Private Interest: Has the Lure of Profits Corrupted Biomedical Research?* Levidow, Les: *Marketizing Higher Education: Neoliberal Strategies and Counter-Strategies*. Noble, David F.: *Digital Diploma Mills: The Automation of Higher Education*. Peekhaus, Wilhelm: *The Neo-Liberal University and Agricultural Biotechnology: Reports from the Field*. Slaughter, Sheila, and Rhoades, Gary: *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education*.

135 Federici, Silvia, and Caffentzis, George: "Notes on the Edu-Factory and Cognitive Capitalism."

136 Saadatmand, Mohsen and Kumpulainen, Kristiina: "Participants' Perceptions of Learning and Networking in Connectivist Moocs."

137 Kolowich, Steve: "The Professors Behind the Mooc Hype."

through coursework, military training, on-the-job training, and other learning experiences. Students will progress towards a degree by passing a series of assessments that demonstrate mastery of required knowledge and skills.¹³⁸ According to former UW System president Kevin Reilly, one of the driving goals of the flex option degree is to respond to the most pressing workforce needs in Wisconsin.¹³⁹ Such pronouncements, of course, align with the neo-liberal university, which is increasingly becoming a site for disciplining, training, and credentializing customers for the workforce rather than educating students to become informed, critical, and active citizens.¹⁴⁰

Along similar lines, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Chancellor Michael Lovell sought to assure interested stakeholders that "the UWM degrees ... [students] earn through the new Flex Option platform will carry the same prestige in the workplace."¹⁴¹ However, empirical evidence suggests such optimism may be unfounded. Kennedy, Gonzalez, and Cenzer found that 87 percent of the library and information science distance education graduates they surveyed did not disclose in resumes or cover letters that their degree was earned online and 72 percent of respondents believed that employers were negatively predisposed toward online LIS programs.¹⁴² A Pew Study found that only 29 percent of the public believes that online courses are as valuable as onsite classes.¹⁴³ Similarly, a little more than 40 percent of higher education administrators believe that low acceptance of online degrees by potential employers constitutes a barrier to widespread adoption of online education.¹⁴⁴

The Implications of Digital Education for Faculty

I want to suggest that MOOCs are merely the latest manifestation of the broader neo-liberal structural trends within academia. They, as well as the flex option degree being vaunted by the Wisconsin Walker administration and somewhat uncritically championed by senior University of Wisconsin administrators, represent an expanding trend through which ever scarcer public funds (because actually taxing corporations to support the creation of the skilled workforce they demand is anathema to the normalized 'common sense' of neo-liberalism) are being channelled into programs designed to develop the skill sets of the so-called "knowledge society," which has serious implications for any knowledge not instrumental to business and getting a job. That is, under these conditions, higher education is increasingly regarded as instrumental training for knowledge workers in a way that is closely aligned with capitalist rationality. And again, I think MOOCs and the flex option degree very much align with such goals.

While I am also rather dubious of their pedagogical value, and the celebratory, rather uncritical, rhetoric about democratizing access to education notwithstanding, I want to consider some of the potential labor implications of MOOCs. And here I want to suggest that many of these issues are glossed over by strong currents of technological fetishism that inform much purported digital educational innovation. That is, the liberatory potential of these new technologies tends to be foreclosed as they instead reinforce capitalist social relations.

138 My own academic home, the School of Information Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, is one of four units on campus offering a degree (B.S. in Information Science & Technology) through the flex option. It warrants mentioning that the decision to pursue this mode of delivery was made by school administrators, who originally contended that a change in mode of delivery rendered the decision beyond the mechanisms for shared governance. Aside from obfuscating for months the true scope of the school's participation in the flex option degree, at least one senior administrator in the school has been actively attempting to re-write the history around the decision through specious claims purporting that shared governance on the decision was honored.

139 n.a.: "UW Flexible Option." Quirk, Kathy: "UW System Unveils First Flexible Option Degree Programs."

140 Giroux, Henry A.: *The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex*.

141 Quirk, Kathy: "UW System Unveils First Flexible Option Degree Programs." para. 11

142 Kennedy, Kathryn, Gonzalez, Sara Russell, and Cenzer, Pamela: "Student Perspectives on Library School Degrees and the Hiring Process."

143 As discussed in Stephens, Michael: "Online Lis Education--or Not."

144 Allen, I Elaine, and Seaman, Jeff: "Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States."

Again, while not perfect, the edu-factory metaphor goes some way in representing how trends from industry have been reflected in the university. The university parallel to industry subcontracting can be seen in the rampant outsourcing of non-academic campus personnel (especially those who had previously enjoyed union protection), the increasing casualization of routine instruction (which MOOCs and flexible option degree programs will only intensify), and, of course, the creation of the academic precariat, that class of permatemps who work on short-term contracts for subsistence wages and typically no healthcare or other benefits; all of which puts downward pressure on salaries and, even more dramatically, on job security, which is manifested in the increasing disappearance of tenure-track positions.

As has been documented by multiple empirical studies,¹⁴⁵ and is well known by those instructors who have taught online, the increased flexibility touted by proponents of online education comes at the cost of intensified productivity of academics, typically without a consequent increase in remuneration or reduction in other aspects of the job. Yet, and perhaps unsurprisingly given their managerial positions, only a minority (44.6 percent) of college and university administrators believes that online course delivery requires more faculty time and effort as compared to face-to-face delivery.¹⁴⁶ The speed-up and intensification of work that accompanies online education delivery represents the academy's digital version of early 20th century Taylorism.

Aside from the unremunerated, increased workloads of digital education, online course delivery poses a more serious risk for the long-term interests of academic laborers. MOOCs, and even more so modes of delivery such as the flex option, will make it that much easier for university administrators (that is, the one percent of the university) to replace tenured faculty lines with MOOC and flex option operators. I posit that we will experience mounting efforts by universities to exercise 'work for hire doctrines,' whereby the intellectual property rights to the intellectual output of their workers (that is, adjuncts and tenure-track/tenured folks) will be claimed by the university. After all, once the heavy lifting of actually designing and populating an online course has been completed, if the university can claim ownership it cares little who actually delivers the course subsequently. Why pay a relatively expensive tenure-track/tenured faculty member to deliver an already packaged MOOC or flex option course when you can get a contract worker to do it for a fraction of the cost? Given the adherence to neo-liberalism within the academy, university administrators have increasingly adopted private sector productivity measures and applied them to research, grants, and student credit hour production. What better way to improve that latter ratio than by opening enrolment to hundreds, or even thousands, of students and paying someone a pittance to act as operator? This has the potential to render academic labor much more susceptible to Taylorist processes of planning, rationalization, and serialization that might finally provide administrators with mechanisms to separate conception and execution in ways that further divide the academic labor force into a handful of superstar forepersons and a mass of 'shopfloor' precarious workers. And so, while I suspect my framing may not be well received by many, I contend that MOOCs and flex option programs portend some very serious implications for the class interests of university faculty. By uncritically jumping on board, or perhaps even worse, by engaging in the ostrich politics of apathy that seems to pervade so much of academia, we run the very real risk of putting, if not ourselves, then certainly future aspirants to the job out of work before they even get here.

Finally, I would assert that MOOCs, and particularly the more instrumental flex option degree that emphasizes job skills, threaten to exacerbate an already stratified and competitive environment within the academy as we begin to narrow even further the focus of what is a university education. An orientation toward short-term education markets and the corresponding prioritization of market share and revenue generation will not only displace concerns about educational quality (lip-service notwithstanding) but also further marginalize those

145 Buchanan, Elizabeth A. et al.: "A Systematic Study of Web-Based and Traditional Instruction in an MLIS Program: Success Factors and Implications for Curriculum Design." Marcella, Rita, and Baxter, Graeme: "Information and Library Studies on a Virtual Campus." Allen, I Elaine, and Seaman, Jeff: "Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States." Kolowich, Steve: "The Professors Behind the Mooc Hype."

146 Allen, I Elaine, and Seaman, Jeff: "Changing Course: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States."

disciplines in the social sciences and, even more so, in the humanities that are motivated by educational concerns beyond the instrumental rationality of imparting capitalist job skills to a disciplined future workforce.

Conclusion

The preceding brief discussion suggests several ethical issues that these latest mechanisms of educational content delivery portend for students, faculty, and the contemporary university more generally. The first concern arises from the potential to further exacerbate an increasingly stratified system of higher education in which those students confronted by time, financial, and other resource constraints that preclude physical attendance on a campus are offered the latest digital version of 'university lite.' Rather than engage in the difficult politics of developing a structural response to the increasing neo-liberalization and unaffordability of higher education, digital delivery provides university administrators a technological solution that promises to yield increased tuition dollars while reinforcing socio-economic marginalization. Yet, and this represents a second ethical issue, the type of education most easily delivered via digital mechanisms, particularly the flex degree, aligns with the neo-liberal role of contemporary education. That is, the instrumental training most suited to electronic delivery is ideal for credentializing workers being acclimated to the discipline of their future workplace rather than imparting the type of edification required to assist students to become informed, critical, thinking citizens. Put another way, the already circumscribed commitment to social responsibility and social justice within the academy is threatened with further erosion.

A third ethical issue stems from the enclosing effect digital delivery mechanisms and associated intellectual property rights threaten to exercise on the social labor of developing course content. Although typically an individual endeavor, faculty members develop courses by drawing on a wealth of prior knowledge created by colleagues, professionals, and others. The enclosure of these collective resources, be it by for-profit educational entities or universities exercising work for hire doctrines, represents a third party privatization of the collective efforts of past and current generations that threatens to reduce the public domain at the expense of future generations.

A fourth ethical issue effects mainly faculty. These digital content delivery mechanisms offer university administrators an additional tool in their arsenal to control, discipline, and further erode the autonomy of the academic labor force. Finally, and relatedly, we are producing doctoral candidates at a rate that already far outstrips the number of secure and decently remunerated positions available within institutions of higher education. While it is certainly the case that some of those newly minted PhDs will seek employment outside of academia, it is ethically problematic for the current professoriate to contribute to schemes that will further undermine the ability of these future colleagues to obtain employment in the full capacity for which we are training them.

But perhaps to end on a note, or at least a glimpse, of optimism. As the introductory quote from the edufactory collective makes clear, the university, not yet completely assimilated by capital, remains a critical site of social struggle. Indeed, the fact that this special issue of the journal seeks to interrogate the ethical implications of the evolving digital nature of higher education attests to this claim. We need to problematize the imposition of capitalist social relations in the university without invoking some sense of nostalgia for a romanticized past. By recognizing that the commodification of higher education is a process made possible by social and conflictual power relations, we open up the possibility of glimpsing lines of flight and terrains of resistance. We need to open up more lines of fight that serve to question the dominant, and rather uncritical, knowledge paradigms by producing and communicating oppositional knowledge antagonistic to capital's appropriation imperatives in the context of higher education. And we need to do this in a better, less insular way that seeks to restore the university as an institution that serves all of society and not just business.

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