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Downloading Education

by Jay Herson

Earlier this summer I was asked to record a lecture that I give once a year to Master's Degree students at the Bloomberg School of Public Health of Johns Hopkins University. This was a voice-over for my PowerPoint slides to be made available over the internet for registered *internet distance learners.* The latter are a new breed of students who take graduate courses, including exams, over the internet during a specified period such as an academic quarter or semester. These students must satisfy a minimum residence requirement which is accomplished by registering for the specified number of one-week and two-week courses over a 3 week period in June-July. At that time the school is overrun by distance learners, many of whom are still unfamiliar with their surroundings despite having officially been students for the past 2-3 years.

On my way home from this recording session I realized that this digital lecture was just an object to be downloaded and easily transferable. In that sense it could be like digital music albeit with a much smaller market. While Johns Hopkins and other universities may be thinking of these lectures being recorded just for use in their own graduate courses, the larger education market may see these as objects of commercial value. This could be the dawn of a new industry. Just as it may be unrealistic to expect everyone in need of a graduate or even undergraduate education to be on-campus, resources may not allow one professor for every class taught. Today many courses are taught by graduate students and many of these graduate students are not native-English speakers. This makes it difficult for some students to learn, especially in undergraduate science, mathematics and engineering courses. Thus, there is a developing market for sharing lectures among universities, and internet lecture sharing appears to be a way to accomplish this.

Clearly universities can license their internet lectures to other universities to include in all or part of their courses or to individuals enrolled at other universities (possibly traditional on-campus students) for enrichment of their coursework. If this became inefficient, the industry would evolve to the emergence of distribution companies who would be licensed to broker lectures for as many universities as they can sign up, possibly on a non-exclusive basis. Distributors could be responsible for having lectures translated into various languages. The universities would thus become content providers, and they and their contributing faculty would be in the royalty stream. This would not be a new role for universities. They have spent decades licensing logos for merchandise, television coverage for sporting events and producing programs for public television.

Of course there will be the risk of illegal downloading, copyright violations, unauthorized translation to other languages and even counterfeit lectures (a high school teacher records a lecture and a distributor claims it was recorded by a Harvard professor). A black market could emerge such as has existed for ghost-written term papers and book reports. While litigation may seem to some as the logical way to settle these problems, eventually reasonable pricing, similar to the solution in internet music distribution, will be seen as a way to make the illegal practices unprofitable.

The university system developed as a four year undergraduate curriculum because in centuries past that was considered a reasonable time for young people to be away from the farm and the summer—off / September start of classes was made to be harmonious with the farming chores of the students. In the modern world, fewer students live on a farm, and many older students are seeking undergraduate and graduate degrees as a resume line item to higher salary. Earlier in this century an employer hiring a college graduate was hiring someone who had indeed dedicated four years of their life to this level of education and someone who learned much being in a community of faculty and other students. This learning was mutual between faculty and students and provided an opportunity to make friendships that can last a lifetime. With internet distance learning the degree means that the student sat before a computer and submitted perfunctory exercises and wrote exams over the internet at a schedule of his/her choosing. While we can process more course completion records in this way, we must understand that the final product is not the same as a traditionally college educated student.

Of course distance learning need not be used only by people learning at home. On-campus students at traditional colleges could be benefiting from some internet lectures produced elsewhere as well as those attended live on their campuses. They could even use the internet to play back the same lecture they heard live earlier in the week. Internet lectures can make use of graphics, animation and video that printed textbooks cannot match. Indeed the term "lecture" should be generalized here to mean "learning opportunity" because internet modules could consist of interactive computer directed learning and need not contain a human voice or image at all. For students studying for master's degrees in applied areas like public health and engineering, distance learners may have the benefit of learning something Tuesday night that can be applied at the office Wednesday morning. Indeed internet lectures can be used for on-the-job training independent of any degree program. If properly enforced the internet lecture distribution system could be a way of educating more 21st century students with higher quality material than what the current on-campus system can provide. The resume of the future may not consist of merely a list of degrees but a printout of internet courses passed where some would have higher value in the marketplace than others due to the professor teaching, content, production format, etc.

It remains to be seen if college professors would like to be equated to rock stars in the internet world of if they will be as effective in talking to a microphone as they are to a sea of bright eager faces. Internet college teaching will likely attract a different kind of person with different skills than currently. When the recorded music industry began surely not all vaudeville performers transferred easily to this new medium.

A digital education industry will emerge, but it will not be because there is an increased demand for education but rather because there is an increase in demand for academic credentials. An economics professor in a traditional classroom once included the phrase in many of his lectures "the market giveth and the market taketh away." Indeed the market for credentials will take the form that makes the most sense in the 21st century and beyond. In the end, individuals can become educated by making the most of whatever resources are available. This takes motivation and commitment. These traits cannot be downloaded.

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POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM *(send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):*

- *If universities share lectures, will that lead to more courses or to fewer faculty positions – and what is the future of the lecture itself as a means of education?*

- *Will IT (digital "downloadable" education), in conjunction with other trends, impact the balance between classical subjects on one hand and utilitarian, "current" topics on the other? What subjects will be taught in universities 20 years from now?*

- *Will the advantages inherent in Internet-based education (namely, the ready availability of up-to-date course content in diverse subjects) outweigh the loss of face-to-face interaction among students and professors?*

- *In what other ways will internet-based education, in conjunction with the spiraling costs of college education and the demise of the "profession for life" for college graduates, impact college education, the traditional college campus, student life (including dating), faculty tenure, and university research?*