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Courses As Commodities

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It's way too easy to activate the cynical reflex with the wave of MOOC Hysteria – e.g. **from the perch of _The Atlantic_** (frankly a red flag goes up over any written thing wrapped in the phrase of "revolutionizing education")

In a recent article in the New Yorker, the President of Stanford, John Hennessy said, "There's a tsunami coming."

Daphne Koller, a professor of Computer Science at Stanford University and the co-founder of Coursera, a free online classroom, believes that Hennessy is right. "The tsunami is coming whether we like it or not," she said. "You can be crushed or you can surf and it is better to surf."

It's especially fun to surf **when you have a $60 million board** ;-)

If we can let the wave of hype crash by with all the tsunami surfers, a way of looking this is at least its got people thinking, talking, about education, even if it is a fear or follow the leader response.

Frankly, what I (in my only not seeing every aspect of every bit of information and shooting from the gut) see among **what are called the "AI-MOOCs"** or better, Cathy Finn-Derecki's delicious acronyum "EdUCKA" is to me, the offering of courses as some sort of product.

These products are framed in efficiency, scale, production- witness:

Offer high-quality products at a low price, consumers tend to notice. When Target offers clothes from couture designers like Missoni and Rodarte, the stock disappears within a few hours. The same goes for higher ed: Huge numbers of people are also flocking toward bargain basement Ivy League classes.

A collection of course certificates, badges, etc doth not an education maketh. These are certainly not without value, especially for the international community.

But in most of these, (huge generalization coming), the focus os on the product the course, the numbers… what part of the educational experience is being left out? It's the personal attention, the guidance, the social fabric for the students.

You remember them? The students. Is an education going to be pulling some packages off the shelf, and ringing out at the cash register? Is this going to be what develops the next generation of people who will solve problems and become leaders? Or will that come from people who are certified by algorithms and machines? Here is what is so revolutionary…

Like a traditional class, each online class is comprised of a series of video lectures with PowerPoint slides. Students can participate in discussion boards and are graded on the assignments. Students who complete the course with passing grades receive a certificate of completion.

I think this was invented last century. My dad completed a program like this in the 1950s. It was a correspondence course.

Using new technology and crowd sourcing innovations, both programs hope to bypass the problem of needing human beings to moderate discussions and grade assignments…

After the videos are created, the assignments are written, and the initial kinks are ironed out, Koller expects that these courses should be self sustaining and run on auto-pilot.

We certainly do not need human interaction. Cue Mr Orwell.

What is not being mentioned is that most of those 100 Gazillion students who enrolled in the Stanford AI course came with the built in drive and interest to try on that course- as I mused about a while ago, we ought to be looking at that **Gaping M Shaped Void in DIY** learning. It's one thing to seek out learning for things you know you want to learn, but where comes the motivation to learn things you maybe dont know are worth learning?

That does not happen in an environment like:

It would be impossible to hire enough people to grade the essays for a class that served 20,000. At Coursera, three engineers worked for two months on creating a system similar to Amazon Mechanical Turk for peer

evaluation. This program will launch in about a week. EdX will use essay-grading software.

Do not believe these engineers have perfected something that will individually grade your essays- they are going to have algorithms that compare your writing to that of a selected and reviewed smaller subset. And yes, I even believe they have have something that can approximate this.

If this "revolutionary" approach to education is not about stamping out products, then just nod your head in agreement to:

While they don't expect a financial winfall, the promoters of these ventures hope to monetize these programs in the future, so they don't become a drain on the university's finances. Both programs may charge students a small fee for their certificates. Koller said that Coursera might also work with the business community to use their databases for recruitment purposes.

So yeah stir it up. At UMW we are having these discussions too. It's framed around this idea of an approach to "online learning" and the entire problem there is that expression sets it up as something completely different from whatever the opposite is. It lends itself to notions of "converting" things to online, it makes large riffs between the practice of teaching and learning, which, has been going along on some basis for a few centuries, and this "new" massive thing.

I have to truly commend my colleague **Martha Burtis**, in our discussion today, to subtly turn this around- rather than talking about doing "online learning", framed with all the notions of doing it for convenience, or scaling, or increasing enrollment, to have a strategy of a direction of supporting "learning online". What we ought to be doing is preparing students for the future where there will be ways to learning online, but also in a spectrum of modes that start with an integrative approach, not replacing what we do with some product.

Or we just re-arrange it all to look like

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