The Learning MarketSpace, May 1, 2000

WORTH A SECOND LOOK

Every once in a while someone makes an observation so prophetic that it is worth a second, even a third look. Just so with Peter Drucker in his 1995 Managing In a Time of Great Change. 

"...Education will become the center of the knowledge society, and schooling its key institution. What knowledge is required for everybody? What mix of knowledge is required for everybody? What is "quality" in learning and teaching? All these will, of necessity, become central concerns of the knowledge society, and central political issues. In fact, it may not be too fanciful to anticipate that the acquisition and distribution of formal knowledge will come to occupy the place in the politics of the knowledge society that acquisition and distribution of property and income have occupied in the two or three centuries that we have come to call the Age of Capitalism."

"Paradoxically, this may not necessarily mean that the school as we know it will become more important. For in the knowledge society clearly more and more of knowledge, and especially of advanced knowledge, will be acquired well past the age of formal schooling, and increasingly, perhaps, in and through educational processes that do not center on the traditional school--for example, systematic continuing education offered at the place of employment. But at the same time, there is very little doubt that the performance of the schools and the basic values of the schools will increasingly become of concern to society as a whole, rather than be considered 'professional' matters that can safely be left to the 'educator'."

"We can also predict with high probability that we will redefine what it means to be an 'educated person.' Traditionally, and especially during the last two hundred or three hundred years, at least in the West (and since about that time in Japan, as well), an educated person was somebody who shared a common stock of formal knowledge--some who had what the Germans call an Allgemein Bildung (a general education) and the English (and following them, the nineteenth-century Americans) called a 'liberal education.' Increasingly, an 'educated person' will be somebody who has learned how to learn and who throughout his or her lifetime continues learning, and especially learning in and through formal education."

"There are obvious dangers to this. Such a society can easily degenerate into one in which the emphasis is on formal degrees rather than on performance capacity. It can easily degenerate into one of totally sterile, Confucian-type mandarins--a danger to which the American university, particularly, is singularly susceptible. It can, on the other hand, also fall prey to overvaluing immediately usable, 'practical' knowledge, and underrate the importance of fundamentals, and of wisdom altogether."

"Drucker, as is his custom, was writing about management but couldn't Resist commenting upon the changes likely to be occasioned by the Knowledge society. Even the short time ensuing between the publication of these thoughts and the present has been sufficient to demonstrate just how "on target" he was. He suggests nothing short of a new paradigm for American education. In that context, we probably shouldn't be surprised by the vocal intensity of those attempting to hold on to the old paradigm. But, alas, we are."

--RCH

THE AGE OF REASON

For six months of the year, I live in Miami. The events of the past few weeks surrounding the custody of a small child have convinced a good number of Americans that the city of Miami does not hold rationality in high esteem. This impression is greatly enhanced by members of the news media who seem to require a belief in conspiracy theory (Fidel Castro made him/her do it . . .) as a basis for appearing on camera. (If you're sick of the national coverage, imagine what our local coverage is like!)

Of course, not all folks who live in Miami agree with the local relatives. And most of us don't spend our time hanging out around the Gonzalez home. The rule of law has a strong following.

Like many in higher education, I was attracted to the academic life because it represents a reasoned approach...
to the world. Standing on a street corner, shouting at those with whom we disagree is not for us (at least not since the sixties.) Overcoming prejudice, developing positions based on fact, reasoning our way to new knowledge—all a part of the search for truth—that was the life for me.

But lately I have begun to wonder about the status of reason in higher education. Here’s an example of what I mean.

The Chronicle of Higher Education recently reported that the University of Phoenix has agreed to pay the Education Department $6 million to resolve charges that the institution gave federal financial aid to ineligible students. (The government had originally sought more than $55 million, $50.6 million of which was in loans that the students will have to re-pay themselves.) As reported, Todd Nelson, president of the Apollo Group, called the charges “outrageous” and said the university had settled only to avoid a long and costly legal battle.

What was this nefarious behavior on the part of the university? Surely it must have been something like having sex with human subjects against their will! Or perhaps advertising a four-year degree that, in fact, takes six years to complete because the required courses aren't available.

On the contrary the charge was that students at the University of Phoenix had not spent enough hours in class to qualify for the financial aid they had received. Education Department rules require that students who do not use a semester, trimester, or quarter system must be in class at least 12 hours a week, for 30 weeks (or the equivalent—e.g., in class 10 hours a week for 36 weeks) to obtain aid as full-time students.

When I read something like this, I feel like I'm on drugs. Unfortunately, I know I'm not hallucinating because I spent a good part of the late seventies and early eighties in dreary offices negotiating with officials from the federal government, the state government and, even, the INS about this same issue and that was 20 years ago! As an academic administrator at SUNY Empire State College, an institution where students spend NO time in class, one of my unhappy assignments was to help defend the institution against the same kind of government interventions. We spent years on this stuff!

But this is the age of the Internet. What's next? Will the feds require consumers to spend a certain number of hours face-to-face with their travel agents before it is safe to fly? Or will they go after banks that dispense money to consumers without sufficient interaction with a teller during banking hours?

What possible difference does it make whether students spend 45 hours a semester in class or 30 hours or 10 hours or no hours as long as they master the course material and fulfill the learning objectives of the institution?

And what does having a semester or quarter system have to do with the issue? In institution after institution throughout the country, faculty and students are moving out of the classroom, onto the net. Now let me get this straight. If Penn State and Virginia Tech and the University of Central Florida reduce class time and create highly effective, interactive learning experiences for students on-line, that’s okay because they have semester systems?

How do we know that full-time students are, in fact, full-time students, whether they are in class or not? Because they receive college credit equivalent to their full-time status. Every student who receives credit for a course—whether taken online or on campus—does so because the faculty member teaching the course (who has been appointed and reviewed by his or her colleagues and institution) evaluates what and how well the student has learned.

So what does all this have to do with Elian Gonzalez? Just when you’re about to cast your vote for the people of Miami to win this year's award for most outstanding irrational behavior, don't forget about the US Department of Ed.

--CAT

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

We have commented upon the "digital divide" in previous columns. The subject seems to be high on the priority list of the current administration in Washington although we likely have somewhat differing definitions of just exactly what the divide is.

As has been observed by any number of critics of the majority of current "virtual" classrooms, truly compelling asynchronous learning applications await the widespread availability of high bandwidth communication. For, it is only with high bandwidth that "immersion" learning environments can be constructed. It is difficult to fault the designers of these current learning applications for basing their designs on a low common denominator assumption of available bandwidth for to do otherwise would exclude nearly every potential student.

The arrival of high bandwidth Internet connectivity in any but the densely populated urban corridors is not in the near term future of the incumbent telephony monopolists. In spite of the best efforts of the FCC, it appears highly unlikely that we will see DSL-like services in the near future outside the obvious urban markets where competition, or the threat of competition, goads the incumbent providers into upgrading their networks and offering high bandwidth services at reasonable prices. Much the same can be observed of cable solutions.

In the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries, the development of critical infrastructure was aided or undertaken by governmental agencies--local, state, and federal. There were any number of reasons for this. Not the least was
the conclusion that societal value of infrastructure vastly exceeded the entrepreneurial rewards for its construction. As a consequence, most canals, bridges and roads were constructed with governmental resources. The interstate highway system is one obvious example, the Tennessee Valley Authority another, and in our time, the development of ARPAnet/NSFnet which ultimately lead to the Internet.

Governmental intervention in hastening the arrival of high bandwidth infrastructure appears somewhat problematic in the near term. The FCC has not been particularly successful in breaking the local loop monopoly through regulation. The lobbying power of incumbent monopolists in state legislatures has similarly stymied efforts by local governments to increase the pace of deployment of high bandwidth communications. Legislation has been introduced in many--passed in some--states that prohibits local governments from causing to have constructed (either by themselves or in partnership with commercial competitors to the incumbent) high bandwidth communications infrastructure.

The future may lie in wireless. Predictions of a number of years ago that telephony would move to wireless and high bandwidth (digital TV and data applications) would move to fiber have been partially borne out. The ubiquity of the cell phone attests to the former. The latter, in the form of fiber or other high bandwidth wirelines to the home has not come so easily for the economic and political reasons already noted.

There are any number of experiments currently being conducted with Wireless that offer some hope of breaking through this logjam. Much of this experimentation is taking place in the higher end of the spectrum where signal attenuation (due to weather, foliage and the like) is still a major technical problem. The increasing attractiveness of personal digital assistants like the Palm and expanded applications of the cell phone are feeding this interest in wireless.

It is worth keeping an eye tuned to this battle. It may be in wireless where truly useful learning applications finally breakthrough.

--RCH

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UPCOMING LEADERSHIP FORUM EVENTS

THE LEARNING MARKETPLACE: NEW RESOURCES FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

Seminar: Tuesday, April 18, 2000, 8:30 am-4:00 pm
Product Demos: Monday, April 17, 4:00-7:00 pm
Location: The Westin Horton Plaza, San Diego, California

Moderators: Bob Heterick and Carol Twigg

More and more companies are entering the higher education market, providing new and different approaches to supporting your teaching/learning efforts. This workshop provides a rare opportunity for you to compare and contrast commercial offerings in an impartial environment and to gain an overall understanding of the industry.

- Learn in one day what would take you many to find out on your own.
- Identify potential partners for developing new learning environments.
- Meet your colleagues who are wrestling with the same set of issues.
- See product demonstrations (optional activity on April 17).

Featuring moderated discussions with:

- Blackboard Inc.
- eCollege.com
- Eduprise
- SCT
- WebCT

If you are involved in decisions regarding expenditure of funds for teaching/learning services and products, you can't afford to miss this workshop!

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