



Chapter 1

Web-Delivered Education: Shaking the Foundations of the “Establishment”?

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There is a growing emphasis upon the provision of education through web delivery services that will allow universities and other educational providers to reach out to a global audience. The benefits for the learner include the prospect of flexible systems that provide greater consumer choice in terms of subject, times and patterns of study, and choice of institution. The availability of such a diverse, rich and accessible opportunity for learners, combined with the larger market place would seem to offer established educational institutions many advantages and benefits. This chapter suggests, however, that the growth of such a new and dynamic educational marketplace, populated by a wide range of education providers, will bring with it significant new problems, or rather new incarnations of older problems, that may challenge existence of some current educational providers. These threats are not technical, instead being driven by market related perceptions that may alter provider/student relationships as the web-enabled client-led learning paradigm develops.

INTRODUCTION

On the 28th of May, 1968, the students and some of the staff took control of Hornsey College of Art, North London, as part of a revolt against what they saw as an education system that did not support the needs of students. They boldly declared that the college was in the control of the students and that they were

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demanding a new educational structure that would better meet the needs of the students.

The staff and students were striving to achieve a system where “lecturers” and “students” become partners engaged on the same task, as opposed to the authoritarian models still in use: lecturer as ruler; pupil as subject; lecturer as priest; and student as acolyte (The Hornsey Affair, 1969).

Although that “revolution” was unsuccessful, the core educational structures demanded by the staff and students appear to be sound, and perhaps modern web-based education would applaud, and could quickly address, many of the key ideas. The “revolutionaries” proposed an educational system characterised by the following focal issues:

- An open system whereby all individual demands can be taken into account whether specialised or comprehensive.
- Subjects to be set up in response to the need of individual or group of students at any moment – thus the curricula will be in a constant state of flux.
- Within the operational curricula of any one moment there will be total freedom of choice of options and combinations available to everyone.
- Complete freedom of individual or group research at any time with or without tutorial assistance.
- A system of invited tutors who are engaged for the duration of a project that involves them. Probably only technical staff will be engaged full time.
- Tutors will be determined as suitable according to student evaluation.
- Tutors are those people who have any information that an individual or group want. They can be drawn from any area of involvement.
- The spatial, social materials and equipment organisation should have an equivalent degree of flexibility in use as embodied in the curricula and tutorial structure outlined above.
- All facilities to be open 168 hours a week throughout the year.

This proposal, however educationally attractive at first examination, would appear to have posed several significant problems for the managers of the system that was then in place. Firstly, the process indicated in the student demands would not lend itself to “easy” management of resources (rooms, staff, facilities) as it requires a lack of rigid arrangement of defined subjects. Secondly, the making available of resources on a twenty-four hour basis would have posed practical problems both in terms of finance and management of the security of those resources. Thirdly, the selection of teaching staff by the students would typically raise issues of the validity of the selection process and “credentials” of the appointed “staff,” and also of the remuneration of individuals employed on what would be key but, paradoxically, casual contracts. The fundamental problem may well have been that while this would appear to be a truly flexible and student-

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