

A bit lengthy, but a good treatise on MOOCs.

Pedagogy of the Depressed



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Whenever [David Brooks](#) and [Thomas Friedman](#) begin singing from the same hymnal you can bet the next public policy catastrophe is knocking at the door. This time around they've become boosters for online college courses as a panacea to cure the ills afflicting public colleges and universities. Brooks and Friedman's new interest in higher education means that Very Serious People are lining up to hand over yet another public good to the shock doctrine of privatization.

When considering the condition of the nation's public colleges and universities these days the "shock" has already occurred in the form of defunding and manufactured budget "crises." Now the vultures are circling with ready-made "solutions" that also seek to [turn a quick profit](#) for private technology companies.

Depending on who's doing the promo, Silicon Valley venture capitalists promise to "rescue," "reform," or "save" public higher education with a hodgepodge of "massive open online courses" (MOOCs) and other computer-driven academic offerings. Of late, they have even been championing automated grading software that can evaluate the merits of students' essays with a click of a mouse. Throwing around a lot of liberal sounding buzzwords like "access" and "innovation," these academic entrepreneurs seek to dismantle what's left of the public university sector and replace it with a loose, but highly profitable, collection of business enterprises.

Don't get me wrong. The Internet is the greatest tool humans have yet invented. Fighting off restrictive legislation like [SOPA](#) and PIPA and other attempts to censor or control Internet content and delivery is the free speech cause of our era. It's imperative to keep up the pressure on the FCC to maintain a free and open Internet. The Anonymous hacktivists, along with [Julian Assange's Wikileaks](#), and the work of the late [Aaron Swartz](#) and the political prisoner, [Jeremy Hammond](#), show there are people who have literally given their lives and put their freedom on the line to maintain their commitment to Internet openness. The Internet's social media have enabled the organizing of mass movements, such as Occupy Wall Street, and has kept those connections at the ready for the next giant protest action. These are all achievements that would have been unimaginable just 20 years ago.

But when private tech corporations, no matter how "visionary" they claim to be, begin to pilfer tax dollars earmarked for public higher education or meddle in faculty governance and make curriculum

decisions detrimental to the mission, the amazing technological achievement that is the Internet, like any technology, can be deployed in a way that hinders rather than helps the wider society.

As is the case with many other issues that David Brooks and Thomas Friedman champion in the paper of record, they choose to ignore the tough questions their certitude won't allow them to raise. Can students really be taught critical thinking, civics, and citizenship skills in a standardized format that values conformity? Will relying on MOOCs and automation in the long-term turn professors into "delivery managers" and students into automatons and passive consumers rather than citizens? Why are the ideals that have long been associated with public higher education being scrapped in favor of private special interests that stand to profit from these changes? Just because something is found online, whether it's a dating service or a comments board, does not, *ipso facto*, mean that it's "better" than other more organic discursive options available to humans. (As the journalist, Aaron Brady, points out, most people might want to see a real doctor instead of going to WebMD.)

If you're a 50-something unemployed person who is seeking the cheapest, fastest, way to earn a certificate showing you know something about accounting or business, then online education is fine. But if you're a college-age person, especially one who is from one of the "under-represented" student groups in American society or the first person in one's family to attend college, then online education is a [rip-off](#). Part of getting a college education is showing up for classes, learning discipline, meeting deadlines, studying with your peers.

All of the [cheerleading for MOOCs](#) and automated grading software might not be that much of a concern if it weren't taking place in the current context of the systematic drying up of public funding for education generally. The enthusiasm for new technology as a panacea for the public universities' ills seems either naïve or inconsistent coming at a time when all things with the word "public" in front of it are under coordinated assault. Add to this scenario the wider context of enfeebled labor unions, flat real wages for most workers, right-wing billionaires drenching our politics in money, and a Supreme Court that believes corporations are "people," and the "idealism" associated with diverting scarce public resources to experiments in privatized online education may seem a little fanciful and suspect.

In more affluent times, when public higher education was fully funded this discussion about the merits of MOOCs and [automated grading software](#) might make more sense, but in the current era of scarcity and contrived "shocks" to the system with the aim of privatizing everything possible we might want to slow down a bit before charging down the path that Very Serious People are dragging us down.

Public Education/Private Profit

Public colleges and universities across the country have been under aggressive budgetary assault. For decades now student services have been increasingly privatized to fill the gaps left by the defunding of these schools. As corporate money looking for a return on investment has flooded the system, corporate-minded presidents and administrators have ascended to places of power. Corporations are undemocratic and hierarchical institutions designed to pay off shareholders and exploit the skills and knowledge of a docile workforce. Colleges and universities have a very different mission. They're charged with passing on to the next generation critical thinking skills consistent with the needs of democracy. As public colleges and universities become more dependent on corporate cash business prerogatives have metastasized and with them has come a wholesale devaluing of the humanities and liberal arts.

College courses that might contribute to a deeper understanding of American civics have been brushed aside or dumped outright in favor of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) and Business courses, which promise to produce obedient workers. Forget about the high ideals of the "Freedom Schools" during the civil rights movement in the South, or Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*;

we now appear to be entering the era of "Pedagogy of the *Depressed*."

One of the key virtues of colleges and universities is that they are among the only places in American society where humans can congregate where commercial values do not dominate the discourse. Inside the classroom, students can join together in an environment unmediated by market forces or commercial advertising to engage the big ideas and issues and contemplate their place in the world. If you can't ask the big questions when you're between the ages of 18 and 21 when can you?

Today, commercial values are splashed all over our public colleges and universities. Private for-profit companies promote textbooks and other products, test kits, even credit cards, and other student "services" that are sold as vital to their careers. Udacity, Coursera, and EdX are the newcomers to this old commercialization story. But unlike book suppliers or other private vendors that contract with public schools these Silicon Valley venture capitalists are moving into controlling the curriculum. Taking a page from the ["University" of Phoenix](#) script, they seek to run the "delivery" and "management" of course materials, stripping these vital functions from faculty, undermining the tradition of shared governance, and putting more power in the hands of unqualified administrators and managers.

Administrators today, even at public universities, often resemble corporate CEOs more than they do educators. Our nation's dismal long-term high unemployment rate has only accelerated this trend that existed prior to the financial crash of 2008. [Privatizers](#) have aggressively swooped into the public universities (as they have with K-12 education) because they stand to make a fortune. They've shown little concern about the possible negative long-term consequences of their actions. As long as the [profits are flowing](#) through siphoning off public dollars their changes to the teaching profession or the professoriate matter little. One of the only other domains in American life, outside of colleges and universities, where commercial values might still be subordinated are in churches and synagogues. Think how "efficient" the "delivery" of spiritual guidance could be if clerics had "access" to Udacity's software or could reach out to their flocks through MOOCs?

Pedagogical Concerns

While the profiteers and [technological determinists](#) extol the virtues of online education and lace their sales pitch with slogans about "access" and "deliverability," they ignore the "lateral learning" that takes place inside a classroom. "Access" to a computer program cannot replace interactions with real life professors and students inside a supportive setting where dialogue, critical thinking, and learning take place.

Participant observation, gazing around at other students taking notes and interacting with them, seeing who asks good questions and who doesn't, taking the leap to build your own point based on someone else's question or comment, understanding which professor or learning exercise works for you and which one doesn't. These collective student activities are all part of the learning process that no online course or computer program can come close to simulating regardless of its complexity or "interactivity."

The exchanges between students and professors online are nothing more than glorified emails or message board chat rooms. It's linear, written, compartmentalized, and slow. There are no nonverbal cues or signifiers coming from professors or students. It's a lot of rote learning measured by standardized questions that require homogeneous answers. No matter how many times those who stand to profit from selling their software to public schools claim there is no difference between what they offer and the real deal, the fact remains that cookie-cutter teaching methodology cannot promote critical thinking or give young people seeking a college education anything close to the classroom experience.

Regarding the liberal language about "access" that permeates the discussion students from "under-represented" groups or the first in their families to go to college have a much better chance of succeeding if real human interactions with students and professors are nurtured.

The online boosters have yet to show us the data that proves computer courses work for college-age students better or are as good when compared to the long established classroom setting. Technophiles always claim to value data yet when it comes to whether or not students actually benefit from online courses or automated grading systems they are surprisingly mute.

Next year will mark the 50th anniversary of the UC Berkeley Free Speech Movement. One of the leaders of the FSM, [Mario Savio](#), throughout his life held up an ideal for public higher education both as a Cal student and a member of the faculty of CSU, Sonoma. This push toward privatization, standardization, and automation of the university experience represents everything Savio identified as being wrong with higher education. It's as if the baby boomers, having gotten their own quality schooling for a fraction of the price students pay today, are kicking the ladder out from under their children and grandchildren and substituting it with a shoddy, privatized product to which they, in their youth, never would have succumbed.

I don't find MOOCs and automated online education as exciting as David Brooks and Thomas Friedman do. Even the sound of the acronym "MOOC" is kind of unappealing, something akin to the sound a cow makes fused with the word "muck." And "Udacity" and "EdX" sound to me more like the brand names of erectile dysfunction pills than anything associated with a university.

The futurists have imbued their call for radically restructuring public higher education with an air of inevitability, as if it's predetermined. They suggest that technology drives human affairs instead of the other way around. And that it must be good. Trendy ideas like MOOCs and new automated grading software and online course offerings managed by private corporations are all the rage among the self-appointed education "reformers." But I know for a fact that the last thing so-called under-represented students need is less direct contact with their professors.

Once in a while someone lets the cat out of the bag. For example, at the end of the journalist [John Markoff's above-the-fold, front-page article](#) in *The New York Times*, ("Software Subs for Professors on Essay Test, Grading by Computers Debated on Campus" -- as it appeared in the paper), he quotes a University of Akron professor, Mark D. Shermis, who "supervised" a contest on automated essay scoring and came away excited about its possibilities. Shermis noted that "critics" of the new automatic essay grading technology come mostly from "the nation's best universities, where the level of pedagogy is much better than most schools." These critics, (among whom I include myself), Shermis says "often... come from very prestigious institutions where, in fact, they do a much better job of providing feedback than a machine ever could. There seems to be a lack of appreciation of what is actually going on in the real world." This line of reasoning [scraps the ideal of public higher education](#) as being "unrealistic." But we've never had a real debate about why this seems to be the case -- why America has abandoned these schools leaving them vulnerable to the vulture capitalists who now want to pick at the carcass. Why have we decided to accept as a fait accompli the lowering of the quality of our public colleges and universities?

The professor's remarks illustrate just how far in recent years we've moved away from the ideals associated with public higher education (like those presented in California's Master Plan for Higher Education). It used to be a source of pride for many states to pursue the goal of building schools that aspire to the quality of the more "prestigious" institutions. With the GI Bill and investments in education even the daughters and sons of the working class had the opportunity of getting an education on par with America's best colleges and universities. How does it serve student aspirations to put online

courses in the hands of under-qualified managers where students can log on, click a mouse, and download their college educations?

Most infuriating is the false dichotomy enthusiasts of online education and automation construct whenever anyone raises criticism about their aggressive push toward dismantling traditional higher education: They call us "Luddites" who just don't "get it." But you can rest assured that David Brooks's children and Thomas Friedman's children aren't going to be downloading their college educations from a MOOC or Udacity.

The late [Steve Jobs](#) is one person who understood the role of technology in society. He didn't see it as something to deskill professors and give college students a lazy computer program where they act essentially as autodidacts. The enthusiasts for online courses, MOOCs, and automated test scoring fail to see what Steve Jobs could see: The point of your whiz-bang technological innovations is not to bend humans to fit the machines, but design the machines to enhance the human experience.

Many college presidents today like to talk about "outcome metrics" and "game-changing" technologies, while faculty members struggle to piece together a living with multiple part-time jobs, and students suffer under crushing student loan debt. The "new normal" is a long-term unemployment rate we haven't seen in this country for 70 years. This level of joblessness puts downward pressure on wages and presents young people with a dismal outlook for the future. In this context of economic depression, forgive us if we fail to get excited about MOOCs, online courses, and automated grading as "new" innovations that will ["enhance" the learning experience](#).

In the current social environment of lost opportunities and lost lives this virtual college push comes at a time when there has been not only a defunding of public colleges and universities but a general watering down of the curriculum to move students through quicker. Little attention, if any, has been paid to the quality of education these new "delivery" systems offer. Our current social context is not conducive to triumphalist technological fixes, especially when they come from people who stand to make a buck on them, or elite voices like David Brooks and Thomas Friedman, who both never met a terrible public policy option they didn't like.

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