

Jane Austen and the Belly of the Beast:

Commodification, Technology and the Open Agenda in Higher Education

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This is a reflective and rhetorical analysis of the changing nature of higher education, mediated by commercial interests, technology, and the open agenda. As Till (2013) argues, in the context of art education, there is an urgent need to look outwards beyond narrow disciplinary and institutional concerns, to critically reconsider what the purpose of higher education might be. The title of the paper conveys the tensions between the received concepts and cultural forms of the art college / university and the powerful forces changing our society - the tensions between manners and economics that underlie much of Austen's work. Being in the 'Belly of the Beast' also expresses the dilemmas described by Hall (2012) facing some academics.

Despite decades of promising to be on the verge of a breakthrough, technology and its proponents has not shifted our current model of higher education. However, what has forced change are the social and economic pressures of the neoliberal agenda of the last 30 or so years, with its instrumentalist views of education and calls for greater efficiency. Harvey (2007) notes a prevailing belief in neo-liberal thinking that there can be a technological fix for any problem and that products and solutions are often developed for problems that do not yet exist, over the years this has certainly been the case with education (Casey, Proven & Dripps 2006).

A consistent element in media discourse surrounding technology in education is the language of fear (Hardt & Negri 2001), especially fear of being left behind others. This, together with intense commercial pressures, goes some way to explain the self-norming nature of debate within the educational technology community; acting as a powerful apparatus of control (Foucault, 2008). A vivid example of this in action being the MOOC-induced management 'meltdown' at Virginia University in the USA (DeSantis, 2012). This is supported by a recurring stereotype of young people being more digitally literate and capable than they are in reality and demanding more digital delivery, although research consistently refutes this distortion (JISC & British Library 2008; QAA 2013; HEA 2011). In fact, the IT industry has long acknowledged that media control and manipulation is essential in opening new markets and creating new needs, it even has a special term for this process – the Hype Cycle (Gartner, 2013)

Because of the disjuncture with reality, the adoption of technology in higher education has, not surprisingly, been at best sub-optimal. George Siemens (2012), one of the original MOOC innovators, provides an incisive overview of the tech/media/financial forces at work in the global education market, the contradictions involved and the urgent need, as Till (2013) advocates, to approach this space with a holistic analysis that goes far beyond narrow technical or pedagogical concerns.

Critics within the university e-learning community, such as Weller (2012) are correct to see the 'education is broken' meme as a smokescreen for furthering a tech-based privatisation agenda for public education. But, as we look further outwards from academe, we see that for a large part of society the current higher education system does not, and will never, work. The problem at the heart of this situation is that the

current model is based on an economy and educational philosophy of scarcity and exclusivity, which dates back to its roots (in the west) as a means of educating feudal and theological elites. It is no surprise that the university sector has provided the 'intellectual soundtrack' for neoliberalism (as well as principled opposition). Thus, in many ways, open education is deeply transgressive (Hall, 2012) to the existing institutional and professional cultures of higher education, especially as they struggle to maintain their social and economic position in a period of extended economic decline in the west.

Until recently, the social capital of the inhabitants of academia has been sufficient to avoid radical change, instead, the response to external social and economic pressures has been the 'massification' of the traditional system without fundamental reform. During the neo-liberal period this has been accompanied by a growing culture of managerialism and the intensification of labour, a global trend where previously secure middle class workforces are forced into an increasingly precarious existence (Hardt & Negri 200). As in other parts of the public sphere, this is accompanied by state-sponsored privatisation, as this extract from a UK government white paper makes clear:

“The government aims to ‘drive competition and innovation’, through a more market-based approach to higher education, allowing students to choose between a range of types of providers.”

The 2011 Higher Education White Paper (UK Government 2013)

Paper Structure

The paper begins with section 1 - *The Mystery of Higher Education*, examining the current state of higher education, its 'legacy features', important long-term trends in state intervention and the recent effects of technology in removing a traditional powerbase - the monopoly on access to quality information and learning resources. It discusses how institutions and interest groups are developing their positions in the evolving landscape of a global higher education market and some of the consequent contradictions and paradoxes that are emerging.

In section 2 - *Public Good and Public Goods*, some far-reaching but under reported developments in open education (other than MOOCs) are described, particularly from the USA where the public sector is currently involved in some radical interventions. The actual and potential impact of these developments is discussed and contrasted with the current trajectory of the MOOC movement, together with its evolving subsidiaries such as DOCCS, SPOCCS, SPOCS, NOOCs and their commercial affiliations. A useful overview of different types of 'openness' is also provided to help orient the reader to the different socio-economic agendas that they represent.

For the final section 3 - *Design Options for a Sustainable Higher Education System*, possible ways forwards are discussed, from the expensive gradualism of publicly funded 'living laboratories' to more radical initiatives in widening participation, and, crucially, assessment and accreditation (arguably the remaining powerbase of the university sector), including collaboration with community and

commercial organisations. In this section there is a discussion of realistic options for open education initiatives for ‘the rest of us’ in the university sector that do not have the human, technical and financial resources to commit to MOOCs; estimated at costing between £30k-50k per course by Martin Bean, Vice Chancellor of the Open University (Bean 2013). This section will also explore the developing policy landscape in relation to open education and outline some of the options for small to medium institutions that want to develop their provision strategically in the long term.

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