

The Harbour League



CREATIVE DESTRUCTION IN THE ACADEMY

By Herbert I. London

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At a recent conference on higher education organized by the National Association of Scholars there were several references to Schumpeter's famous expression "creative destruction". It was argued that technology was fomenting a change in pedagogy and the delivery of knowledge.

Presumably in an environment of tightening resources, the university as we know it will change and accommodate technologies that alter the university experience. Surely this is occurring to some degree. Computers can be found in the classroom and research has been made easier than the past because of the internet.

But despite an egalitarian spirit on the campus that often puts the instructor in the role of "peer in the rear" or "guide on the side", or most professors their role is still the "sage on the stage", standing in front of the room reading from yellowing notes or asking questions Socrates-like to their students.

It is remarkable that the Blackberry, the internet, the cell phone may have changed unalterably social relations and communication, but the university as a system of transmission has remained largely resistant to the dominate themes of technological change. The Academy has certainly not destroyed the conventions of the past, nor created the innovations of the future.

One might well ask what accounts for the resistance. First and foremost, wisdom does not necessarily come poring forth from an electronic delivery system. The internet is only as useful as what is put in and

what is taken out. A wise man sitting on a log with an eager and bright student might still be the ideal teaching relationship.

Second, the tenure system militates against change. A professor who is fully tenured is protected from external influence. He is both an employee and manager. Hence he decides what will be accepted, what will be rejected.

Third, the academy is not subject to the conventional laws of supply and demand as long as the college experience is considered a rite of passage for teenagers. Whether the student has the ability to do college work or not; whether the tuition rate rises beyond the rate of inflation or whether the experience has any utility, parents now consider the college degree an entry credential for the work place.

Fourth, if electronic courses can duplicate the classroom experience, they become a threat to the professoriate. As Larry Ellison once noted to a group of professors, "I think professors are underpaid, my belief is that each one should get a million dollars." After the applause subsided, Mr. Ellison pointed out that "I only need one hundred of you" based on his belief that with technology he can reproduce the best lectures and put them on-line.

At the margin, technology will alter the higher education experience. But for most of the Academy creative destruction is an idea restricted to the economy. Just like alumni rely on traditions to keep the college experience alive in their imagination, faculty members generally assume the classroom is sacrosanct, a place that does warrant change.

Perhaps one day an internet university will break through the barriers offering a program that transmits the best that is known and thought (thank you Matthew Arnold) and in the process challenge effectively the prestigious institutions in the United States. Perhaps one day the two century dominance of Harvard, Princeton and Yale will be toppled by an online university.

At the moment, however, despite the marvels of technology and the demands in the economy, the university remains largely unchanged, a curious product of the past that for better or worse refuses to consider the technological change surrounding it.

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