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OUSA Partners Dinner, 4 April 2012

## **The Deserted Campus**

I recently read with dark amusement the following headline in a British paper: *Deserted University Campus Destined to be Immortalized as a Key Filming Location*. The school in question is Buckinghamshire New University, located northwest of London, and not exactly a top tier institution (in the *Guardian* 2012 University League Tables, Bucks New University is ranked 112<sup>th</sup> in Britain, up one spot from last year but still seven from the bottom of the list). I notice that one of its flagship programs is a foundation degree course in “bed sales management,” offered in partnership with a local bed manufacturing company called Dreams.

From sleeping dreams to waking ones: what will be “immortalized” as a film set is the university’s former campus near Little Chalfont—a sleepy and a dreamy village to be sure, but with a respectable array of educational institutions, including Bell Lane Combined and Nursery School, Dr. Challoner’s High School for Girls, St. George’s Infant School, and Dr. Challoner’s Grammar School for Boys. And until 2008, this lineup had included Bucks New University, the former site of which is being made available for filming.

The Location Collective, which appears to have taken control of the campus in order to market it for filming, describes the place this way: “The now deserted 240 acre ‘28 Days Later’ site lies dormant just north of the M25/M40 junction, just a hop, skip and a jump from the M25. This principle (sic) filming location is centred around a restored 18<sup>th</sup> Century mansion with a very unique stairwell that can replicate a banqueting hall, residential manor house, hotel, dining room and old peoples home.”

I wonder if there is anyone in the room who is not disconcerted by this story and by the very image of a deserted university campus. For a start, an institution is only an institution because we perceive it (or believe it) to be enduring, to transcend the merely contingent. Even though we

know nothing lasts forever, with educational institutions and particularly universities, we tend to behave as if that isn't true.

And of course there is some justification for this: only 48.6 kilometres from Little Chalfont is the University of Oxford, still with us after approximately 900 years and clear evidence that in some sense universities are for all time. The Chalfont campus of Bucks New University, by contrast, closed down one year after the institution received university status, which is clearly evidence that in another sense they are not. Since one hundred and ten institutions separate them on the university league tables, one might resolve this apparent contradiction by inferring that endurance must be a function of quality—or, more controversially, quality must be a function of age.

I suspect it would be dangerous to argue in support of either proposition here tonight. From the details I have provided to you there is also another inference to consider, and this is that the good of universities is not guaranteed by their alliance with industry. To be in partnership with Dreams Bed Manufacturing Company, and to offer courses in “bed sales management” is no assurance of an institutional future—no more than it is a guarantee of the future of the students enrolled in such a course of study.

“The Deserted University” is my theme tonight, and through this anecdote of Bucks New University I have been inviting you to speculate on what it might mean to us as citizens of Ontario, of Canada, of the world—and simply as human beings—to contemplate the demise of the university as an institution, as well as the potential causes of that demise. I was recently at a conference in England in which a fellow panelist, talking about the new world of globalized higher education, suggested that we are presently caught up in a process of societal and institutional change comparable to the industrial revolution, and while I thought at the time this was an exaggerated claim, I am now not so sure.

Claims for the influence upon us of the digital revolution, for example, have sometimes been extreme and unpersuasive; but the thoughtful interventions of some scholars, such as Cathy N. Davidson and David Theo Goldberg in their book *The Future of Thinking: Learning Institutions in a Digital Age*, do leave one feeling that the comparison

with the industrial revolution is not so far-fetched. Everyone here will know that the vision of a wholly-digitized future in higher education continues to exert influence both within and without our institutions, especially at times of financial difficulty. While in practice most universities have come to recognize that to do on-line education properly might (in the short-term at least) be more expensive than “conventional” formats, the examples of Athabasca University and the University of Phoenix nevertheless seem to linger in the collective mind as a kind of alternate universe of higher education—utopia for some, dystopia for others.

A deserted campus is the visual emblem of that dystopian view: a place of learning hollowed of its humanity and of its engagement with the physical world—indeed with the whole notion of physicality—and indifferent to the value of society as a coming-together in one place for the purpose of nurturing community. In the early years of the industrial revolution social critics made use of the deserted *village* as a similar icon for the dehumanizing effects of commerce and technological change.

The English poet Oliver Goldsmith, for example, in 1770 wrote a famous poem of that name, lamenting humanity’s alienation from the physical world and from community: “...times are altered; trade’s unfeeling train/ Usurp the land and dispossess the swain.”

You are certainly fortunate that I did not try to write a poem for tonight—an elegiac lament for the dispossessed swains and maids (the students) of the digital university. But I have borrowed and adapted Goldsmith’s title for my own purpose, and I want to ask you to meditate on an extreme and apparently dystopic scenario, in order to help us redefine a future for our universities that is focused more squarely on what matters to our humanity and what will most effectively benefit our society.

Even if it is unlikely that our own institutions here in Ontario will ever be wholly supplanted by the digital revolution or so dehumanized by an industrialized model of education that our empty campuses are rented out as film sets, let us recognize that we face a real threat to our existence—one perhaps not yet recognized as such. And perhaps it is a

threat that is in the first place irresistible, and in the second place paradoxically to be welcomed. What doesn't kill us makes us stronger, as first Friedrich Nietzsche and more recently Kelly Clarkson have suggested.

When MIT announced ten years ago that all of its undergraduate and graduate course materials would be published free and online, we entered a new age in higher education. Last December came the announcement of *MITx*, which would build on the earlier OpenCourseWare initiative “through an online interactive learning platform that will:

- Organize and present material to enable students to learn at their own pace
- Feature interactivity, online laboratories and student-to-student communication
- Allow for individual assessment of any student's work and allow students who demonstrate their mastery of subjects to earn a certificate of completion awarded by *MITx*
- Operate on an open-source, scalable software infrastructure in order to make it continuously improving and readily available to other education institutions.”

As if this weren't ambitious enough, MIT also declared that it expected “*MITx* will eventually host a virtual community of millions of learners around the world.” [*MITnews* December 19, 2011]

The progression from making course materials freely available to embedding those materials in an “online interactive learning platform” usable by anyone was no doubt inevitable. No sooner had MIT made its initial announcement in 2001 than Carnegie Mellon University secured \$4 million from the Hewlett Foundation to initiate the community college project “which will enable 50 to 100 classrooms to use Carnegie Mellon's OLI [Open Learning Initiative] courseware, which keeps tabs on what concepts students are grasping in their online work and lets professors tailor their lectures to help students in areas where they struggle” [*eCampus News* 16 September 2009]. As a spokesperson noted at the time—and clearly making reference to the initial MIT

announcement—“Instruction involves a lot more than just having the material. Anyone who has ever taken a class can tell you that.”

The shift from OpenCourseWare to *MITx*, or to the Carnegie Mellon Open Learning Initiative, is a shift from the web as a substitute for the library (providing information) to the web as a substitute for the classroom (instructing). As Jared L. Cohon, President of Carnegie Mellon, recently declared, this movement is a “game changer.” And one can list a host of initiatives of a similar sort: OpenLearn LearningSpace, an open content delivery method developed by the Open University in the UK; Open Yale courses; Rice University *conneXions*, and so on.

With many of the strongest institutions in the world engaged in this project—not just making their course content available, but devising ways electronically to instruct—the game of higher education has indeed been changed irrevocably. For many of these institutions, the motive for moving in this direction is entirely admirable. The Hewlett Foundation, which has funded almost all of these projects at one time or another, has done so in order to “Equalize access to knowledge for teachers and students around the globe through Open Educational Resources” [Stacey 4]. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation targeted open courseware as part of a massive investment in global development and global health [Stacey 5].

The forces of good are, in short, mustered behind the open learning initiative, as are those of economic pragmatism and political expedience. On December 5 last year, the President of Carnegie Mellon and the Presidents of several of the largest public US universities met with President Barack Obama and Secretary of Education Anne Duncan to discuss a question which must also be addressed by our government here in Ontario right now: “how to reduce costs and improve the productivity of . . . higher education.” [Cohon1]

The Open Learning Initiative will inevitably seem a promising answer to that question, but here is where I must bring you back to the image of the deserted campus, and offer some thoughts on the cost of going this route. I believe without reservation that what was begun at MIT ten years ago is—and will be increasingly—an enormous and transformational (if overdue) contribution by the developed to the

developing world. So long as the established universities of Europe and North America commit themselves to the sharing of knowledge, rather than the selling of their degree brands, we can be optimistic about the results of this process.

What is especially interesting, in fact, is that the Open Learning Initiative has so far appeared to pursue the transmission of knowledge and cultivation of learning for its own sake and apparently separately from the normal economy that obtains in the systems of higher education from which it has emerged. That economy one might describe this way: in Europe and North America, students seek knowledge and understanding, the successful acquisition of which is symbolized by receipt of a degree, conferred upon payment of certain fees, either directly by the student or indirectly by the taxpayer. In contrast, it is made clear that the Open Learning Initiative “does not grant credit, certificates, or validation of course completion for any course” [“Frequently Asked Questions” 5]—although its “academic” materials may be used in an institution which does do so. But “Open and Free” courses are aimed primarily at individual learners, and lend themselves to entirely unstructured and un-institutional use: courses have no set start or end dates and there is no need to enroll or pay fees. This is education offered by first-rank institutions entirely outside of an institutional context. The goal of *MITx*, for example, is to “advance education around the world by publishing MIT courses as a public good for the benefit of all.” [Stacey6]

In countries where access to institutions of higher learning is limited or non-existent, the benefits of the Open Learning Initiative will be obvious. Here at home, on the other hand, where our institutions are numerous, generally adequate to demand, and firmly enmeshed in the economy of fee-paying and degree-granting, the availability of first-class interactive courses from the Ivy League will inevitably lead to complications.

Let me summarize the effect in a simple question: in twenty or thirty years what, apart from our legislated degree-granting power and our society’s veneration of the degree as a prerequisite for success and advancement, will convince students that their studies are better pursued on our campuses, rather than in front of a monitor at home or

on the job? What, in other words, will prevent our campuses from falling into obsolescence, as technology and the far-sightedness of a few educators today have the effect of bringing all students into the benefits of an ivy league learning experience—even if not into possession of an ivy league degree!

Perhaps we can console ourselves with the thought that possession of a degree is all-important to our students, will continue to be so, and so long as governments defend our degree-granting monopoly, our campuses will swarm with swains and maids eager for both illumination and eventual reward. But that is surely a very tenuous consolation. If there is any lesson to be learned from the digital revolution it is that all monopolies must eventually yield to the democratizing power of the network, and that unless there is something on offer on our campuses that surpasses whatever is available from *MITx* and its successors, those campuses will become steadily depopulated. And as the locus of learning shifts to the virtual university, we will be looking for people to film medieval romances amongst our piles of collegiate gothic fantasy.

I warned you I would be asking you to look squarely at a dystopian prospect. And I also said, you will remember, that some would see the same scene as utopian. Certainly I would agree that the expansion of educational opportunity across the world—and the liberation of learning from the obligation to pay fees and to be constrained by institutional rules and requirements—is admirable. And in that respect the scenario I have imagined a decade or two down the road is indeed utopian—particularly in comparison with the inescapable inequities of global education today.

When I first described the deserted campus of Bucks New University, however, I suggested it is an image that we will all find disconcerting. If the vision does seem dystopian it is important to ask why this is the case. What do we feel is lost—or will be lost—in the migration of students to the web, in this twenty-first century reprise of the industrial revolution? I mentioned earlier on that in the US the Open Learning Initiative is imagined by some to be a means of reducing costs and increasing productivity, which makes the parallel to industrialization very apposite. But like industrialization, the brave new world promised

by OLI is neither wholly bad or wholly good. In fact, the real threat to our peopled campuses is the quality of what is being made available on-line.

I come to quality now at the end of my talk because it is the crux of what I have to say. The rather bleak future for our universities that I have been asking you to consider is not inevitable, but it is certainly possible. If we assume that we will not always be protected by our degree-granting monopoly, it follows that the future of universities will depend on students *wanting* to be there, in person, physically, as members of a community of learners—not merely the “community of use, research and development” promised by the Open Learning Initiative, but a real human community. And implicit in this observation is an important point: an on-campus experience that lacks those and other related human dimensions will in time come to be indistinguishable from what is on offer on-line—and perhaps even inferior to it, if the intentions of MIT are anything to go by. At that point it will all be over and Presidents will be calling the Location Collective to talk about filming rights on campus.

Let me articulate the critical issue somewhat differently. However appealing and potentially useful the OLI may be in reducing costs and increasing productivity here on North American campuses, it is not in the broader and longer term interests of our society to concede too much to an industrialized model of higher education. Indeed, and particularly at times of financial difficulty, those interests require us to focus our attention on such elements in the campus experience that are not—and likely never will be—part of an on-line learning process. That certainly doesn't mean there is no place in an optimal model of the learning experience for on-line components—indeed, quite the opposite. The point is simply that if universities are to serve the educational needs of their students in anything like a complete way, they must invest heavily in quality *and qualitative enhancements* to learning and to the process of personal growth.

One consequence of the digital revolution is that students' access to information is now infinitely greater than ever before, and it requires far less mediation than ever before. And it is interesting to take note of the fact that this has not meant the death of the library, as some feared.

Instead, while students have visited the virtual library for information in journals and other sources, they have continued to visit the physical place for a very different purpose: it has become the locus for group and collaborative study, and to the credit of librarians, the institutions have been allowed to change to address this qualitative need in the student experience.

I think the library example illustrates very well what has been happening on many of our campuses in the wake of the digital revolution. As electronic media have provided more efficient means to deliver certain key aspects of the educational experience, space has been created for other forms of learning to take place. And what will make the campus experience invaluable and indispensable in the future will be our determination to foster a new, broadened conception of learning in which engagement with human communities, immediate and distant, dialogue and experiential learning are fundamental.

It so happens that these forms of learning provide a useful foil to the differently valuable but potentially “industrializing” opportunities opened by new technology. And they furthermore underscore and support the broader ideals of the Open Learning Initiative as it seeks to democratize access to learning across the world and to foster the health of our global community.

All of which is to say, a deserted campus is indeed a sad thing to see because it symbolizes either the triumph of a technological—technocratic—view of education or the failure of our humanity. Either is reason for elegiac musings along the line of *The Deserted Village*, but fortunately neither is inevitable. Those with the most immediate stake in avoiding the intellectual and human devaluation of the universities are our students—you—and your voices and your passion will ensure their continuance.