

THE HEIST: WHAT DIGITAL PLATFORMS STOLE FROM PROFESSORS AND STUDENTS UNDER THE GUISE OF COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

After two-and-a-half years of teaching college students during the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, we can begin to assess the new teaching-learning environment. This paper explores the impact of Covid-induced digital education on (a) the homogenization of teaching pedagogies across courses, disciplines, and academic programs, (b) the intellectual property rights of teacher-scholars, and (c) student learning. The findings suggest that gross inequalities in knowledge acquisition are solidifying behind the veil of the supposed sophistication of technological bells and whistles. Employers will figure this out soon enough and lobby for government-funded private on-the-job training to augment formal education. Digitized education, moreover, feeds into the broader anti-intellectualism in modern society, the false notion that teachers are somehow out of it and not keeping up with the times. Quite the contrary. Covid demonstrates what happens when teachers are not able to offer young people the skills and knowledge to survive in a competitive economy.

Keywords: Digital Learning, Digital Pedagogy, Covid-19 Teaching-learning Environment

1. INTRODUCTION

After two-and-a-half years of teaching college students during the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, we can begin to assess the new teaching-learning environment.¹ To be frank, pre-existing problems in higher education have been exacerbated. Educational sorting has become more acute. Competition for dollars, students, prestige, and patronage has created perverse incentives. Universities spend less on academics and more on surveillance, online software, and Zoom carts. Faculty have simplified course content to fit prescribed third-party digital platforms. Standardized test scores continue to fall. Students are learning less, to no fault of their own or their teachers.

¹ Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, I volunteered to teach students full-time, live, and in-person. This was made possible thanks to our college president, a foresighted executive who skillfully implemented both standard C-19 protocols and novel engineering virus testing systems to enable students to safely remain on our 1,200-acre campus. Covered with PPE equipment, I taught in an auditorium, with fresh bipolar ionized air circulation, adequate spacing between students, and a slightly elevated stage from which to teach safely and interactively.

Less often acknowledged is the impact of Covid-induced digital education on the intellectual property rights of teacher-scholars. Since March 2020, administrators ushered in a teaching modality that was waiting in the wings: digital, remote, online courses. Throughout the 2010s, Silicon Valley had been pitching their software to college functionaries, funding instructional design centers on campuses, and hosting workshops on the benefits of online courses to (i) routinize teaching operations, (ii) cut demand for full-time professors, and (iii) free up campus space for commercial rentals.

There was little to no resistance from within, despite the empirical literature countervailing Silicon Valley spin. There is no substitute for a master teacher's ability to convey and excite learning F2F in the classroom, which is why elites have always willingly paid the best educators to tutor their children, both on and off campus. Think of the famed Adam Smith, who conducted his seminal field work for *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) while traveling around Europe, tutoring the stepchild of England's future Chancellor of the Exchequer. Two-and-a-half centuries later, top schools in the U.S. continue to offer customized in-person learning for those willing and able to pay.

The white flag was raised on campuses in the Spring of 2020, as one institution after another shrugged its shoulders and announced they had no other choice during mandatory closures other than to offer courses remotely. Silicon Valley swooped in with an updated version of 19th-century correspondence education, which forced teachers to become IT technicians, set up cottage industries and recording studios at home, and give away their cumulative life's work for free.

Digital platforms vacuumed up set activities, lecture notes, carefully-crafted exams, problem sets, models, science lab preps, course notes, practicum assignments, syllabi, and anything else managers required teachers to load onto third-party digital platforms. And universities paid these platforms for the privilege of taking professors' work.

In other words, instead of digital platforms paying universities for their employees' intellectual property, universities paid software firms to steal our work. Quite the heist.

During the C-19 shift, faculty tried to protect their data and intellectual property rights by adding protections in faculty Handbooks, efforts that were largely dismissed by executives. Faculty did not have access to contracts between the university and digital platforms, which would clarify who owns what. My guess is that the digital platforms made out like bandits during the pandemic. Administrators, after all, don't necessarily keep up on the Data Science literature, much of which has been produced by the professoriate itself.

2. IMPACT ON STUDENTS

As teacher-scholars lost the rights to their original creative works and pedagogy became homogenized across courses, disciplines, and academic programs, Covid-induced digital education also impacted students in non-trivial ways.

§Some students now say they do not need to come to class "because it's all online."

§Parents are balking at the price tag for college, knowing courses taught online are not as robust as in-person courses carefully curated, tailored, and monitored by professors.

§Students' learning skills began to slip. It is acceptable for students to do less, which translates into diminished knowledge acquisition.

§Students are opting for more online courses "because it is easier to cheat on tests."

§Learning objectives have regressed to the mean because teachers understand that high-level, rigorous, complex notions are not easily conveyed digitally.

Thus, we see a shift toward the delivery of more basic concepts and away from substantive course content. Higher-order thinking skills are not being developed by students at the same level as in a structured classroom setting facilitated by skillful teachers. Students are getting less from the professoriate, which have been reduced to piece-meal, cottage workers, ultimately paid by the course (Dvorak, 2022).

Even when universities offer in-person courses, students bring sloppy learning habits and lower expectations derived from online courses, thus, diminishing learning in F2F settings. The spillover effects are evident (Locke, 2022).

Of course, there are examples cited of students going "above and beyond expectations" and performing at "high levels" in digital classrooms. Student awards will be conveyed. Teachers expect this. There are always young people who will figure out ways to learn and excel regardless of the setting and socio-economic conditions.

However, this group of students remains in the minority, the top 10 percentile, for whom circumstances do not significantly impact learning. It is not this small group of students who are suffering today. It is the rest of our clientele, the majority, for whom fortune hasn't favored, who come to college without adequate secondary education, who have difficulty with comprehension in the best of times, and who are not disciplined enough to perform well in unstructured learning environments where self-study is required. These are the students who suffer. These are the students we worry about.

3.0 THE CONSEQUENCES

The consequences are unfolding. Teachers feel like laborers, forced to simplify course content. Students feel like consumers, buying course credits and degrees. Learners are becoming less attentive to their mental capabilities and study habits, deprived of the capacity to absorb complex concepts, deconstruct information and come to judgment on their own—the hallmarks of a well-educated mind. Students have been robbed of their ability to learn how to think critically, a skill not readily taught robotically.

And we are only just beginning to see the consequences of the digital platform heist on the intellectual well-being of members of society. Gross inequalities in knowledge acquisition are solidifying behind the veil of the supposed sophistication of technological bells and whistles. Employers will figure this out soon enough and lobby for government-funded private on-the-job training to augment formal education.

More importantly, the push toward digital education during C-19 feeds into the broader anti-intellectualism in modern society, the false notion that teachers are somehow “out of it” and not keeping up with the times. Quite the contrary. Covid demonstrates what happens when teachers are not able to offer young people the skills and knowledge to survive in a competitive economy.

My observations, as a global capitalist, are not veiled in elitist notions of sophistication or civility. I am just concerned that young people are not learning how to think substantively or how to develop adequate comprehension skills to navigate what life will throw at them.

At my university, we are not trying to produce graduates who will cement their membership in the ruling class or the intelligentsia. Rather, we are trying to help students develop the core skills and knowledge necessary to understand the world in which they find themselves. Digital course delivery is working against these aims at the peril of the majority of today’s youth and young adults.

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Unfortunately, this digital heist is happening at the very moment in history when college doors are opened to just about anyone, regardless of whether or not they meet minimum entry requirements. Students now come to college with a range of know-how. This is a pedagogical nightmare for even the most skilled teachers, compounded by instructions to teach digitally.

Hats off to the teachers of today! Many teachers continue to have the internal fortitude to continue in their chosen profession and not abandon the next generation of learners.

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