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Social Work Education in the 21st Century: ~~Educating~~ Training ~~Practitioners~~ Units of Practice for ~~the Caring Profession~~ Technique Implementation

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A Glistening Future: Distance Education and the Promise of Pedagogical Reform
        I was an innovator in online education. The promises for pedagogical reform combined with opportunities for the democratization of knowledge were, in my estimation, the most astounding promises of the 21st century. I welcomed the opportunities to transform lecture-based classes delimited by time and space to ubiquitous multi-sensory experiences where learning moments were not fractured by the ringing of a bell or where teaching no longer depended on my ability to *tell* students what I wanted them to know. I yearned for an opportunity to *show* them, to let them experience information through all of their senses. I saw online education as a way to accomplish this and I set about designing courses with graphic artists to use metaphor, symbols, colors, images, and multimedia presentations to allow students to have a deep experience *of* and *with* the information and through this experience to create their own new meanings.
        I embraced distance education because I saw it as a lifeline to struggling students in remote and struggling communities who did not have the financial resources to leave their homes and travel often up to 8 hours to come to the university. Many students in Montana worked on reservations in Indian Health Services, and in rural drug and alcohol treatment centers. They staffed suicide and domestic violence crisis lines, child and family service agencies and child protective services. Sometime these professionals were the only lifelines communities had to mental health. Planting them 8 hours away, at a desk, in a class room to listen to me lecture felt like an irresponsible waste of their time, expertise and talent. And it felt like playing Russian roulette with the lives of those who depended on them.
        As an innovator I developed an online social work program to bridge geography and pedagogy. By offering classes to students in rural Montana we embedded the university, and all of its resources, in their communities to create a community-relevant problem-solving mechanism adapted to the local context that enhanced the content of our classrooms and improved the lives of those who depended on the solutions. For example through discussion forums practitioners returning for their MSW could bring real-world problems, problems they often struggled with in isolation, to the class to be assisted by a whole team of problem-solvers. Without blinking faculty from various disciplines and experts from around the country were invited to class virtually to be a part of the discussion, working with us toward a solution. Technology made academic silos obsolete and allowed us to easily bridge impediments like time and space. Almost instantaneously students could find answers to their questions, apply those answers in practice and bring the outcomes back to class for more discussion and refinement to be tried again. This expanded the direction of knowledge sharing. Now it included sharing between faculty and students, students with each other, students to mental health consumers, other scholars, experts or practitioners to students. Everyone benefitted and we, as a profession, inched closer to our social justice mission.
        Distance education also promised to democratize knowledge. The advent of MOOCs (Massive Open Enrollment Online Courses) furthered this mission by removing the necessity of financial privilege required to attend universities like Harvard, MIT, Stanford or Yale. But democratizing education was more than about increasing access. It

meant shifting the center from one that privileged a brick and mortar institution to one that privileged student learning. In the spirit of justice and inclusion, I eagerly participated in shifting the center of educational discourse from buildings, classrooms and schedules to hold uninterrupted focus on the deep intimacy between students and knowledge. And the new perspective awed me. I will never forget my first online class when I actually bore witness to my students' thinking. I had been used to years and years of reading facial expressions trying to gauge the rhythm and cadence and nuance of my lectures. Now for the first time, I heard not just the timid questions or tenacious skepticism of students bold enough to raise their hands, but I witnessed their ability to think through, to reason with and to explore complicated facets of practice-related problems as they laid their thoughts, questions, doubts, anxieties bare in a much visited discussion forum. Now I was not just reading their faces—I was reading their minds and their souls.

I was patient with my colleagues when they insisted that we could not teach students we had not laid eyes on and I invited them to see what I saw. As an online teacher I could invite anyone into my classroom to look around, to experience the class and then to emulate or improve the experience. Online meant that my colleagues and I could, for the first time, not just have discussions about how to teach or observe each other in the front of the classroom, we could focus instead on how students learn and actually visit each others' semesters and experience the learning trajectory our colleagues had created.

While I was celebrating the pedagogical renaissance distance education would bring to higher education others were celebrating it as a way to meet the financial imperatives caused by increased operating expenses and cutbacks in state funding. The vision I held was quickly being overshadowed by a vision of distance education as a profit-making endeavor. The glorious pedagogical transformation I saw was quickly usurped by a ""business-model" of higher education, [which] subject[ed] learning to marketing practices, bottom-line return on investment, and capital accumulation, without regard to the demands of learning and scholarship" (Sweezy, Magdoff, McChesney, & Foster, 2002:1). The goals of this vision, similar to those established in managed health care, were to "make money, cut costs, and further reduce the need for full-time professors," (Washburn, 2005:219). *This* celebration, not mine, was the real game changer for higher education. It is potentially the real game changer for 21st century education.

While the corporatization of higher education, as Derek Bok tells us, began with profits envisioned from college sports teams, (profits all but a few schools ever realized) distance education added to a growing trend of blurring the lines between academia and commerce through the corporatization of higher education (2003:99 Kindle edition). Education could actually realize profit through mass produced courses and degrees. For-profit colleges like Walden and Phoenix with their engorged online student enrollments, catastrophic attrition rates and exorbitant tuition that left far too many students in debt and no closer to academic credentials, were proof. Initially seen as a scourge and exposed as little more than diploma mills they would later be extolled by leading educators like Robert Zemsky and Walter Massy as the salvation for public institutions who were encouraged to emulate their operating model (in Washburn, 2005:220). The call for state and private institutions to adopt a for-profit model as Jennifer Washburn argues, not only

changes the structure of modern universities, ultimately making bricks and mortar and full time faculty unnecessary, but changes the mission of higher education as well.

> The University of Phoenix has no faculty governance and no tenure; it pays "facilitators" $950 to teach a college-level course ($1,050 if the facilitator has a PhD). Its founder, John Sperling, once famously remarked that the University of Phoenix "is a corporation, not a social entity. Coming here is not a rite of passage. We are not trying to develop. . . [students'] value systems or go in for that 'expand their minds' bullshit," (Washburn, 2005:457 kindle edition)

In 2003 Derek Bok, former president of Harvard, wondered "whether universities can best exploit these glittering opportunities by organizing their own on-line education on a profit-making basis," (2003:93 Kindle edition). He did not have to wait long for his answer. The next decade would see a proliferation of online programs, colleges and degrees and a proliferation of partnerships between nonprofit institutions and for-profit ventures like UNext, U2, Embanet and Pearson[i]. These companies supported universities' quests to turn distance programs into profit making machines that could mass produce courses for a profit and procure a steady stream of students eager to access higher education. Profit was realized as Bok predicted by building,

> "as large an audience as one can while keeping the incremental cost of each additional student as low as possible. In other words, use interesting and appealing lecturers, add attractive visuals, but give as little feedback and personal attention as one can get away with, since these services will entail further costs that will reduce, if not eliminate, any profit gained from enrolling additional students," (Bok, 2003: 96, Kindle edition).

It did not take long for small struggling private schools like Southern New Hampshire University to make Bok's vision a reality by emulating the for-profits through the concept of "disruptive innovation," articulated by Harvard business school professor Clayton Christianson, (who at the time also chaired SNHU's Board of Directors). By applying an aggressive for-profit management model to their university and by partnering with the for-profit Edadventure, Southern New Hampshire University has seen enormous growth in enrollments and profits. The Chronicle of Higher Education reported that in 2007 SNHU enrolled 1,700 online students. By 2011 they had 7,000. In 2014 they had 30,000. With just 7,000 students the school realized "$73-million in revenues … and [projected] more than $100-million next year… to post a 41-percent "profit" margin," (Parry, 2011). Revenue forecasts for 2013 were in excess of $200 million Henchinger:2013).

Disruptive technology works, Christianson tells us, when managers "set up an autonomous organization charged with building a new and independent business around the disruptive technology" (*in* Parry, 2011). Paul LeBlanc, president and "CEO" of Southern New Hampshire University, has done just this. Established in a mill several miles from the campus, SNHU's College of Online and Continuing Education is staffed by "innovators" lured from the for-profit sector like Kaplan, Phoenix and the for-profit higher-education unit of Washington Post. The setting as well as the activity in this

operation bears little resemblance to a traditional college. Courses and specializations within degrees are selected and developed in response to market demand. These courses are designed by itinerant "course authors," after which they are mass-produced and taught by poorly paid adjunct instructors. "Enrollment specialists" doggedly pursue "leads" generated from aggressive advertising and marketing efforts. In 2013 SNHU reportedly spent over $20 million dollars on television ads alone, (Hechinger, 2013). These television ads sell the American dream while they educate potential "customers" about what an education can and *should* be like. You *can* go to school, work full time, raise a family, care for your aging parents, and get a quality online education that will land you firmly in the middle class. At SNHU "program managers" ensure good "customer service" through "retention specialists" who regularly contact students to monitor their progress while they also monitor faculty response rates. Faculty who fail to respond in a particular time (24 hours for emails and 72 hours for graded work) may find they are not asked to teach again[ii].

Failed Vision

It is important to ask what is being disrupted so boldly and proudly by non-profit schools nation-wide who adopt a for-profit model for their online programs? How is this disruption impacting higher education and what does this matter to social work? What do graduates of social work programs who adopt the Phoenix model look like, what do they know or more importantly what will they *not* know?

Historians of technology like David Noble, suggest that we are deskilling and disassembling the profession when we intentionally transform "the educational process into commodity form, for the purpose of commercial transaction*"* (Noble, 2002:3). Through these relations of production he tells us,

> teachers become commodity producers and deliverers, subject to the familiar regime of commodity production in any other industry, and students become consumers of yet more commodities. The relationship between teacher and student is thus reestablished, in an alienated mode, through the medium of the market, and the buying and selling of commodities takes on the appearance of education. But it is, in reality, only a shadow of education, an assemblage of pieces without the whole (2002:3).

Far from being new, Noble reminds us, the process of breaking tasks into components to be assigned to line workers (course developer, adjunct instructor, enrollment manager, retention specialist) is a process witnessed by Adam Smith at the dawn of the industrial revolution and perfected by Fredrick Taylor in his quest for industrial efficiency (Noble, 2002:6). This is not innovation. This is the reproduction of an exploitative industrial model applied to a new frontier, education, and on a scale education has not before witnessed. So what is at stake is not just the *quality* of education but the very *nature* of education itself and the nature and definition of an educated person and a skilled practitioner.

Quality education, as we have traditionally defined it, is labor intensive, contingent on process-based content, and on an intense relationship between teacher, students and the material (Noble, 2002:3). It is an intentionally evocative, fluid, individualized, self-correcting, evolutionary process that we share and experience with our students. The way

I taught courses 10 years ago does not resemble the way I teach today because the state of knowledge has changed, my knowledge about a topic has changed and I have been changed through my teaching. This evolutionary process cannot be effected through a mass-produced assembly line where courses are "refreshed" and "managed" by the corporation or through a process that intentionally separates the creation of content from its delivery or selects content based on market opportunities alone. Nor can our classes, through which we prepare the next generation of practitioners, be reduced to a series of replicated culturally and situationally decontextualized skill-based techniques.

In social work what we teach and how we organize the vast array of information about a subject is contingent on expertise that originates from our own unique practice experiences and the way we synthesize and deliver that knowledge. The fact is, I think about and teach research and practice different from my colleagues. My knowledge, the way I deliver that knowledge or the relationship through which that knowledge is conveyed is not interchangeable with anyone else. Nor can my experience and thinking be reified and reduced to a syllabus, course assignments, and learning outcomes any more than it can be mass-produced and handed to innumerable instructors for implementation under the guise of teaching. Yet when driven by a for-profit model, we *are* passing off the components of a course as an education and insisting that the process, critical thought, expertise, and lens through which content was synthesized is as irrelevant as who delivers it.

While we are deskilling the profession we are also conflating education for training and selling the latter as the former. This is especially damaging in a profession like social work, which is based on the primacy of human relationships and on our ability to critically co-create and integrate an empathic understanding of others into our subjective experience filtered through and integrated with topic knowledge. We are the tools we bring to bear on human pain and social change through the creation of ourselves as educated people and the co-creation of a change-producing relationship. This process is first learned in the classroom and later emulated in practice.

Within our classes the relationship we have with students through content lays the foundation for all subsequent relations through rituals-of-becoming that we provide space for and individually tailor each semester. We intentionally create a transformative parallel process, demonstrate our own ability to transform with our students and ask them to allow themselves to be changed with and through the relationship. Mass-produced curriculum premised on uniformity and standardization abrogates this critical piece of learning and eclipses the isomorphic process inherent in social work practice. What about interacting with a client will students learn from an instructor who teaches from a script? How can learning needs, situational differences and different levels of expertise be accommodated and used to enrich the learning process in a canned course? What happens to social workers whose ability to handle complexity and think critically about problems is eclipsed by a curriculum premised on homogeneity? There are no scripts in human relationships, no road maps and often little order. Certainly there is no predictable uniformity in social work practice.

While I have argued with my colleagues for years that any subject can be taught on line and students will receive as good as or a better quality education than in a face-to-face setting, (and I stand by that assertion), the argument has shifted. Commodity formation necessarily shifts the focus from the educational experience and educational

purpose of our universities and classes to a simple quest for profit. We are no longer talking about *quality education*. We are talking about mass-producing content guided by the market imperative that innovation, human interaction, and variation reduces profit. At best we might be talking about online skill training resulting in a two-tied education system in which the "haves" will opt for a quality education on campus while the "have nots" will be trained online while they work full time, raise their children and care for ailing parents—and slide further into debt.

This is not the 19ᵗʰ century craftsmen's lament about the inferiority of mass-produced items. Because even after industrialization made mass-produced household goods widely available, high quality handcrafted items were still available to those with money. What is at stake is also far greater than whether the professorate should or will continue. This is a frank call to our profession to carefully examine the ways in which our identity as educators, social work practitioners and advocates is changing through mass-produced programs, most of which are online, that intentionally replicate a for-profit model. This is a social justice issue.

This year there will be at least 36 online social work programs in the United States. An unknown number of these programs will adopt a for-profit model when developing their programs. They will seek to enroll hundreds if not thousands of students recruited by enrollment specialists buoyed by aggressive marketing strategies. Some of these programs will "market" quality with analytics that can quantify the number of times an instructor responded to a student via email, how fast an instructor returned work to a student, how many words an instructor wrote on a discussion post or weekly customer satisfaction ratings. But these measures do not signify quality any more than they tell us whether or not participants emerged with an education or even a skill.

Within higher education it is not just our vernacular that is changing. Our ability to decide who we are and who we will become is changing. A whole new capitalist vernacular will not only become more and more common-place but will be weaponized and aimed at traditional programs as uniquely inferior precisely because they are not *profit* making—as though that is the new standard against which we will measure our worth. But market logic is no substitution for an educational philosophy and training is no substitution for education. Market forecasts cannot replace a university mission and innovation driven by the market alone will produce degree-bearing units—but not educated people. "As Lynne Rudder Baker, a philosophy professor at the University of Massachusetts, cautioned, "The point at which we look to nothing but demand to determine what a university should offer is the point at which the market becomes the enemy of excellence,""" (in Washburn, 2005:174 Kindle edition).

Distance education held promises for revolutionizing higher education pedagogy and delivery. It held real promises for democratizing knowledge and access. It is time that we demand these promises be fulfilled. Perhaps reclaiming the revolution means that we must educate students about what they have a *right* to expect from educational institutions and educate society about what they have a *right* to expect from our profession. We need citizens capable of solving complex world problems. We need social workers capable of critically thinking our way to solutions and practitioners capable of forming the kinds of transformative relationships upon which our profession rests; relationships that they learn first from and through us. This is what is lost through mass production. Without this formative educational experience –effected through any

teaching modality-- we are simply training customers to enact techniques and social work as we know it will cease to exist.

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i I want to note that these companies may have been the gun so to speak. But it was academic institutions that sought the partnerships and designed the relationship parameters, including setting the profit margins, that constituted pulling the trigger. And in the act of pulling the trigger, *we* as academic institutions, altered the very definition of education as an entity that exists to serve a larger good and to provide the best possible education to students. As Derek Bok suggests, "Commercialization threatens this educational principle, because the profit motive shifts the focus from providing the best learning experience that available resources allow toward raising prices and cutting costs as much as possible without losing customers," (2003:108, Kindle Edition). One critical question for the future is, can we shift our focus back to educational quality and maintain academic integrity while creating solvent programs in financially stable institutions? Can we incorporate some of the positive student support and recruitment strategies that these companies have provided? This is a matter of swinging pendulums or models we have yet to fully develop.

ii Kevin Carey in The Chronicle of Higher Education points out that "for-profit higher education is [not] inherently bad. The reputable parts of the industry are at the forefront of much technological and organizational innovation. For-profits exist in large part to fix educational market failures left by traditional institutions, and they profit by serving students that public and private nonprofit institutions too often ignore "(2010). I believe the question remains can we potentially adopt the technological and organizational innovation developed in the for-profit sector and integrate it into what is best about non-mass produced higher education? Paul LeBlanc's model has worked, in part, by creating a completely separate college—one from which traditional faculty in the on campus university have been excluded. In other words it is "siloed" and reproduces with fidelity 20th century industry. What could happen if the vast expertise in content, pedagogy and infinite variability in delivery married innovations in organization and technology? I'm not sure we know. But I would certainly love to try.