

Do You Want Ketchup With Your Degree?

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Do You Want Ketchup With Your Degree, Or Can You Beat McEducation?

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A short editorial published by *Education Today* in early October of 2002 started a debate that is not settled to this time. Moreover, in many regards it becomes sharper as distance learning evolves. The argument is between two principally different approaches to learning. On one side are advocates of developing standardized courses that can be delivered easily and cheaply by any educator, in any environment, to any student body. In other words, these are advocates of commoditization of education. They are opposed by proponents of education that is highly specific to both educator's background and students' needs. This education can promptly incorporate and respond to newest scientific achievements and challenges. Sir John Daniel, at the time UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Education and the author of the editorial, was the first to coherently articulate the former position that can be reduced to the following ideas:

- *Commoditization ... is a key process for bringing prosperity to ordinary people... Commoditization of learning material [is] a way to bring education to all.*
- *Secret [to success] is to offer a limited range of dishes as commodities that have the same look, taste and quality everywhere.*
- *Commoditizing education need not mean commercializing education. The educational community should adopt the model of the open source software*

movement. We can imagine a future in which teachers and institutions make their courseware and learning materials freely available on the web. Anyone else can translate and adapt them for local use provided they make their new version freely available too.

- *When products become commodities there is fierce price competition between manufacturers and profit margins are squeezed. Producers hate this and industries often have to restructure, but consumers benefit greatly.*

Concisely written in a lively language with comparisons drawn between McDonald's restaurants and educational institutions, this article apparently touched a raw nerve of educational community around the world. Many of the educators criticized Sir John Daniel for "consumeristic" approach to education, where process of learning does not differ from the process of purchasing food. This approach is characterized by very narrow vision of the educational process that sees learning in the first place as the consequence of the provision of data and materials. (See, for example, response by Jan Visser, President, Learning Development Institute, and Member of the International Board of Standards for Training, Performance and Instruction -- <http://www.learndev.org/dl/SenseNonsenseMcDo.pdf>). Others criticized implicit one-size-fits-all approach; "the assumption that there are people who can think and people who can, at most, apply or adapt what "thinkers" come up with". (See an excellent compilation at <http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/mceducationforall.htm>).

Interestingly (but not surprisingly), all the protestations did not do much good. Established institutions expand their distance learning programs with only intermittent success. Commoditization remains one of the main concerns among educators as a number of newcomers to the educational field offering any and all degrees unbelievably fast, conspicuously easy and really cheap grows year over year. And Sir John Daniel continues his labors as a President and CEO of the *Commonwealth of Learning* – a Canada-based “intergovernmental organisation that was created by Commonwealth Heads of Government to encourage the development and sharing of open learning and distance education knowledge, resources and technologies” (see <http://www.col.org/jdaniel.htm>).

The question, therefore, arises - is McEducation really the only alternative? Perhaps, in terms of the restaurant analogy, there is a place and opportunity for both McDonald's of education, *and* other eating places, with better, more specialized cuisine. Cheap, fast, bland education might indeed be a solution when that is what you need, or, at least, what you are ready to accept. Specialized, advanced knowledge education cannot be duplicated easily, if at all. It requires educators to be professionals in two fields simultaneously: their academic field and education, and be active in current research. These are the characteristics of educational institutions that sometimes “lost in translation”. Cutting edge knowledge can manifest itself only if instructor uses his or her personal research and experience. This is something not available in a generic textbook and video.

You cannot beat McDonald's at its game, but is it your game? Your students will much rather appreciate unique specialized knowledge you can share with them. This is

your institution's trademark strength. Translate this traditional strength into the language and tools of distance learning. Our experience working with educational institutions and corporate training departments alike shows maximum enrollment, highest retention rate and highest student satisfaction in courses that use courseware prepared by educators based on their own research and experience. This courseware might include printed materials, audio on CDs, as well as video presentations on DVDs. Two latter formats (audio and video) can be also accessed as streaming audio and video served by a web server. These materials obviously must reflect the current state of science. Textbooks student purchase in a book store reflect data and methodology that are at least two -- three years old, in most cases more than that. Generally available educational video is often ten or more years old. Today it is unacceptable. Current technology does not require you to produce courseware by thousands copies and use it over the period of several years with few, if any changes. Both printed materials, and audio / video can and should be updated by educators to each course and produced on-demand. They will provide students today's data and methodology at an angle that is specific to your course and student body.

Technology allows you to take competition out of realm of commoditization ("who can provide me with the cheapest degree") into the realm of value ("what education is most valuable for me"). Experience shows that this is not the field where McEducators want to compete.

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About the author:

Dr. Alex Heiphetz received Ph.D. in Geophysics from the University of Pittsburgh in 1994. After working for a consulting company, in 1997 founded his own software and consulting company AHG, Inc. specializing in document management solutions. In 2003 the company opened *Delta L Printing* facility to utilize AHG's experience in electronic document management and ordering, on-demand printing and digital media production. Dr. Heiphetz can be reached by e-mail alex.heiphetz@deltaLprinting.com or by phone (814)234-0900.