# E-Learning in the New University
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*The University has been changing, only slowly. The advent of the Internet not only makes these changes visible, but, in many ways is forcing the change in both form and content. And, in many ways, the willingness of the academic to play the public intellectual has hastened this transformation. What happens when the academic must abandon the Ivory Tower for the global agora?*

## Introduction
*...the authority of church and state, community and family has been largely replaced by the academic, profoundly altering the nature of knowledge and its impact on society -* Shipman and Shipman

A physician's armamentarium is assembled so that the right tool, nostrum or ointment can be accessed to meet a specific health need. As science advanced and our understanding of human health expanded, this "black bag" has seen its contents evolve as practices and practitioners change. The Academy's tools-of-the-trade have changed very little until the recent, and precipitous, introduction of computers and the Internet. Large lecture halls have been uncovered in ancient Egypt; and traditional brick-space campuses, the familiar ivy covered halls, have changed more in architectural style than in functional form.

The British philosopher, Michael Oakeshott[1], did not accept the idea that "The University" was a place, though there could be an assembly of scholars. He would be concerned at any attempt to saddle "The University" with a purpose such as training for a professional practice. He says, *A university is not a machine for achieving a particular purpose or producing a particular result; it is a manner of human activity*. And there are still many who either believe in or hope for the University of Newman, Kant and von Humboldt, a community seeking truth and inviting in those who would wish to also pursue such truths, regardless of what the world of commerce might be involved in.

Yet the University has changed, in part because it accepted "The King's Shilling" in the form of public support, where the public, then, sought a return for its investment, persons with employable skills and other valuable returns. It accepted funds for research, which demanded more than esoteric scholarly musing in the academic literature. And, it created the social study arena and modeled it after the physical sciences; thus, claiming the bully pulpit as social arbiter. Fundamental changes started occurring in the late 19th

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[1] T. Fuller, *Michael Oakeshott on Education*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut 1989

century and accelerated rapidly during the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century as The Academy opened its doors to a larger and more pragmatic public, one which expected that a university degree assured a certain level of economic well being. In the United States those in the humanities, whose desire was the scholarly pursuit, rose up out of the frustration that The Academy had betrayed their trust; graduates, who had been recruited for advanced degree programs found that there were no opportunities for employment within the University. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, graduate students in economics, in France, even rebelled against their neo-classical oriented faculty, questioning their scholarship and apparent lack of intellectual integrity, hiding behind mathematical obfuscation; thus was launched a new school, Post-Autistic or Heterodox Economics[2].

There is the story about the natives in WWI who fought with very sharp knives. During a battle, one native swung his blade and the enemy jumped back proclaiming that the native had missed. The native said, *Just wait until you try to shake your head*. The Internet is just such a blade aimed clearly at the jugular of Oakeshott's university and one which may have laid to rest the illusion so clearly articulated in Newman's *Idea of a University*. Though, like some rare bird, one might chance upon an isolated example, keeping open the hope.

**What has the Internet Wrought?**

Like Edgar Allen Poe's *Red Death*, the Internet has passed through the walls of the Ivory Tower already crumbling under the challenges of the public-at-large and the internal strife unsettling the academic calm amongst the cloistered. Like the 16<sup>th</sup> century posting by Martin Luther of his 95 theses, we can list some of the impacts of the Internet on the University:

1) <u>Pundits outside the wall having equal or greater voices of authority and demanding equal time on stage</u>. When the University claimed authority, it was able to contain internal conflict in the world of ideas and maintain a strong public intellectual authority. The Internet provides equal access to knowledge to all who seek, including internal dissention on controversial issues such as "Intelligent Design", medical issues, politics and other social controversies. It is here where independent scholars and academic apostates can claim equal time, pare passu, with the Internet as a platform.

2) <u>Open access to cloistered knowledge</u>. Many scholars are posting entire curricula on the Internet; academic journals are moving towards open access and communities of learners and knowledge experts are able to exchange ideas under open view to all who can access the Internet. The scholarly guilds ability to control ideas via peer review are seeing such evaluations opened to the infinitely harsher judgment of a diverse community rather than collegial communities, often with leanings towards a particular school of thought.

3) <u>Brick-space yields to click-space.</u> University libraries are looking more like "Penny Universities", coffeehouses, where a latte and web search replace the arduous tasks of wandering through print volumes in dusty stacks. Students are able, at the click of a mouse, take courses in spots around the world. And, electronic portfolios, which gather both credits and life experiences, can be vetted

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[2] http://www.paecon.net, 20.09.2005

by a number of universities. In fact, diplomas from Universitas 21 carry the seal of a number of credible and even medallion institutions.

4) <u>The Sage is off the Stage</u>. It has been argued that the role of the academic has shifted from "the sage on the stage to the guide on the side". Yet the Internet carries this much further by the elimination or reduction of the traditional role of an academic as a "teacher/mentor" and replacing traditional Ph.D.'s with a host of emerging options from secondary school faculty to practicing professionals – at the undergraduate level, particularly. Though some institutions even use upper level graduate students to instruct lower level students, under the guise of improving instructional skills-problematic at best (see below).

Perhaps one of the larger impacts is the accelerated destruction of the brick-space Ivory Tower and the rise of newer physical institutions while the educational functions are moved into cyberspace. Even "on-campus" students will often go on line rather than rise for an early morning seminar or take a late evening class. Cloistered campuses look like modern subdivisions and research parks.

One must take care; when one discusses change because there is an element of time. Cardinal Newman's volume, *Idea of the University*, was written in the mid 19th century, at the edge of where change was starting to occur; and, as mentioned, major changes also occurred in the mid 20th century. The arrival of the Internet occurred about 1950 with Tim Berners-Lee's World Wide Web announced in 1991; and Mosaic, the first web browser, arrives in 1993. Conversational software, such as bulletin boards, existed prior to the entrance of the web, with their modern versions appearing on the web shortly after Mosaic's arrival. The use of these systems for education stretches back to the late 1960's/70's, again, about the same time changes were occurring. Today these systems are ubiquitous, globally, and their use grows as more academic institutions create virtual campuses to parallel their current brick-space campuses.

Herein lies the rub. Current systems being used by The Academy essentially map brick-space into click-space. They are to the future universities what the horseless carriage is to the automobile, a simulacrum of the past that is mapped into the future. They create a virtual space that is understandable to the current faculty, those whom Marc Presenky[3] labels as digital immigrants. One recalls that most immigrants to a country do not adapt as well to the new world as their children. And the immigrants are often lead by the youths, digital natives, the future. Thus, today, one can visualize a virtual campus, or even visit such an image on the Web, navigate from virtual registrar to a library and then to a classroom; one can get didactic materials, hold synchronous and asynchronous conversations, take tests and get credit.

Such a campus would have Newman and Oakeshott turn over in their graves. What adds insult to injury is that scholarly exchanges, because of the current system for promotion and tenure, has the faculty participating in this simulacrum in the same manner, but expanded across both brick and click space. Both faculty and students are engaged in the popular game of "treasure hunt" where participants have a list of items they need to acquire in order to win a prize. For students, it's a degree and for faculty it's tenure and promotion. The virtual university makes this visible whereas in the past it lay behind the walls of the Ivory Tower.

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[3] http://www.markprensky.com 20.09.2005

What is even more interesting is that, while the media promotes the idea of extra earning potential for college graduates, Snyder[4] has shown that only 30% of college graduates require the knowledge they obtained in college for their employment. And, today, many employers prefer skills gained in alternative institutions or to provide their own equivalence (some corporations are even considering applying to offer university credit, and even accredited diplomas, for their programs). Thus, what was once cloistered is now free in virtual space and the last vestige of university hegemony, the certification, or degree, is in danger. Today, there are universities who will evaluate portfolios of students and award degrees whether or not the student has taken a program at that institution. Intellectual hubris and the desire to enter the public marketplace of ideas have rendered the university vulnerable, at best. In fact, the university, having enjoyed the top of the hill with the Sophists, now has to enter the Agora, the Socratic market place of ideas, and participate, pare passu, with the scholars and lay persons who have practiced the intellectual arts outside of The Academy.

One must remember that the sciences lay outside of The Academy. And in fact, many science searchers eschewed the scholarly community. With the founding of the British Royal Society in the 17th century, bridges started to be built. On the other hand, the social studies arena was quickly assumed by The Academy, where it has enjoyed its position at the public pulpit until recently challenged – with that challenge being even greater with the increasing ubiquity of the Internet.

In an attempt to stabilize the virtual university system, there is a significant pressure to develop "standards" for e-learning, synchronous and asynchronous. This makes as much sense as trying to create aircraft design/safety standards based on the original Wright Flyer. Today, a number of institutions are developing e-learning programs around the cellular telephone, having abandoned, sequentially, desk top computers, laptops, tablet systems, and Personal Digital Assistants. The cellular phone represents the, as yet, unborn, universal communicator with all its portability, storage, and communications capabilities. With such capabilities available today, in its early stages, the scholar has been released from the prison she created. Yet, even here, one sees a vague and disorganized attempt to rebuild some semblance of an Ivory Tower, a walled community in virtual space.

The political philosopher, John Gray, believes that there is something inherent in human nature that needs to have faith[5]. At one time this faith was placed in religion as the vehicle for creating "peace on earth". This faith was transferred to the political domain only to see both Marxism and Democratic Capitalism fail, in present time. The current focus is on science and technology that has been able to clearly demonstrate progress. Where the university fell into the trap was to place the mantle of science on the social studies arena in order to present the idea of progress. There is a certain hubris here, since the social studies arena has not been able to demonstrate progress in secular society[6].

If the academics had remained sequestered in their Tower and not opened the gates to the public in a bid for the bully pulpit, The Academy might have retained its position of intellectual privilege. That scientific mantle on the shoulders of the social studies arena, much like the adoption of mathematics by economists, was the equivalent

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[4] D. P. Snyder, *From Higher Education to Longer*, Fuller Further Education, On the Horizon, in press
[5] J. Gray, *Heresies*, Granta Books, London, 2005
[6] Y. Levin, *Tyranny of Reason*, University Press of America, Lanham, Maryland, 2000

of the efforts of Dukas' Sorcerer's Apprentice to assume his mentor's robes. The World Wide Web, returning knowledge, openly, to the Agora, frees the academic, particularly in the non science arena, from a self created curse, allowing her to return to the Ivory Tower, regain the opportunity to search for truth, but probably, again, become fiscally impoverished.

**The Virtual Agora**

When a computer is manufactured, it comes with some very simple capabilities, sufficient to accept an operating system that allows additional programs to be added in a user friendly manner. As computer technology improves, these systems have more capabilities, often ones that allow the system to be upgraded in a manner transparent to the end user. The metaphor transfers well to humans from birth to the time that they have learned the basics of the world around them.

What computers are not very good at, currently, is dealing with situations that are outside their knowledge domain. But they do know where their domains start and end. Humans are similar, but what humans do not know is exactly what they do know, until it is within a context. Give a person a piece of paper and ask them to write down all they know and they will soon run into a blank wall. Give them a problem or a context and the information seems endless. David Snowden points this out in his knowledge management materials[7] and Robert Persig provides an example in his philosophical novel, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

The virtual Agora is home to digital natives, the youth; and they are equally familiar with the navigational tools from game consoles to MP3 players and cellular phones with instant messaging, cameras and other features accessible through some arcane sequence of button presses or voice commands. Games and simulations not only sharpen their skills at maneuvering through cyber space, but they provide a familiarity with a virtual world where significant learning can take place. This is their world, the context where they are comfortable playing, working and learning[8].

The question of whether this is the best environment is moot. As Rheingold has shown in his volume, *Smart Mobs*[9], and Douglas Rushkoff described[10] in *Playing the Future*, this is a world where present and future citizens find familiarity. Desks in classrooms, even with the best graphics, and virtual space which imitates brick space do not provide the context for the future, regardless of how comfortable digital immigrants, the academics, feel or what "color" they paint the space. Furthermore, like those individuals in the work place, the digital natives learn within context and that arena is virtual and as instantaneous as possible. The idea of learning for a potential future has been exchanged for just-in-time learning. In other words, the quest for knowledge for its own sake, the world of the scholar, the world of Newman and Oakeshott, is for the few and not the larger public that has pragmatic ends in mind.

We see that in today's university where students understand that they need certain "credits" to earn their degree. Just-in-time learning allows today's students to pass courses, collecting credits, and often discarding that knowledge in preparation for

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[7] http://www.cynefin.net 20.09.2005
[8] http://www.markprensky.com 20.09.2005
[9] H. Rheingold, *Smart Mobs*, Basic Books, New York, 2003
[10] D. Rushkoff, *Playing the Future*, Riverhead Trade, New York, 1999

obtaining future credits. The knowledge has an immediate end and is not an end in itself. Faculty, of course, have a similar process in place when they publish articles or perform other functions within the academy in order to meet certain standards for their review for promotion and tenure. Thus, the academy, in many ways, as long as it has a public purpose, will continue to engage in just-in-time knowledge acquisition whether in click or brick space.

While the cell phone becomes the vehicle to participate in the virtual intellectual agora, the current virtual spaces within the academy fall significantly short of the learning environments offered to people today in the world of games and simulations. Much of the literature around the games and simulations arena has been developed by individuals outside of the Ivory Tower; though, more is being done within The Academy. Often it is not the scholarly literature from academic journals that is being cited, but rather materials in professional, non-academic, journals and books that are published by the trade press and which appear in commercial book stores. Thus, the intellectual commons, the Agora, is starting to evolve in cyberspace. The vehicles for such exchange are evolving at the same time[11].

With this ability of individuals, regardless of education, to access such knowledge on demand, the purpose of the public face of a university is changing. In other words, the function of the university in providing pathways for individuals to acquire needed knowledge have been separated from the other functions of a university including the search for "Truth" however defined. That "Truth" quest, though, still sits uncomfortably within the University because of the need for funding, a need that was not as pressing when individuals had the capability of funding their own research.

Never-the-less, the tutor/mentor relationship is changing and thus the forum for such experiences needs to conform to the "new reality". As T.S. Eliot says:

*And the end of all our exploring*
*Will be to arrive where we started*
*And know the place for the first time.*

The world of games and simulations has developed a substantive and highly profitable entertainment industry. Many working in this arena have been reluctant to devote assets to education, which is singularly not as profitable. Currently, there is a growing movement around this area under the rubric of "serious games", a subject of several books and two issues of the academic journal, *On the Horizon*. One significant project that involves both academia and the private sector is the Croquet Project and their product, Open Croquet[12].

What makes this first major attempt at a learning platform of significance is that it is open source down to "bare metal". This would mean that if the platform were left completely open, any participant could change the rules of the entire virtual universe. Deciding how open a learning platform should be is an intellectual challenge for academics themselves. Who will be the grand vizier or intellectual cabal to describe the rules for the existence of The Agora? And therein lies the quandary identified by John Gray. Can a virtual agora be developed? Can a virtual world, the world that humans have

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[11] http://www.emeraldinsight.com/oth.htm 20.09.2005; see issues 12:1 and 13:2 and references therein
[12] http://opencroquet.org 20.09.2005

been seeking, be created in virtual space by the scholars who wax so eloquently about how to solve the problems of the world outside of The Academy? In other words, this first virtual learning environment creates the intellectual challenge that the academics have been studying outside of their cloister and which now they face once they step into this virtual space.

Once the rules of the community are established, will this new Academy provide a hospitable environment for the academic in the search for truth? Will it provide a sufficiently compelling space for attracting future scholars, learners who desire knowledge for other purposes, or the public sector who will believe that this community provides a sufficiently rich and relevant knowledge base that can not be obtained in the larger, global agora?

### References

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