



The Prisoner's Dilemma Revisited and Augmented: The Teacher as The Modern Sisyphus

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ABSTRACT:

The new demands imposed upon the education industry world-wide by “globalization” and “information revolution” are analysed in this paper, centred on the ethical constraints surrounding the teacher, and the challenges facing management. The concept of the modern Sisyphus is presented herewith, to capture the “burn-out” pandemic, the “lagging behind” and the “social-virtual” mobbing pressures, of particular importance for universities. Both push the whole system to a systematic decline in the value of the services delivered, and hence the quality of the human capital absorbed by the students, as proved by a simulation using the classical game theory model of the Prisoner's Dilemma. Professors at the universities will give priority to their own survival, and collude with colleagues in order to escape the constraints imposed from above. This new modus operandi could, in the long term, depreciates the value of the signals given to the market by the education industry.

Keywords: Education Industry, Teacher's Ethical Constraints, Modern Sisyphus, Prisoner's Dilemma, Management Options

1. INTRODUCTION :

The “education industry” is undergoing sizeable changes, altering above all the standardised patterns of the relation teacher-student, teacher-institution, and student-institution. It has become an international industry, particularly at the university level, in the sense that almost every country has a share in it. However, it is also a “globalised” industry, or better, “in the process of being globalised”: There is growing exchange between the nations and aims and methods are becoming more and more homogeneous.

There are, however, persistent “barriers to trade”, especially regarding the acceptance of diplomas and titles, as well as to the “internationalization” of the teaching staff. Furthermore, “world-rankings” of universities have become a powerful signal for the “export revenues” accruing to countries, and for the survival and expansion of institutions. Hence the renewed pressure on management, to improve on the “quality indicators”, which is then transferred to educators and students.

Both now have to respond not only to national requirements, but also increasingly to international ones, which seem to be gaining the upper hand on the quality grading of the human capital being produced in the education industry.

“Globalisation” and “information revolution” go together. The latter probably had a greater impact upon education than in most other sectors. Why? Simply because that industry can, to a large extent, be defined as a “transmitter” of information, in that specific category of “knowledge”. We define “knowledge” as that set of interrelated and verifiable items of information on a specific subject, which allows its possessor a thorough understanding of the issues, and the hence resulting praxis. The impact has many levels, and it has been studied elsewhere (Campbell, McNamara and Gilroy, 2004; Baumert and Kunter, 2006). It suffices to say that it affects both the content, the volume and the availability of the information, as well as the technical tools available to implement that transmission. Perhaps even more relevant, the speed of adjustment has increased, and the rate of increase of its rate of increase keeps increasing. Both regarding the *γνωσος* (*gnosos*) and the *τέχνη* (*techni*), keeping oneself “up-to-date” has become almost a full time *extra*-profession, necessary to keep oneself alive in *the* profession.

A parallel phenomenon is the speed at which the “obsolescence factor” is becoming determinant. Both knowledge, and the technical ways to transmit it, are becoming steadily “transitional” or “provisional”, because the “expiry date” of every textbook or any relevant mechanical instrument becomes shorter and shorter. “Modern estimates place the half-life of an engineering degree at between 2.5 and 5 years, requiring between 10 and 20 hours of study per week” (Parrish, 2017).

The many facets of the change in the traditional paradigms in the education industry, together with the ever-increasing demand for formal education has provoked

new constraints, among them a worldwide trend of “teachers de-professionalization”, which seems to be gaining ground, according to a UNESCO report. “...a number of trends point to a process of de-professionalization of teachers in both the North and the South. These trends include the influx of unqualified teachers, partly in response to teacher shortages, but also for financial reasons; the casualization of teachers through contract-teaching, particularly in higher education; the reduced autonomy of teachers; the erosion of the quality of the teaching profession as a result of standardized testing and high-stake teacher evaluations; the encroachment, within educational institutions, of private management techniques; as well as the growing gap between the remuneration of teachers and professionals in other sectors”(UNESCO, 2013) and that report underlies also “the growing gap between the remuneration of teachers and professionals in other sectors”.

The level of remuneration of teachers now becomes more critical, in a context of worldwide trends towards greater income inequality. A single position in one educational institution may not suffice to maintain a respectable standard of living, or indeed, they have to be active in other lines of business, in order to reach the minimum basic standard of living. This “degree of dispersion” affects, directly, the quality of the product offered by the teacher. Manifestly, the levels of development of the countries, and in particular the average salary in the industry, constitute a massive constraint in the “quality deliverance” of the teacher. The more “multi-task” and “multi-place” it becomes, the lower the quality.

The very spillover effects of the “information revolution”, which allows students, parents and administrators to verify the quality of the “knowledge” provided by the teachers in a few minutes and at no cost, accentuate the constraints under which a “disseminator” of knowledge within an educational institution has to operate. Robotics also possess a threat to the traditional teacher, hence raising the question as to whether his or her own plausibility in the labour market may be at risk.

That teachers nowadays have to face an *in crescendo* amount of new challenges and pressures is no mystery. Furthermore, albeit the traditional vertical hierarchical relationship between teacher and students persists, theoretically, as the main model, it is at least being questioned. More than often, it is being complemented by the new approaches, or it is seriously eroded. From a world where the only thing that did matter were the grades given by a teacher, we are settling in a world where students and parents, as well as school and university administrators, are also entitled to “grade” the lecturer, formally and informally, privately and publicly, and harass them in a more or less elegant manner, “round the clock”. The teacher becomes more and more “naked” and “transparent”, and feels more and more “pushed against the wall”. Thus, the first priority becomes the need to “survive”. „Students, parents, and community members exercise disciplinary power from every angle to make docile, normalize, and control teachers even as they normalize institutions’ disciplining structures themselves to create particular kinds of school cultures, teacher-subject/objects, student-subject/objects, and adult citizen-machines“ (Worley, 2013). It does echo to a large extent the “*Red Queen*” effect: “do nothing and fall behind, or run hard to stay where you are”. The metaphor was concocted by the American biologist Leigh Van Valen, who was inspired by the Red Queen character from Lewis Carroll’s “*Through the Looking Glass*”. Van Valen used the Red Queen as a metaphor for his evolutionary principle that regardless of how well a species adapts to its current environment, it must keep evolving to keep up with its competitors and enemies who are also evolving (Higuera, 2018).

The ethical issues, which have always surrounded the teacher, become in the new context more pressing, more difficult to avoid, and lacking precise and coherent answers (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2010).

Awareness of the new pandemonium permeating the education industry is increasing, as well as fresh management strategies, even tentative and fragmentary, to cope with it. They include a systematic withdrawing, or at least tight control, of the “high-tech” information tools (Beland, Murphy, 2010; Katsova, 2015; Doughty, 2014) as well as a call to re-think the whole approach to education, emphasizing the need for a sustainable education (Vasić, Petrović, 2017). Yet the challenges to managers and supervisors of educational institutions are not only large and varied; they change in their forms and substance at an ever-increasing pace. We concentrate herewith on two syndromes, their effects upon the quality of the educational service delivered, and how managers may attempt to deal with them.

2. DIAGNOSIS I: THE MODERN “SISYPHUS” SYNDROME

Today’s teachers in the globalised education industry have to struggle with the symptoms of “burn-out” pandemic (Rankin, 2016), which may then lead to the impostor syndrome (never good enough) (Clance, Imes, 1978), the “lagging behind” awareness, its accompanying stress, and the pressures accruing from the new types of “social-virtual mobbing” (Friedenberg, 2008).

As student’s evaluation reports become more and more obligatory at the university level, being also used to determine promotion and pay, the university professor may well see its own “psychological capital” being eroded. Thus making it even more difficult for the teacher to enhance the “psychological capital” of its own student. “Psychological capital has created a new way to approach and to understand the emerging problems associated with managing the human resources in an organization. Psychological capital is defined as a higher-order construct and it is composed of Self-Efficacy (having confidence), Hope (preserving and redirecting towards goals),

Optimism (positive attribution), and Resiliency (bouncing back from setbacks)” (Luthans, Youssef & Avolio, 2007). “People with higher levels of psychological capital exhibited higher performance in their jobs, generate multiple solutions to the problems, have positive expectations about results and respond positively to setbacks” (Baskaran, Rajarathinam, 2017).

We define the preceding phenomenon as that of a modern Σίσυφος, the modern “Sisyphus” syndrome. „Modern” is a dangerous word, as it promises a lot, but delivers little. We use the word “modern” herewith as a synonym of “con-temporary”. The figure of the “overloaded” and “frustrated” teacher has appeared in earlier periods, as suggested by Bertrand Russell already in the 1940s. (The teacher) “becomes harassed and nervous, out of touch with recent work in the subjects that they teach, and unable to inspire their students with a sense of the intellectual delights to be obtained from new understanding and new knowledge” (Russell, 1961).

The backgrounds and the interpretations of that particular mythological figure are plentiful, and their possible semantic derivatives no less abundant. It has been simplified to a metaphor for someone forced to undertake a task, which is both laborious and futile, originally crystallised in the picture of Sisyphus strenuously pushing a heavy stone upwards, only to see it going down, once and again. A complement is that of pointing towards the “absurdity” of a given situation or role, or even life as such (Camus, 1962).

More or less any teacher around the world is now asking itself the question, as to whether it is simply undertaking more and more “Sisyphian” tasks. Furthermore, the rewards are becoming meagre, social esteem is being eroded, and the pressures from all other actors lead to exhaustion and “burn-out”.

Let us describe and classify all the elements of that syndrome, as well as the ways the teacher may be considering, in order to extricate itself from the modern “Sisyphus trap”.

The teacher is operating in a context of hyperinflation of information, of sources and techniques, above all, a “virtual flooding”. “Virtual flooding” may lead to the case of “virtual drowning”, as the waves of information and data exploding through the new media swamps the teacher, to the extent that they cannot put any order, nor evaluate the real value of the what the flood brings. Teachers then just simply drown themselves in the virtual world. A power issue emerges: the teacher has long lost their quasi-monopoly as a source of knowledge. It is just one of many sources, for many students and parents perhaps even not the most important one. Students are also affected by the “virtual flooding”, becoming pressing and impertinent, more impatient and less willing to work hard. Moreover, the increase in the “work-load” and the “work-pressure” has not been matched by income. Low morale sets in and pride on their work weakened, which fuels up the lack of respect for teachers in society. Teachers’ incomes are low while their workload is heavy. Since promotion does not correspond with their professional development, teachers suffer low morale. Some spend their time moonlighting for more income. Their pride in being good teachers has decreased. Consequently, society respects the teachers less as some of them do not behave properly (Kumar, 2016). The temptation to “simplify” proceedings, and thereby reduce the quality of the product delivered becomes greater, not telling anyone about it, letting it be camouflaged by routine and formalities, and also accepting that students cheat or “buy”, directly or indirectly, their grades and titles (Colbert, 2016).

“Lagging behind” means *grosso modo* that the teacher cannot cope with the tsunami-like invasion of new information, new knowledge, new textbooks, and new tools to operate in a classroom connected to the virtual world.

This is exacerbated by the other pressures emerging in the context of the industry, above all by the increase in workload, the ever-mounting pressure from students and parents – the teacher is now “naked” and “transparent” – and the growing consciousness that his position is no longer as secure as it used to be.

As long as we assume that ethical constraints are still binding (an evaluation of the different sources of ethical constraints can be found in Demiray, Sharma, 2008) – in an era where “who cares about integrity?” seems to resound more often and louder – the teacher faces an ethical dilemma. They need to generate enough income to support themselves and their families, and at the same time, they must fulfil both the quantitative and qualitative requirements at the nature of their job. The full acknowledgement and compliance of both ethical constraints, the personal ethical constraint, and the professional ethical constraint, becomes more and more difficult, if not altogether impossible. If the latter constraint receives priority, the teacher must either change profession or put the institution against the wall, in order for the overhauling, a radical reform, to take place. As human behaviour tends towards simplicity and less effort, the straight decision “to abandon boat” would be the most likely one, even if no other boat seems to be around. At the same time going “against the institution” could end up in losing their jobs and/or be considered a “black sheep” throughout the whole industry.

If however the personal ethical constraint overruns the other, the teacher has no option but to continue the “show”, perfectly aware that the products he or she delivers decline both in size and quality, and that he or she must extinguish, or at least reduce, the flames coming from the “burn-out”, which may simply cannibalise the professional caught in the trap.

Looking for a new *modus vivendi*

The behaviour of teachers’ *vis-à-vis* the new context can be dichotomised:

- either they accept that they cannot cope with the new challenges, asking the institution to overhaul its structure and functions, and finally hand in their resignation, as no visible change has taken place,

- or they continue the game, reducing quality and accepting, more or less, generalised cheating or “short-cuts”. We may speak here of “ethical blindness” or of “turning a blind eye” or a combination of both. “Ethical blindness is the unconscious, context-bound, temporary inability to see the ethical dimension of a decision at stake” (Akrivos, 2017). “Many models of (un)ethical decision making assume that people decide rationally and are in principle able to evaluate their decisions from a moral point of view. However, people might behave unethically without being aware of it” (Palazzo et al, 2012). Palazzo describes the Ethical Blindness with example of the well-known fairy tale “The Emperor's New Clothes”. “Turning a blind eye” or „contrived ignorance” or “Nelsonian knowledge“ are idioms describing the ignoring of undesirable information. On the other hand, wilful blindness, „ignorance of law“, „wilful ignorance“ are legal concepts, implying that if there are things that you could know, and should know, but somehow you manage not to know, the law will hold you responsible (Heffernan, 2012).

In any case, we may safely assume that there will be some kind of a “collusion” between two ethical constraints, which represent the classical example of the ethical dilemma. In the field of psychology, „cognitive dissonance” is the mental discomfort (psychological stress) experienced by a person who simultaneously holds two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values. In “A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance” (1957), Leon Festinger proposed that human beings strive for internal psychological consistency in order to mentally function in the real world. A person who experiences internal inconsistency tends to become psychologically uncomfortable, and is motivated to reduce the cognitive dissonance.

This is done by making changes to justify their stressful behavior, or by actively avoiding social situations and/or contradictory information likely to increase the magnitude of the cognitive dissonance.

The modern Sisyphus needs a new strategy, a new *modus operandi* to find a way-out, which would make possible a new *modus vivendi* with the other actors of the industry. That strategy could be detailed as follows:

1. Use more and more virtual information and sources, allowing also the students to use the “net” indiscriminately to concoct essays and other work. Hence, they reduce their own “talking time” (contact hours), even their presence in classrooms and in the institution as such.
2. Engage in “lowering the standards”, both while lecturing, examining, correcting and grading, in order to speed up proceedings and reduce the workload.
3. Tolerate, more or less indirectly, plagiarism and cheating.

No doubt, thanks to information technique, many other tricks and shortcuts are there to be used.

Informally, a new *modus vivendi* with the students becomes settled, whereby they also accept the reduced workload, assistance and quality criteria as the “optimal solution” for everyone. Parents may also accept this new status, as a kind of “second best option”. At the same time, the individual teacher consents to a mutually agreed “coexistence” with most of the other teachers, who are also reacting in the same way. A mainstream towards “survival first” becomes established.

The teacher rationally believes that the above-described set of reactions will, somehow, and sometime, reduce stress and pressure, neutralise students and parents, and give him or her more time to supplement their regular income.

The modern Sisyphus will then, alone or in understanding with colleagues, reduce the size and the weights of the stones to carry to the peak of the mountain, and will also endeavour to use any possible means, in order to convince people that, at least for a moment, *pour la gallerie*, the basic task has been accomplished. As in the modern world there are no “superior gods” to penalise him or her, they believe it could go unpunished.

Yet the teacher is in an institution where there are colleagues, administrators, supervisors, and inspectors. Cooperation and competition go together. The majority may follow, although skirmishes of greater or lesser resonance are bound to appear. In the long-term, the *ad hoc* acceptance of the new *modus operandi*, which leads to the more bearable *modus vivendi*, cannot continue. Sooner or later, the lowering of standards and the continuous unloading of unprepared students into the labour market will provoke the intervention of the relevant authority, both inside and outside the specific institution.

3. DIAGNOSIS II: “SUBSTITUTE- ISATION” AND “DE- PROFESSIONALISATION”

A collateral figure that has emerged – and it seems to be gaining in ascendancy – is that of the “*substitute teacher*”. “Casual teacher” or “emergency teacher” are also categories that could be included herewith. *Summa summarum*, teaching staff subject to short-term contracts, quarterly or yearly, or even no contract at all, once a rarity, has now become normal.

The trend towards “de-professionalisation”, as mentioned before, has heightened the quantitative relevance of the peculiar “out-sourcing” within the educational industry. And not only in developing countries, where the steadily increasing demand for formal, “diploma-rewarded” education creates a scenario of “excess demand”, as the traditional and authorised teaching staff cannot cope with the onslaught of new students.

The income gap, *vis-à-vis* the other sectors in the economy, also speed up the exodus of well-qualified teacher, thereby increasing the need for replacement, *ad initium* perhaps only for a transitional period.

This sort of “reserve army” is seen optimistically as *suppletory*, in the original sense of the world, that of “making good a deficiency”, in this case perhaps rather an “absence”, but in fact it becomes a “substitute”, someone who simply jumps into the just emptied space. As it happens, even its initially conceived role of a “transitional solution” may soon be abandoned, and it becomes a “long-term-transitional-solution”. The “*substitute teacher*” could also be defined as a *mercenary*, covering both the sense of working for an institution to which it does not naturally belong, and the habit of being remunerated according to the tasks and the time needed to accomplish them. This conceptualisation does not, of course, attempt to include all type of replacement staff into the previously underlined behavioural patterns. As always, there might be a minority, perhaps even a large one, which does not fit into the stereotypes, and may as well be taking this transitional role as a springboard to a full-time, long term, fully committed employment.

The key difference between the figure just outlined of the modern Sisyphus and the “*substitute teacher*”, the mercenary, is that the latter would have no ethical dilemmas, or at least the operating ethical constraints will not be binding. Their very status allows him or her to be considerably less rigorous with respect to the quality of the “human capital” finally delivered.

The process of “substitute-isation”, a somewhat awkward noun, which might nevertheless help us, while waiting for a better alternative, interacts with the “de-professionalisation”, and it puts further constraints on the institutions and on the traditional staff, whose members are suffering under the Sisyphus syndrome, at a lesser or greater degree.

4. DILEMMA: THE PRISONER’S DILEMMA REVISITED

What are the options available to managers and supervisors, both within the specific institution and outside it, when faced with the growing decline in standards, and the erosion of the market value of the certificates issued?

Herewith we setup a scenario in which managers act, using “rewards” and “punishments” in the least conflictive approach, hoping for a suitable teacher’s response, bounded by the professional ethical constraint.

Teachers are caught in a rational dilemma (Global Studies: The Future of Globalization, 2018), which may happen to be similar to that of the prisoner’s dilemma. The latter has been mentioned, in another (societal) context, in terms of educational policy (Geel, 2012).

As well known, the prisoner’s dilemma refers to two delinquents who together enacted a crime, held by police, do not confess their guilt, and are subjected to inducement to do so, by lowering or eliminating the prison sentence. No prisoner is able to know what the other decides, but each one has to decide whether it keeps its mouth shut, or whether it confesses.

In our case, the managers of the institution, possibly also under pressure from government supervisors, realise that most teachers are “undercutting” their services, and establishing a new *modus vivendi* with students and parents, thanks to a hidden curriculum, a *hidden modus operandi*, which may be “intentional” and “negative”, therefore diminishing the quality of the final product. The “hidden curriculum” is a contingency phenomenon; it can be either positive or negative, intentional and unintentional (Peters, Burbules, 2015). Although not immediately, this will also be noticed by parents and employers, lowering the ranking of the institution, and creating financial or political (mainly in the case of state schools and universities) pressures.

The institution is necessarily constrained by law in the way it may warn, punish or fire its employees. Furthermore, it needs “proof” of what is actually going on. At the same time, it cannot threaten – always ... – the traditional staff with the “*substitute teacher*” “reserve army”, as everyone knows that such an option may rapidly lead towards a further deterioration of the quality of the education delivered.

The aim is “to force teachers to denounce the illicit *modus operandi*, which generates the illicit *modus vivendi* with students and parents, wherever it appears”.

Most likely scenario is that of the managers of the institution deciding to use those discretionary tools at their disposition, mostly not legally binding in a work contract, which could be reduced to the concept of “*bonuses*”. They include extra remuneration and financial awards and subsidies, which are at the sole discretion of the institution, like promotion, supplementary pension benefits, reduction of workload, special dispensation for extended holidays or temporary absences, etc.

Let us assume the following framework: we have only two teachers. They are caught in the prisoner’s dilemma in the context we have already explained. A classic example is the now famous Prisoner’s Dilemma, first suggested by Merrill Flood and Melvil Dresher in 1950, then formalised by Albert W. Tucker. In the original Prisoner’s Dilemma, with rational agents, with no ethics and loyalty, and no possibility of communication between themselves, the Nash Equilibrium does not coincide with the Pareto optimality, or “optimum”. A “Nash Equilibrium” in game theory (“a non-cooperative game”) describes an equilibrium, where each player’s strategy is considered optimal, given the strategy of the other player. (Nash, J, 1950).

A “Pareto-Optimum” (or Pareto efficiency) refers to a state of affairs reached, when there is no other alternative, except the one that would make one better off, but the other worse off.

Parallel to a world of individualistic, rational and egoistical behaviour, where ethical considerations may just be considered a nuisance, there are also feasible scenarios where human beings would be prone to implement a “cooperative behaviour”, when they are subjected to similar restrictions applied in the classical example of the prisoners dilemma (Fehr, Fischbacher, 2003).

We may speak of an “augmented” Prisoners Dilemma matrix, under the assumption of “asymmetric information”. We call it “augmented”, because, compared to the classical model, management does not know for certain if both, or any, of the teachers is “guilty”. Managers cannot have access to all the relevant information accumulated by the teachers, each of them holding their private “black box”, which may also contain confidential items regarding the other teacher.

We substitute the “police” in the classical case, by the school management in our revised model. They demand from each teacher to prepare a report on the other, disclosing the “true quality” (or not...) delivered.

Every player has two options: to compete with his fellow teacher (that is, to disclose all relevant information to the managers) or to cooperate with his fellow teacher.

I - “Compete”: one teacher “unmasks” the other, and reveals its hidden *modus operandi* to the managers.

II - “Cooperate”: one teacher “protects” the other.

Here is the pay-off matrix in terms of the bonuses.

Table 1: “Augmented” Prisoners Dilemma matrix

		B	
		Cooperate	Compete
A	Cooperate	1 1	1 0
	Compete	0 1	0 0

(1, 1) both teachers get standard bonuses (1). The report presented by each teacher will not unveil any mayor fault, or dysfunction. *Grosso modo*, the managers have no way of countering these reports, unless they use other teachers, who will no doubt, under our assumptions, behave like the first ones.

(1, 2) (2, 1) the teacher who competes, and unmasks the other, gets positive bonus (1), and the teacher who does not, gets no bonus (0).

(2, 2) both teachers compete, denounce each other, and do not get the bonuses (0).

Nash equilibrium (1, 1): it is rational for the teachers to cooperate between themselves, as there are in possession of a “black-box” that cannot be accessed by the management. The latter only know that: “Something is rotten, but we do not know where, and to what extent”.

Pareto Optimum is (1, 1) too. The outcome is different from the original prisoner’s dilemma. It is a reverse prisoner’s dilemma case. Namely, overall gain for the both players in the Nash Equilibrium is 2 (field 1, 1) and it is the best outcome for the teachers, a Pareto optimum.

It is quite obvious that, in most cases, the “*esprit de corps*” would prevail, as it entails in any case less individual damages, compared with the uncertainty of entering into a game of mutual betrayal, denunciation and ferocious competition.

5. CONCLUSION

This very preliminary analysis, using some restrictive, but nevertheless feasible assumptions, helps illustrate the quicksand scenario one is likely to fall in, whilst trying to tackle the destructive waves coming from the modern Sisyphus. Unlike its original Greek figure, King of *Ephyra* (now Korinth), he has the will and the means to escape their enforced destiny. Repressive or coercive measures aimed at individual targets will fail to produce any tangible, relevant benefit. That is, measures destined to force the teachers to accept “overload” and “overwork”, “stronger social pressure”, and the need to constantly “recycle” themselves, would in the end lead towards, either teachers abandoning their careers, or to them implementing, more or less efficiently, hidden *curricula*, a hidden *modus operandi* that would make possible a more bearable *modus vivendi*.

The former option, the “exodus” would imply the imposed need upon the institution of hiring more and more “substitute teacher”, “substitute-isation”, furthering the “de-professionalisation” of the industry. The latter, a straightforward decline in the human capital provided. This would also be the consequence of the “substitute” option.

The education industry relies to a large extent on a *bona fide* intangible capital, whereby the main actors, and the market, accept the final products, degrees and certified academic achievements at face value, as solid signals for the quality of human capital delivered.

This “capital of truth” can be considered as a “common resource”, an intangible good whose access and enjoyment is available to every agent of the industry. As universities get more and more globalised, the value of the human capital produced by each institution is subjected to closer and deeper scrutiny.

Yet individuals, in this case the university professor, acting as the modern Sisyphus or the *substitute mercenary*, and either ignoring crucial ethical constraints or paying them only a lip service, may well erode systematically that “common resource”. Such unchecked debasing of the “capital of truth” could indeed draw the whole industry to a situation akin to the “tragedy of the commons”, whereby at the end, extreme individualistic rational behaviour dilapidates the common intangible good.

The education industry is therefore in need of finding a much broader and radical management approach, beyond that of hoping, the “good will” of its main agents, the teachers, will suffice to reverse the decline of standards.

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