The Plight of the Millennials: Pedagogy as Marketing, Marketing as Pedagogy

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Anyone who already regards college education as a business should have no trouble with corollary notion that marketing is essential to success. In the information and service industries including education, marketing depends more upon image than it does in resource extraction, refining and manufacturing. It is not that style does not often prevail over substance in the sales of everything from automobiles to kitchen appliances and from lawn mowers to designer handbags; rather, it is that in the promotion of non-material goods from financial services to rehabilitation clinics, the image is not only the most important thing; it is virtually everything.

In the marketing game, much depends on meeting the expressed or induced "needs" of a target audience. But what if there is no specific audience to target? What if a particular segment of the population which ought to be the principal consumers of a product are not made the subject of a specific and refined appeal? What if no one establishes a connection between the identity of the consumer and the commodity that is offered? Can there be a successful sales job without an advertising component?

There was a time, of course, when such questions did not matter with regard to teaching and learning. The inherent and instrumental values of education—and especially postsecondary education—were well-established. Whereas a high school diploma was quite satisfactory for anyone seeking honest, respectable employment and a successful middle class life, a university degree was needed to enter the professions and have guaranteed access to a more rewarding and lucrative profession.

Indeed, entry to higher education was restricted. It was mainly reserved for the elite, and only a small number of scholarship students from the middling and lower classes could realistically aspire to entry into the few existing centres of higher learning.

That was then, and this is irredeemably now. Instead of having students desperate to win some sort of certification, colleges and universities are currently desperate to attract customers and to retain them by means of lower academic standards, ample remediation and frantic initiatives to maintain existing markets as well as to open up new ones.

Enter Diana Oblinger, Executive Director of Higher Education for Microsoft Corporation. Microsoft's electronic "gizmos" have profitably

produced a generation of students and perhaps teachers, who are comfortable with technology and in many ways dependent upon it. Technology has promoted Nintendoized edutainment as a way to create "good educational environments." It has generated games which "involve problem solving and decision-making, provide rapid feedback, speed and a sense of urgency that can contribute to learner motivation" (Oblinger, 2003, p.44). Of course, in the process, library holdings has shriveled, literacy has declined and the reliance upon predigested information held only long enough to regurgitate it on multiple-choice tests has replaced anything approaching critical engagement with the subject matter; but, such are the conditions of the marketplace.

We focus on Diana Oblinger, of course, as merely one of the more prominent market analysts who has sought to single out a new cohort of educational consumers and describe what makes them unique. There are plenty of others. One major academic entrepreneur in the field, for example, is Jean M. Twenge, whose books, **Generation Me** (2006) and **The Narcissism Epidemic** (2009) have led to the establishment of a modest cottage industry in promoting the distinctiveness of what might better be called the "Twitter Generation." The list could go on.

Acceding to the alleged needs and only dimly articulated preferences of contemporary college students, we find a bizarre pedagogy emerging. This is most easily witnessed in the study of history, although ample examples could be drawn from areas as diverse as anthropology and zoology. Rather than "telling students about the conclusions of history," Oblinger touts games allow that "students to explore authentic information via multiple paths" (p.44). So, instead of studying the American Civil War by immersing themselves in James McPherson's book **Battle Cry of Freedom** (867 pages) described by the **New York Times Book Review** (Brogan, 1988 as "historical writing of the highest order," students are urged to play games such as "Gettysburg," since it allows "users" to "recreate military engagements using different assumptions." After all, presenting "conclusions" might run afoul of the need to expand the imagination, to say nothing of submitting to logocentric narratives. With games, students are permitted to draw their own conclusions, making history up as they go along.

While the long term consequences of the American Civil War are subject to academic debate, "Gettysburg" allows users to "create" unique scenarios to explore history"; so, Oblinger asks: "Would the battle have gone differently if General Lee had been there" (2003, p.44)? Never mind that he wasn't, history is more fun when we can just pretend.

Re-creating historical facts and conclusions using "different assumptions" may be motivating and engaging for people with frivolous habits of mind, but it is not a substitute for the discipline and persistence required to understand the causes and consequences of

real historical, economic and political events.

Creating a game with unique exploratory scenarios has, of course, fascinating implications. It can, for instance, lead to arguments justifying the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor as retribution for the Americans dropping the Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima. Why worry about having history repeat itself, when it can be whimsically rewritten by generation after generation of college students, at least for as long as the teaching of history lasts.

With such light-headed assumptions about the purpose and methods of education afoot in the land, millennials find themselves in a familiar epistemological spot. If we may beg the indulgence of the specter of Karl Marx, we can say that contemporary youth may make their own history, they do not make it just as they please; they make it under the direction of product guidelines made available by Microsoft and Nintendo. If this "unique scenario" frames the fate of the adults of the future, the least we can do is offer an alternative to these exercises in recombinant history and banning "games" from our curriculum.

Some may object that this sounds churlish. If so, we shall try to be more serious. Rather than mock the consequences of millennium marketing, we can treat Diana Oblinger and her followers with more "gravitas." We can pay more careful attention; but, if we do, we shall have to put her exemplary article in its appropriate institutional context.

"Understanding the New Students" was originally published in the official organ of one of North America's most aggressive and unrelenting information technology advocates. More recent issues of the **EDUCAUSE** promote e-conferencing, encourage digital libraries and enthuse about the future of e-books, arguing in part that the greatest drag on electronic book production is that faculty dinosaurs are reluctant to include them in students' course materials. The corporate sales agenda is obvious, but its implications for a college system that accedes to this agenda should be plain as well.

Oblinger, it should be mentioned, displays neither academic nor scholarly pretensions. Her work features a table with some data that was already woefully obsolete at the time of publication, and there are a few desultory footnotes; but, it is akin to popular "midbrow" magazine such as **Psychology Today**, which were once the preferred reading material of unserious undergraduates and are now at the apex of managerial aspirations. Its message, that is to say, is common enough, but its impact seems to be out of all proper proportion. Published almost a decade ago, its thin thesis is now echoed in innumerable popular articles, newspaper stories, management directives and teacher in-house training sessions.

Among the miscalculations that stand out are the assumptions that age trumps all other demographic data and cultural influences

when it comes to defining the new college consumer. Fixating on 18-24-year-olds, a generally unpleasant generational profile emerges that insists that the millennial generation is techno-savvy, multi-tasking, impolite, impatient, irretrievably relativistic and possessed of an overwhelming sense of entitlement but possessing no apparent awareness of a work ethic (Protestant or otherwise). This, we think, is not only sociologically suspect, but highly insulting as well. Moreover, to have that stereotype deemed a universal sociological pattern when, in fact, local, regional and national differences among young people are no less in evidence today than in at least the recent past is disconcerting. Nuances of class, race and gender are also dismissed. Instead, we find that the faith that the promoters of the millennial marketing artifact merely reflects the corporate marketers commitment to their own technological products. This is a betrayal of their customers' best interests, not that such concerns have worried corporate distributors overly much in the past. What is new is how deeply college educators have been bamboozled by the campaign.

If, moreover, our students are so abysmally ill-equipped to approach life at even a single notch above a Nintendo game, it is surely our duty to help enable them to alter their thought and behaviour. The fact *(if* it is a fact) that they expect learning to be constant "fun" is no license for us to enable the charade any further. At some point, either students must engage with substantive subject matter in a thoughtful, creative, articulate and critical way, *or* we must abandon the pretence that we are involved in anything approximating education, to say nothing of "higher" education. Maintaining the Walmart ideology of price (and quality) reduction serves no one's long-term interests.

Our own experience suggests, we are pleased to say, that this bilge severely underestimates at least the better students, and that no amount of time-wasting effervescences such as endless simulations, amusements and collaboration exercises is apt to help the woefully unprepared, the preternaturally disoriented, the unremittingly lethargic and the congenitally bored.

Of course, even critical chatter about the millennial generation is difficult in the absence of reliable empirical data and analysis. Portraits of young people may be available, but they are rarely cited in the literature that sustains college marketers. Instead, anecdotal evidence alone is provided to grease the slide into corporate curricula and the rush to the bottom of academic expectations.

With the dubious assistance of product promotions dressed up as curricular seminars, electronic software and textbook manufacturers encourage administrators and teachers to buy into their merchandise. The course requirements that we are encouraged to assign, the learning objectives that we are compelled to incorporate, the curricular structures and the "delivery systems" that we are expected to deploy are all seamlessly designed to make the corporate product-lines endemic to our educational project.

This is a big money-maker, but it is more. It is a course in indoctrination both in content, and in teaching and learning methods. We are, of course, rarely told to promote particular beliefs; we don't have to be, for they are implicit in the organization and the content of the course materials from which we tirelessly work. Moreover, the greatest ideological delusion that we are required to pretend to believe is that the education we proffer is "objective" and without ideological intent. All the same, corporate purposes are achieved by the systematic lie that we are teaching impartial information and value-free skills.

The millennial generation, of course, already gets that, or something like it. Having been deprived of the rudiments of critical learning (all the while being assured that they are developing "critical thinking skills" by learning to become sceptical of soap commercials), they need no encouragement to be cynical with regard to the intellectual offerings of the schools they attend. Nonetheless, we are not sure that some of the deeper messages have not sunk in.

We are urged, for instance, to confirm the myth that technologies and techniques are "value-neutral," that they can be used equally for good or ill, depending on the goals of the people using them. Iconically, we are told to validate the National Rifle Association's peculiar metaphysic, which says that a gun can be used to murder a neighbour (presumably a bad thing), or to help an aboriginal hunter feed his family (presumably a good thing). The gun itself is alleged to bear no blame for its use. This, of course, is nonsense. Guns, by their nature and design, make everything (suburban neighbours and Arctic caribou alike) into targets. Likewise, we help sustain the illusion that computers can be used for good or ill. They can expose adolescents to pornography and Internet gambling (presumably bad things), or they can open up young minds to an almost infinite supply of putative knowledge (presumably a good thing). This, as Arthur Kroker has elegantly indicated, is also nonsense. "Technology," he writes, "is not something restless, dynamic and ever expanding, but just the opposite. The will to technology equals the will to virtuality. And the will to virtuality is about the recline of Western civilization: a great shutting down of experience, with a veneer of technological dynamism over an inner reality of inertia, exhaustion and disappearances (Kroker, 1993, p. 7)."

Computers turn everything into decontextualized factoids. They are aggressively acontextual, ahistorical, apolitical and asocial. They trade in summary bits and sanitized bytes. The destroy memory. They create recombinant history and pastiche culture. They reduce experience to simulacra and human beings to "data in cold storage."

A cursory phenomenology of the officially approved pedagogy would reveal much more that is equally false and equally premised on *faux* sociology, the results of which are served up in such articles as Oblinger's and are the stuff and substance of almost every brochure from the education industry and every memo from our local

authorities. An intense critical interrogation of such pop sociology-cum-advertising and of the corporate-collegiate complex is needed lest we betray ourselves, our students and anything that makes our colleges worthy of the name.

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