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Do I Print My Degree? Or Do They Send Me One?

In this day and age, a college education is incredibly valuable. In fact, many people view receiving a college degree as an absolute necessity to get a good job and make a decent living. Unfortunately, the current education system has many flaws. College tuition has been increasing faster than inflation and has made an already discriminatory system even worse. It is nearly unheard of these days for a student to graduate without being buried in student loan debt. But there are big changes on the horizon, changes that could lead to affordable education for anyone interested in pursuing it. Online classes are becoming more popular and are much more affordable than a traditional education. Combine this with the emergence of cheap information technology and the stage is being set for anyone in the world to have the opportunity to get an education. Kevin Carey, the director of the Education Policy Program at the New America Foundation, wrote the book *The End of College: Creating the Future of Learning and the University of Everywhere*, in which he talks about the history of the current college system and how he believes the future of education will be based around online education. He offers insight on the growing trend of online learning and even discusses his first-hand experience of completing an online biology course from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Many of Carey’s theories and examples go hand in hand with those of Doug Ward, an associate professor of journalism at the University of Kansas and author of the article “Why Online Education Has Gained Revolutionary Momentum.” Ward breaks down his article into several sections and discusses the rising cost of college tuition, the emergence of technology in education, and the far-reaching capabilities of online education. However, when something like online education seems too good to be true, it often is. Sven Birkerts, a professional book reviewer who has taught creative writing at several prestigious universities including Harvard and Bennington College, believes that technology is harming the way people read and learn. Birkerts wrote the essay “The Owl Has Flown” where he talks about the contrasting concepts of vertical versus horizontal reading. He argues that having so much reading material available due to technology is forcing people to lose the ability for deep, or “vertical” reading. Instead, people choose to skim through shorter reads and move on to the next thing without taking the time to really analyze the information, or let it sink in. The current system for higher education is deeply flawed. College tuition is becoming more and more expensive, reinforcing its already discriminatory nature and chipping away at the middle class. However, with technology becoming cheaper and more available, the option to pursue a college education online is becoming more popular. This is also helping people in the developing world to pursue a college education. With proper implementation, this access to education in the developing world could be used as a powerful tool to potentially close the gender gap and fight for greater equality. However, this emerging system of education is not without flaws. Some implementations of technology into education could be detrimental to the future of learning by changing the ways that we read and analyze material.

The cost of a college education is higher than it has ever been, and it is continuing to rise. The current college system is already alarmingly discriminatory, and as costs continue to increase, the problem will only get worse. Ward points out just how much the cost of college has increased and hints at how this is contributing to the shrinking middle class. He writes, “The expense of higher education has risen more than 550 percent since 1985, pricing many students out of the market even as a college degree becomes more important than ever for reaching the middle class” (Ward). He brings up how crucial a college degree is for reaching the middle class, and how the rising cost of tuition has prevented many people from obtaining one. However, the unfortunate reality is that the current college system was not designed to help educate and nourish the middle class, quite the opposite actually. The current system of higher education was designed to maintain the status quo for the elite to receive the best education possible while steering the middle class and minorities into less prestigious institutions where they would receive a lesser education. Carey discusses this discrimination in his book when he discusses the implementation of the current college system. He suggests the system was designed in three tiers; on top would be the elite universities where the name on the degree was basically a guarantee into a high-paying job. The middle tier would be state schools. State schools were targeted towards the middle class. These schools would offer an education designed to put the student into middle class jobs. On bottom would be the community college. This would be the destination of the poor and minorities. Community colleges would provide a lower quality of education and would focus more on specific trades to keep their students in working class jobs. Carey writes, “the bottom half of students […] would start in community college […] This had the great advantage of keeping the unwashed masses out of elite institutions” (55). By “unwashed masses,” Carey is referring to the poor and the minorities. He suggests that the system was designed to give them something that resembled a college education for a low price to keep them away from the elite universities, and thus keep them in their current social class. The whole system was designed to keep people in their place. However, due to rising tuition costs, the system is starting to fail and middle class students can no longer afford to attend college. This trend is slowly chipping away the middle and causing the working class to grow; meanwhile, the elite upper class remains the same.

Information technology is becoming cheaper and more available than ever before, and this means that it is also becoming easier to access technology and education in the developing world. The developing world has been facing a harsh catch twenty-two for years. They lack the infrastructure to develop a good education system, but they also lack the education to create an adequate infrastructure. As technology becomes cheaper and more available, this is set to change. Howard Rheingold, a former editor of the *Whole Earth Review,* wrote the essay “How to Recognize the Future When it Lands on You,” where he discusses how quickly technology is advancing, and how it is actually becoming cheaper as its power increases. He writes, “mobile, multimedia, location sensitive characteristics multiply each others usefulness. At the same time their costs drop dramatically […] the driving factor […] [is] Moore’s law (computer chips get cheaper as they grow more powerful)” (Rheingold 123). Rheingold points to Moore’s law, that computer chips get exponentially more powerful, while simultaneously becoming more affordable. He also emphasizes how much the cost of technology is dropping by using the word “dramatically.” This drop in cost is allowing for a great increase in the amount of technology being utilized in the developing world, and this newfound access to technology could be used as a tool to finally bring higher education to the developing world in greater volume. The utilization of this technology for education is already evident in some parts of the world. Ward pointed to two countries that are already seeing this trend playing out: India and China. He writes, “Living standards for millions of people in countries such as India and China have improved, allowing them to purchase new technology and seek out education as a means to a better life” (Ward). Ward starts by mentioning that quality of life is being improved. However, the important aspect is that the technology has become cheap enough that the citizens of these countries can afford it. He also mentions that they are seeking out education with this technology to better their lives. This is a rather large step in the right direction as people in the developing world begin to create a generation of educated citizens for the first time in their countries’ histories. This trend is not only catching on in China and India, however, but in places all over the developing world. As technology continues to find its way into the developing world, this trend will continue to grow. For the first time in history, higher education will be available almost anywhere.

The popularity of online learning is growing, and it is starting to become a real option for people across the globe. Every year, more and more people are choosing to pursue an education from the comfort of their own home. There are many factors for this increase in online learning. One reason is that it is often cheaper than a traditional education, making it a more realistic option for low-income students. Another reason for this increase in popularity is the flexible nature of online learning. Having no set schedule for attending lectures allows people who may work full time or who work odd hours to attend lectures whenever they have time. This is especially convenient for those who need to work to support themselves or their families. However, the biggest factor for the popularity of online learning is its availability. There are many people, such as those in the developing world, who do not have access to an institution for higher education. Ward talks about how this increase in popularity is not going unnoticed by institutions of higher education, and how many are actually preparing for the trend to continue. He writes, “Many institutions have been preparing for these changes for years, building infrastructure and expertise, experimenting and recruiting, and integrating online learning into long-term strategies” (Ward). He suggests that many of these institutions are preparing for long-term implementation of online support. He states that universities are setting up extensive infrastructures to support mass amounts of online education. However, some of this infrastructure is already in place. Carey talks about the online course called *The Secret of Life,* which he took through a free service offered by MIT, and he points out how many students from around the globe were also able to attend. He writes, “At the same time, all around the world, tens of thousands of other students were taking *The Secret of Life* for free” (Carey 3). He emphasizes that this class had many people from all around the world attending. He even goes on to mention that some of his “classmates” were from places including Indonesia and Honduras. If MIT is already extending free higher education online to tens of thousands of people, then we can only imagine how many people will be able to receive an education when more universities implement their global online education systems. As these programs continue to develop, the popularity of online leaning and its viability for people across the globe will continue to increase.

In addition to creating greater access to education, one of the most important things that information technology could do is to help close the gender gap. It is not breaking news that in almost every culture around the world, women are not viewed as equal to their male counterparts. Thankfully, in some places in the developed world, progress toward gender equality is being made. This is in large part due to education of women on a grand scale. In fact, women are part of the reason there are so many universities today. Carey writes about the increase in the number of universities and how women going to college was a factor. He states, “Millions of new students, the products of the baby boom and the too-gradual emancipation of women and minorities, needed somewhere to go to college” (Carey 54). By using the word “emancipation,” he insists that, at the time, women and minorities being allowed to receive an education was a new development in the fight for equality. This started a snowball effect in the United States as more and more women became educated and continued pushing for equality. This same principal of using education as a tool to help fight for gender equality could be used in the developing world. Geoff Weiss, a staff writer at *Entrepreneur Media,* wrote an article called, “This Is Bill and Melinda Gates' Prediction for the Future of Online Education” where he discusses Bill Gates’ aspirations and predictions for the future of online education. He brings up the issue of gender equality and how technology could be used to help bridge the gap. Weiss writes, “Perhaps most vital to the future of education, however -- especially in developing countries -- is closing the gender gap. One way this can be accomplished is by putting technology in the hands of women” (Weiss). He suggests that by getting information technology to women in the developing world, the chances for gender equality would greatly increase. Once in the hands of women, this technology could be used to give them the education they deserve. They could use this education to fight for equal rights and close the gender gap. The fight for women to get educated is already taking place in several countries around the world. With cheap technology and the availability of online learning, women all over the world may be getting ready to take a huge step toward equal rights

Despite the great advantages of technology in education, many people believe that it could also cause problems with the way we learn. These people believe that technology is fundamentally changing the way we learn and even altering our brain chemistry. For example, Birkerts discusses the concepts of vertical versus horizontal learning. He talks about how the way we read has been gradually changing over time. He suggests, “the general trajectory of reading across the centuries is what I think of as the gradual displacement of the vertical by the horizontal-the sacrifice of depth to lateral range” (Birkerts 72). He is referring to how people tend to skim through their reading now, and suggests that, because there is so much material to read, people take less time to analyze the reading and reach its full depth. In other words, Birkerts suggests that we read horizontally instead of vertically. A great example of this can be found in the essay “Is Google Making Us Stupid,” by Nicholas Carr, a writer who was once a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize. Carr talks about how he has struggled with reading since he started using the Internet and discusses difficulties with focus and maintaining attention. When discussing his reading habits before the internet, Carr writes, “My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I’d spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That’s rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I’m always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle” (4). He points out how he used to be able to read for hours until he started using the Internet. He now struggles to maintain attention and says that he is rarely capable of deep reading anymore. There is definitely a relationship between the Internet and lack of concentration. This could be a real problem with online learning. If the Internet contributes to a lack of concentration, using it as a tool for learning seems a bit counterintuitive. Only time can tell if this correlation will play a role in the future of online learning.

There is little denying that change is coming to the higher education system. With all of its advantages, it is more than likely that technology and online learning will play a big role in the future of education. Information technology is getting more powerful and affordable every day and is becoming available in many places all over the world. With proper implementation and distribution of this information technology, education could be made available anywhere in the world for the very first time. This could have a monumental impact on the future of the whole planet. It could also play a significant role in the fight for gender equality by making sure women in the developing world can receive an education. However, only time will tell if this style of learning will be effective. The constant distractions brought on by the Internet have led to problems with concentration and depleted the capacity for deep analytical reading. This could prove to play a huge role in the effectiveness of online learning. In fact, while doing research for this paper, one source I stumbled upon even had a banner at the top corner informing the reader that it would only take two minutes to read. I found this to be quite the confirmation that people are generally disinterested in deep reading. However, with every advancement in technology, there have been drawbacks that turn out okay. Even books were once looked at by some as the cause of an impending degradation of the human memory. Whether online learning can truly be the solution the world has been looking for to achieve global education, or be a detriment to the world’s ability to learn will be revealed with time.

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