The Virtual University?

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The Virtual University?

Posted on August 1, 2003 by Editor

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One of the primary enduring impacts of the Internet is clearly going to be upon education. This is true even in unexpected areas. For example, the Chinese recently stated that one impact of SARS has been to cause an “explosion” in on-line education as students chose to work from home rather than risk possible exposure in school settings. [1]

There have been many attempts to understand the appropriate place of on-line education. It remains a major concern of the Berglund Center for Internet Studies. But to understand this area still remains very difficult, partly because there is simply so much information and so many opinions floating about. For those who want to begin with a high-level understanding of the problem, I would definitely suggest reading The Virtual University? . The editors are very open-minded and present a number of perspectives; hence the question mark in the title: perhaps there is not and will not be a truly virtual university in the opinion of some contributors.

It is difficult to review an edited collection of articles because of the wide variation in coverage and content among them. There is however, a very strong editorial perspective identifiable throughout. It is a rather radical and skeptical one and may not be to everybody’s taste.

The various contributors largely agree that the current educational system is a reflection of a particular period in history and represents in general the interests of a liberal set of institutions. The challenge they now face is from a globalizing society in which older, nation state-based forms of thought are increasingly irrelevant. On the other hand, the authors feel that many of the highly touted alternatives to conventional forms of education, alternatives frequently held to be necessary reforms to failing institutions, in fact also represent an older form of thought, a sort of technical mythology that sees the solution to every problem in additional doses of science and technology.
The book is divided into three sections: The New Global Context; Practices and Policies; Prospects and Possibilities. Four to six pieces in each section present a rather broad overview of these areas, though each is challenging in terms of the vocabulary used (highly postmodern) and sometimes in its ideological perspective (always more on the left than the right).

Taken together, however, the work shows a rich variety of minds at work on an important problem. The emphasis is much more on analysis than on real-world examples. This work will not tell you which is the proper sort of on-line course in which to enroll, but it will give you a framework in which to think about such forms of education.


Jeffrey Barlow
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