

EDITORIAL

Do We Need School Buildings Anymore? An Internet Question.

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One of the most important developments that affects us all in the early 21st century in the developed countries, especially in the higher education sector, is the impact of the Internet on the possibilities for educational activities and the way we all go to work. Both education and work required, for the recent history of our species, a definite location. One went to a particular place for "school" and one went to a particular place for "work".

Not too long ago I visited, in order to examine a PhD candidate, one of my old places of work in Toronto, a large high-rise building embedded in the University of Toronto. When I left that building twenty years or so ago to come to a similar place at the University of Calgary, it was a bustling place full of 3500 students doing masters and doctoral degrees. The faculty were regularly there too, in their offices, in the corridors or in the library or at a variety of meeting places, including the classrooms, or the cafeteria where teaching occurred. It was impossible to walk about this place without running into students or colleagues. And daily I trekked with my graduate students to the cafeteria to continue conversations relating to their research.

On that visit not too long ago something had changed. There were still about 3500 students registered in programs in the building and the faculty researchers were still the same in number. But one could have shot a cannon through the corridors without anybody being harmed. Essentially the place was empty except for the doctoral oral that I had attended. The same is true in my present place of work. One might occasionally run into a faculty member in their office and bump into an occasional graduate student. But generally all is quiet on this Western front. The corridors are empty. Where is everybody?

The answer lies in what has now become possible. A student may study for a degree entirely on line from anywhere in the world. A faculty member may never have to leave their office at home in order to teach their courses or correspond with their students. Even some meetings are now occurring on line so that one might be anywhere in the world and yet never miss a meeting if the time zones permit (and sometimes even if they don't). This is the work of the ubiquitous internet accessed by all manner of devices from desktop computers, laptops, tablets or iPhones.

This raises the question as to whether or not one actually needs the school buildings anymore. It would certainly be cheaper to simply have everybody who is teaching and everybody who is learning to access their educational or occupational needs from wherever they happen to be. To some degree this is already happening. Until recently our graduate programs were almost entirely taught on site after 4:30 pm and went on into the evening. Students converged from towns and cities around Calgary, ate their evening meal in our cafeteria, and attended their classes in person. But now we have shut down such activities as, among other things, it saves on personnel like library staff and cafeteria workers as well as on heat and light. We now offer most of such courses on line via the Internet.

It is not easy to see what the future of higher education may be. But it is certainly possible that it might become for many programs an activity conducted entirely on line. For laboratory courses or professional ones where interaction with actual people or machines, as in medicine, nursing, kinesiology or engineering, are a necessary requirement perhaps the buildings must stay. But with libraries having become "digital" libraries with 24 hour

on line access to both books and journal articles, much of the traditional activities associated with the arts and the theoretical aspects of the sciences could be equally well taught and learned on line. It may not be long before many politicians seeking to save money will recommend the closure of those parts of higher educational institutions that do not need for their essence physical contact between teachers and students.

This lack of immediate human educational contact strikes me as a terrible human development in general. The traditional immediate and present relationship both between teachers and students and among students themselves are something that offers many benefits beyond the mere learning of knowledge and techniques. The making of lifelong friendships, or of research partnerships, while not impossible on line, are much more naturally found in face to face encounters. It is perhaps too late to shut down the Internet as so much now hangs on it. But while it has given us new ways of doing things educationally and has also made possible many new ways of developing and encouraging international terrorism, of personal harassment and the destruction of many young lives due to the development of the social media which it has made possible. We can now to see it as something that offers not only new ways of doing many things but also as a potentially destructive force that is now out of the box and hard to control for human good.

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