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29.12.2023

The Corporate University in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

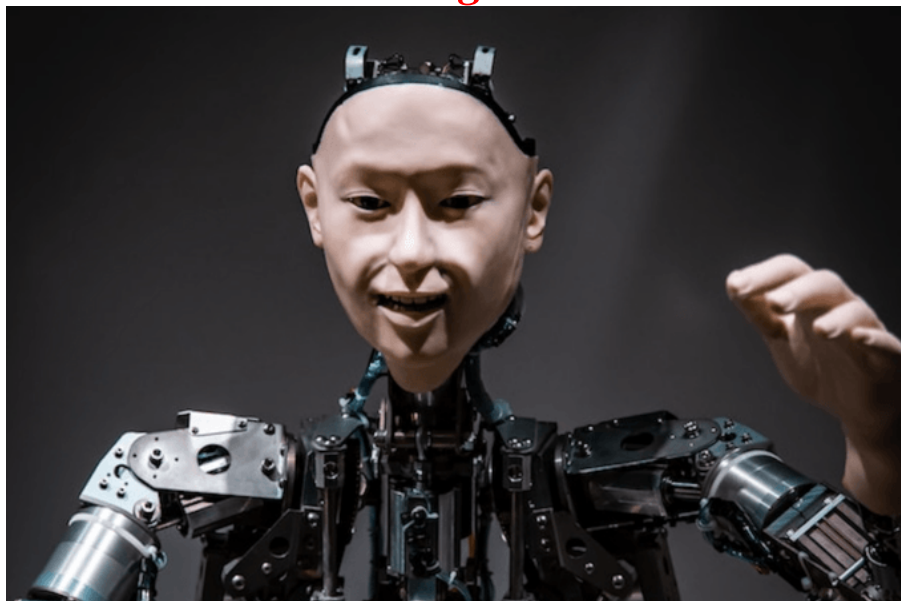


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ChatGPT/AI was supposed to be the next big thing to revolutionize higher education. But based on my students' comments, it is less than underwhelming. But that does not matter.

AI will be the latest tool the corporate university uses to save itself from the neo-liberal education policies it has pursued for the last fifty years.

At the beginning of 2023 ChatGPT/AI took higher education by storm. It was heralded by the likes of [The Chronicle of Higher Education](#), the voice of neo-liberal higher ed, as the next big thing to change teaching and learning. Much like massive open online courses or MOOCs, clickers, interactive whiteboards, Channel One, and a [collection of other ed-](#)

tech concepts driven by profits and cost reduction and not pedagogy or learning theory, it was going to be the savior or demise of higher education as we know it. Yet the road to educational reform is littered with educational technology failures and overhypes.

I decided to see for myself what ChatGPT could do, and embraced it in all of my undergraduate courses in the fall 2023. What my students and I found was a trove of problems. Their ChatGPT searches produced false facts, yielded biased information, and did little to encourage critical thinking—except when I asked my students to think critically about the role of AI in the classroom. They were underwhelmed by it.

Yet AI's value as a teaching and learning tool is secondary to the broader implications of it as another artifice of the corporate university to leverage down costs and enhance revenues at a point when the business plan for higher education is broken.

The corporate university emerged in the 1970s. It is one where colleges increasingly use corporate structures and management styles to run the university. This includes abandoning the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) shared governance model where faculty had an equal voice in the running of the school, including over curriculum, selection of department chairs, deans, and presidents, and determination of many of the other policies affecting the academy. The corporate university replaced the shared governance model with one more typical of a business corporation.

The corporate university was created in response to the emergence of a neo-liberal political philosophy characterized by less government involvement and more faith in market structures. In the case of public universities, the corporate university emerged as a result of dramatic cuts in tax dollars to fund them, forcing upon them a new business plan. The new business plan relied less upon tenured faculty than upon a contingent workforce, standardization of and purchase of pre-paid curriculum, and a growing pool of baby boomers and students willing to pay increasing amounts of tuition for credentials and degrees in a crowded marketplace.

Critical to the corporate university plan was technology. At best a review of the existing literature paints a mixed bag on the deployment of new technology in terms of improved teaching and learning. Yet the “genius” of Apple thirty years ago as I started to teach was to convince schools to overinvest in technology on the premise it improves learning and teaching. In effect, their mantra was “technology drives pedagogy,” not pedagogy drives technology. Over time, one learning technology after another was ostensibly going to revolutionize higher education, a code name less for improving teaching and learning and more as a way to leverage profits and augment the corporate university business plan.

First, it was the for-profit colleges that employed the new technologies but then they were adopted by the rest.

The idea was to use technology, including online courses, to teach more students per class or instructor. Create pre-packaged, recorded courses and curricula and sell them to schools. One could do this and reduce the dependency on full-time faculty. School administrators often speak of all these tech toys as part of “high impact” learning, a phrase that downplays the traditional emphasis on lecture, discussion, reading, research, and writing.

The corporate business model survived until the Great Recession of 2008-09. Since then college enrollment has dropped by more than one million students. It will hemorrhage by 2026 as the so-called enrollment cliff kicks in and colleges will see even fewer students. Combine that with a \$1.8 trillion student loan debt and tuition at pricy colleges that exceed \$80,000 per year and the result is that fewer and fewer students see a university education as worth it.

Enter the new-found excitement for ChatGPT as yet another technological savior for higher education. When it comes to ChatGPT or AI in the classroom its hype and deployment may be driven less by its educational value than by corporate profits or efforts by schools to engage in further cost reductions. At some point, ChatGPT/AI enters the classroom once the corporate university figures out how to monetize it. Look to see schools combine it with MOOCS or other mass curriculum deliveries in the near future as a way to salvage what is left of their failed corporate business plan.

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CounterPunch 28.12.2023