

Sense and Nonsense of the McDonaldization of Education: A Response to John Daniel's "Higher Education for Sale"

John Daniel's editorial note in *Education Today*, the newsletter of UNESCO's Education Sector, of October-December 2002 on "Higher Education for Sale" is shortsighted. The fallacy of Daniel's claim that McDonaldization is good for education lies in its generalization and in its not attending critically to the larger picture of which phenomena like McDonald's, whether the real chain of fast food restaurants or a metaphorical equivalent in some other area providing a readily available and affordable commodity, are part. It also errs in that it assumes implicitly that the learning human being can be defined as the consumer of a product. From a human development perspective the latter assumption is a dangerous proposition.

It is well known from the vast literature on research into the cost-effectiveness of distance education that significant economic gains can be derived from spreading the cost of the labor-intensive process of design and development of high-quality instructional interventions and materials and of the running of supporting educational infrastructure over a large number of potential beneficiaries. In fact, this argument has been used extensively – and with increasing success – in positioning distance education as a viable, and sometimes preferred, alternative to more traditional forms of educational delivery. A similar rationale drives the current trend towards standardization, continual improvement, and reuse of so-called learning objects. As long as

people make wise use of such possibilities to economize by reusing available educational resources and spreading the cost of their use by making them fit the learning needs of many, there is no problem. There is a problem, however, when such principles are being unwisely advocated as a major opportunity to solve the world's educational problems. As much as McDonald's is not a major contributor to solving the world's food problems, commoditization of education is not a major response to the learning needs of the world nor is it necessarily appropriate to the nature of today's most prominent learning needs. In fact, one should apply great caution when using the principles of commoditization if one wants to ensure the integrity of human learning. By comparison, the occasional visit to a McDonald's outlet may not damage anyone's health but the proliferation and generalization of McDonald's-like eating habits definitely will.

Another serious problem lies in the underlying assumption of Daniel's editorial note that all that needs to be done is expanding access to materials and processes that were hitherto in the hands of the traditional schooling systems. No questions are being asked about the appropriateness of those schooling systems for today's world; neither are questions being raised about the meaning of human learning in the context of our turbulently changing planetary society as distinct from the much more linearly conceived world of the past. No prompts are offered that might generate thinking about possibilities to radically change the educational enterprise while we attempt to bring education to all.

Daniel largely misses the point when he responds “yes” to the question he himself poses in his editorial note: “Is the commoditization of learning material a way to bring education to all?” His affirmative response reveals a vision of human learning that gives little attention to what human development should focus on, namely the capacity to constructively interact with a world in change and to creatively contribute to how that world evolves as a place for all of humankind to feel at home. Such human development would focus on exploring diversity instead of feeding ready-made pieces of content.

Daniel’s response also reveals a vision of the educational process that is dangerously narrow as it sees learning in the first place as the consequence of the provision of materials. I believe this to be wrong. While I am aware that the availability of high quality learning materials is often a crucial ingredient of an environment that encourages and facilitates learning, the mere presence of such materials is frequently not a sufficient condition. The learning process – if it is to lead to any reasonable depth of understanding and thus to the development of abilities that allow people to think and act autonomously, contributing to the well-being of their communities and society – is infinitely more complex than what Daniel surmises.

To summarize, I thank John Daniel for having provoked my passion. I hope he and his colleagues in UNESCO will be ready to look beyond the narrow metaphor he proposes in his editorial note and beyond the often too narrow rationales that have driven the EFA movement, contradicting some of the better thinking that emanated from the 1990 World Conference on Education for All. A

more serious look at what actually happens in schools and different alternative structured learning environments around the globe is urgently needed. Learning materials, schools, distance education systems, or teachers are not ends in themselves. They are means that serve social and human development purposes that require a more serious exploration – not by the experts but by the citizens of this planet at large – than what is proposed in Daniel's editorial note.

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