

The Global Virtual University

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This is a new book, published only a few months ago, by authors who have been involved with the early stages of thinking and planning for online higher education, both in real life practice since the 1980's and in their earlier writings on the subject, exemplified by their pioneering book "In Search of the Virtual Class" (Tiffin & Rajasingham, 1995). One might therefore have expected a book that summarizes past experience as a series of case studies of good and not-so-good examples of virtual universities, or maybe one that presents a procedural recipe for the design, implementation and management of such entities. However, this book turns out to be somewhat different. It is not a case study of a specific real-life institution. Nor is it an academic review of such case studies, in search of the principles that might explain the success of the University of Phoenix as opposed to the failure of NYU-Online.

Also, although the book discusses all the major sub-systems of an online university in some detail, it is certainly not a procedural recipe for setting up a virtual university. However, as observed by Professor Donald Hanna in the preface, it is "essential reading for students and faculty within existing universities and for policy makers whose major challenge will be to enable the learning society on a global scale". Rather than presenting cases of success and failure, or algorithms for the design or management of technology-based higher learning institutions, it develops heuristics - ways of thinking about the basic purposes of such institutions and the essential systemic aspects of their operation. It does not address how to make a profit out of E-learning. It does address how to make a difference to the world order.

Chapter one presents an analysis of the the paradigms that underlie the concept and reality of universities, from medieval days to modern times. The main theme may be summarized by the classic French phrase "plus ça change - plus c'est la même chose": the more things change, the more they stay the same. Next, there follows a discussion of the impact that Information Technologies (IT) may/will/should have on both the role and the organizational structure of universities. This chapter includes some quite revolutionary observations on the kinds of technologies that are in line with the emerging paradigms - so unlike the bulk of what currently is occurring in the name of E-learning.

From there, the book moves to a review of the roles of instruction in the modern university and the teaching-learning methods that are appropriate to these roles. Then, three interrelated chapters examine the changes that all this implies in the "eternal triangle" of learning: students, teachers and the knowledge they both use and create. This is followed by a re-examination of the role of research in a modern university and, indeed, the role of a modern university in the conduct of research.

The book concludes with two chapters that come the closest to being a guidebook - though still by means of heuristically-driven principles rather than algorithmic procedures. The penultimate chapter addresses the design of curricula appropriate to a globalized, networked society, by means of presenting and discussing the structure and content of one hypothetical global curriculum for a course on the topic of "globalization". Finally, the last chapter reviews the conclusions of the book so far, integrating them into a model of the ideal global virtual university - a loosely defined model that nevertheless addresses some key real-world preoccupations such as academic accreditation, student assessment, institutional image and "brand name", organizational and operational issues.

One particularly topical issue that is addressed from a variety of perspectives is the debate on the role of higher education in society and the role of governments in the provision, regulation and funding of higher education. This debate has heated up as nations either adhere to or reject the ideas proposed by the UN's International Trade Organization. Should higher education be treated as a "public good" organized by nations for their citizens and largely funded out of public-sector taxation? Or should it be treated as a "commodity" like any other product or service, prepared by specialist organizations in response to market demand and commercial forces, open to relatively free international trade and, ultimately, financed by the end-users - the students or their employers?

This relatively linear, narrative-style description of the book, may give the impression that the authors are "telling a story" or "making a case" for a particular viewpoint or agenda. To leave the analysis at this point would be unjust to the authors. Underlying any book that has a complex message, there is a hidden structure that is alluded to throughout the chapters, but it is for the reader to discover and build upon as the reading progresses. In a book that is as visionary and philosophical as the present, there are probably

many alternative schemata that readers could form in their minds to integrate the many ideas into one synergetic whole. Also, readers inevitably bring their own previous experiences, learnings and paradigms to the reading process, so the schema that one person constructs may be different from the next reader's schema. For what it is worth, let me conclude by presenting the general schema that I formed to reorganize the book in my mind.

In my work and also in my own writing, I have found the systems approach to be of exceptional value as a "language to think with". The authors of this book also use systems concepts and approaches, so I was immediately in tune with the style of writing and many of the basic ideas presented. But what about the hidden structure? My own practical experience in organizational design and development suggested a model of the phases of such projects: establish a VISION for your organization, society, or nation; define a MISSION that will guide further work; design an appropriate STRATEGY; develop the detailed operational TACTICS that are most appropriate and viable in the given context; plan and implement the LOGISTICS that are necessary to make all the previous decisions actually happen.

This model acted as a scaffold upon which to hang the ideas I encountered as I read. I found that I could organize the chapters in relation to each other in a most powerful way. The first chapter, on "the universals of a university" clearly set forth the authors' vision of the university of the future as compared to universities of the past. The second chapter deals with "universities and IT" in a way that jumps from the vision to the logistics, thus closing the conceptual gap between the "what is" of the current impact of technology on education and the authors' views on "what should be" - in this way, the "gap" between the ideal and the current reality is emphasized in all its relevant aspects.

Having established the vision, what about the mission? This is explicitly dealt with in two chapters - chapter three looks at future universities as instructional institutions and chapter seven examines them as research institutions. These chapters are separated in the linear presentation sequence for good reason. The discussion of the instructional mission leads naturally into a deeper discussion of the implications for strategic and tactical planning. These are dealt with in chapters four, five and six, from the standpoint of the instructional mission of the modern university. And it is from this discussion that issues emerge that add support to the key question discussed in chapter seven - whether a research-oriented mission is appropriate, or even sustainable, in the future university.

Having thus addressed the key aspects of the organizational change model, the authors conclude in the last two chapters with a sample of the possible results of a global university planning process that accepts the vision and mission-statements suggested by the authors and then proceeds to a logical, systemic, decision making process in order to plan and implement a specific course.

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