

E-teaching - the Economic Threat to the Ethical Legitimacy of Education?

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that e-teaching, the use of computers and information technology in teaching, can pose moral threats to the legitimacy of the educational process. One of the reasons for this is the strong relation between e-teaching and business interests. The paper will discuss this relationship and why it can be perceived as a moral threat. Briefly, the paper argues that the necessary legitimacy that education enjoys in a high degree is a result of the ethical quality of education. This ethical legitimacy depends on the impartiality of different views and on the fact that all legitimate stakeholders have equal possibilities of influencing the content and processes of education. This equality and impartiality is jeopardized when one stakeholder threatens to dominate the system. This, it is argued, is what threatens to happen when business interests take over as a result of the increasing use of e-teaching.

Keywords: E-Teaching, Ethics, Morality, Business Interest, Capitalism

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper starts with the observation that ethics is relevant to education. From the ancient Greeks to modern theories of development ethics and morality are seen to be closely connected with the process of teaching and learning. Computers and information technology are increasingly used for educational purposes. If one accepts the relationship between ethics and education, this would suggest that e-teaching poses a moral question (cf. Stahl 2002a; 2002b). This paper will start out by briefly discussing these points, and will proceed from them to a more specific ethical problem. E-teaching not only offers a new approach to some of the conventional problems of education, it is also becoming a multi-billion dollar business. Given this development, combined with the moral quality of education, it can be argued that the vested economic interests in e-teaching could become a threat to its moral legitimacy.

The ideas produced in this paper should prove useful to a number of groups with different perspectives. First, there are educators whose activity may lose its traditional legitimacy and high social standing due to particular interests. The second group is comprised of the democratic decision makers who ideally represent the general public and who decide about the framework and the resources dedicated to education. Third, there are the businesses involved in providing e-learning tools. Finally, there are the consumers or clients of education, namely, the students who

are both the beneficiaries and victims of the development of e-teaching. All of these groups influence and are influenced by the triangle of education, IT, and business.

The paper begins by examining the relationship between ethics and e-teaching. The first step is to demonstrate that education is an intrinsically moral process. In the second step, the impact that e-teaching will have on education is outlined and the opportunities and drawbacks of e-teaching in general are discussed. From this, the conclusion is drawn that e-teaching has an ethical impact. The next section will then examine the relationship between e-teaching and business. Four reasons will be discussed why e-teaching is likely to shape the educational process in favor of business interests. It will be argued that businesses not only have a strong interest in e-teaching as a large market opportunity, but that they are already in the process of changing the nature of education in the information society. The fourth section will then discuss in detail the reasons why and how business interests and e-teaching combine to produce an ethical problem in education. The moral character of education depends on its impartiality and this feature is jeopardized if any special interest group dominates education. The conclusion stresses that such a development can endanger the legitimacy of education, thereby calling into question the educational system.

This paper should not be misunderstood as a polemic against e-teaching. As will be discussed, e-teaching offers many new chances and opportunities. It should also not be misconstrued as being anti-business in a simplistic sense;

business interests have played an ever-increasing role in education since the industrial revolution. Instead, the paper argues that the introduction of computers and information technology into teaching can inadvertently strengthen business interests and that such a quantitative change can result in a qualitatively new situation which requires us to reconsider our basic assumptions.

2. ETHICS AND E-TEACHING

The central argument of this paper hinges on the recognition that education and ethics are deeply intertwined. This is important because ethics provides a basis of legitimacy which, albeit often in the background, is of central importance for the role of educational institutions in society. The following section will therefore be used to outline the relationship between ethics and education.

2.1 The Ethical Purpose of Education

There are different tasks that are traditionally associated with education, most of which have an ethical dimension. First of all, education is supposed to support and guide individual development. This is important from an ethical point of view because we know that humans' ethical abilities are subject to development and this development depends, at least partially, on external stimulation (cf. Kohlberg 1981). Even more important than the fact that ethical reflexivity depends on education is the role of moral practice. According to Weil (1998 / 1960) education is moralization; it is the acquisition of a *habitus* which allows the individual to act without self-contradiction. Ricoeur interprets this task of education as the integration of morality, work, tradition, and law, all of which we need for our social existence (Ricoeur 1991). One ethical tradition which stresses the importance of moral formation and education is virtue ethics. Aristotle emphasizes that virtues do not develop by themselves, but that humans are by nature made to absorb and then perfect them through habituation (Aristoteles 1967, Maritain 1960; De George 1999).

Education thus has the dual role of transmitting moral practice as well as facilitating the ethical reflection of that practice. These two roles are included in many other tasks of education that one can find in the literature. A general description of education will sometimes include that it is supposed to develop the person (Hager 1990). Human beings are sometimes understood to have a natural thirst for knowledge (Galbraith 1998); they want to develop the faculty of reason. Reason is the condition of judgment and prudence which leads us back to virtue. The person, as the subject of ethics, needs a character that disposes him or her towards acting morally and that character is developed in education (Gehlen 1997).

Finally, there are several other aspects of education that have a moral quality. It has been a long-held view of many philosophers, starting with Socrates, that in order to achieve happiness one must dedicate oneself to knowledge, truth, contemplation and thinking (Maritain 1960). Education is also the basis of many of the central decisions in life and, in

large parts, it determines individual opportunities (cf. Enderle 1992). These individual opportunities then shape freedom and choices and thus the ability to act morally.

There is also a social viewpoint of these individual aspects of the ethical importance of education. Morality, as the set of rules that are valid in a given society, is a necessary condition of successful social interaction. A society will thus generally have an interest in instilling morality in its members. In order for morality to fulfill this stabilizing and facilitating function, it must have a certain measure of validity and, thus, dependability. Most societies therefore develop measures and institutions for the moral socialization of its members and these tend to be integrated in the formal process of education.

Most of the above observations would be as true for a mediaeval or a tribal society as they are for the information society. However, it is important to note them in our context because they represent the background of a crucial component of education, namely, its legitimacy. Education usually has a high degree of legitimacy and educators are usually highly regarded by the public. The reasons for this are complex, but an important part of them is based on the moral quality of education. We rarely reflect expressly on the justification of education. However, one of the cornerstones of most educational systems, and especially those of Western societies, is the fact that education is simply seen as good and, legitimate in its own right. The growing importance of education in the information society is likely to enforce this aspect. The argument in this paper will be that the possible domination of the educational system, or parts of it, can threaten this legitimacy and, thereby, the entire structure of education as we know it.

2.2 E-Teaching

In order to argue this point, the next step is to take a closer look at the aspect of education in question, namely, e-teaching. In this paper, the term "e-teaching" stands for all uses of information technology in the process of education. The emphasis will be on the use of computers in post-secondary education. This includes computer labs, virtual leaning environments, PDAs in classrooms etc. As a starting point, one can note that e-teaching is increasingly becoming a reality in most universities. There are few universities today without extensive computer facilities and these are increasingly used directly for teaching purposes. This can refer to campus education using computers in class or to distance education (Tress 2000).

The use of IT in teaching holds a huge amount of potential and promise (cf. Alexander 2001). Most of these benefits are either directly or indirectly of a moral nature. In general, the argument for e-teaching is that it improves the learning process. "At its best, technology can facilitate deep exploration and integration of information, high-level thinking, and profound engagement by allowing students to design, explore, experiment, access information, and model complex phenomena" (Goldman et al. 1999). This means that traditional learning is supported, but also that the borders of traditional learning are transcended. Learning

will become possible outside of traditional institutions (Lee 1999) and outside of traditional frameworks. "The world is their [the students'] classroom" (Goldman 1999).

At the same time, empirical research has shown that the use of technology in the right circumstances can in fact improve learning success and overcome some of the barriers to learning found in traditional institutions (Piccoli et al. 2001). While technology may not be a panacea, it "[...] can enable the effective application of constructive, cognitive, collaborative, and socio-cultural models of learning" (Leidner and Jarvenpaa 1995, 288). One of the reasons of this success of e-teaching is that it is closely associated with one of the central features of all educational processes, namely, communication. Communication is the basis of any successful education, no matter what learning model or underlying theory one chooses. Since IT is a tool for the improvement of communication, it stands to reason that its use will result in an improvement of education (Hesketh et al. 1996). Communication can be improved between learners and teachers (Tress 2000), as well as between learners. The latter is of high importance for all constructivist teaching theories and has been proven to significantly influence learning success (Alavi et al. 1995, 296).

Another expected advantage of e-teaching is that it can change the roles in the educational process. Traditionally, teaching in universities is teacher-centered and teachers used to be elevated far above learners. Both of these aspects can be detrimental to learning. Through the use of computers students' attitudes improve and learning becomes more student-centered (Piccoli et al. 2001). Traditional instructional modes are often not suited to the use of technologies and will therefore have to be changed (Alavi 1994). The change of roles implies that the paradigm will change from push to pull, meaning that while the students will be allowed and required to take greater control of their own education, the instructor's role will change to that of a facilitator or coach (Ives and Jarvenpaa 1996). While all of these developments seem to increase the students' freedom and choice and should lead to empowerment, there is also a downside to e-teaching that has some related moral problems.

The most general critique of e-teaching is that it does not live up to the promises listed in the preceding paragraphs. Concerning the efficiency argument, for example, research has shown that while most participants agree that e-teaching reduces cost; there is very little evidence to support those claims (Yetton 1997). Another fear is that even those improvements in student interest and attitude that can be measured, are not in fact caused by the use of IT but only by the novelty of the situation (Alavi et al. 1995; Leidner and Jarvenpaa 1995). Generally, there seems to be a feeling that excessive enthusiasm about e-teaching is not appropriate. Davenport and Prusak's argument, which originally aims at knowledge management, is clearly applicable to e-teaching: "The assumption that technology

can replace human knowledge or create its equivalent has proven false time and again." (Davenport and Prusak 1998)

Among the more specific points of criticism of e-teaching, there is the dilemma of technology versus content: the problem is that the attempt to use a new medium can lead to a disproportionate emphasis on the medium itself, which causes neglect of the educational content. The medium becomes the message. It is what Goldman et al. (1999) call the "flash over substance" phenomenon. Even though most educators would probably agree that "in the best of classrooms, technology (electronic or otherwise) should support the curriculum, not determine it" (Hall 2000), the real-life requirements often work in a different direction. A related problem is that transferring education from traditional methods to computer-mediated environments is not as simple as it may seem. The effort related to doing so can be extremely high and this can turn the efficiency argument around. It could be argued that given the cost and effort expended on e-teaching, the resulting gain in educational improvement are not justified (Lytras and Pouloudi 2001).

A final problem worth mentioning here is that in order for e-teaching to be successful, teachers and learners must fulfill several non-trivial conditions. They must have a certain level of proficiency in using computers. It has been shown that familiarity with computers is necessary for successful e-teaching (Piccoli et al. 2001; Leidner and Jarvenpaa 1995), but there are also other, less tangible conditions, such as computer self-efficacy. This refers to a judgment of one's capability to use a computer and it leads into the areas of psychological requirements, the ability to work unsupervised, a general attitude toward technology etc. These requirements, if not met, can jeopardize even the best-prepared attempt of e-teaching (Compeau and Higgins 1995).

Despite all of these (potential) problems of e-teaching one can hear relatively little of them in public discourses. Strengths of e-teaching are emphasized, often without any sort of evidence, whereas weaknesses are systematically blended out, again disregarding any evidence. Discourse analysis of discourses relating to e-teaching have shown that published statements are one-sided and in favor of e-teaching (Cukier, Middleton & Bauer 2003).

2.3 E-Teaching and Business

There are several points linking business and e-teaching. Since this paper argues that the domination of education by economic interests can produce ethical problems, it will first have to show that such an argument is tenable. This will be done by showing that e-teaching is a huge market, that vocational training increasingly replaces traditional education, that education is turning into a commodity, and, finally, by showing that economic interests are starting to dominate other aspects of the information society as well.

2.4 E-Teaching as a Market

If economic interests are seen as a threat to the moral integrity of e-teaching, then it has to be demonstrated that businesses have an interest in it in the first place. This can be done by showing that teaching in general, and e-teaching in particular, are businesses in their own right. Americans alone spend \$740 billion annually on education and training (Tress 2000). An increasing share of this ever-growing amount is going to be spent in those areas where information technology is used. It is predicted that education on demand to homes, schools, and workplaces will be a relevantly bigger business than entertainment on demand (Ives and Jarvenpaa 1996). This means that the size of the market alone will probably be enough to produce increasing competition between different players. Among them, one can find those service providers and businesses which are in the game to make profits (cf. Ruttenberg, Spickler, and Lurie 2000). On the other hand, there are the educational institutions, especially the third level education institutions such as colleges and universities. In fact, the competition between universities, for those students who are able and willing to pay for their services, has long started. Increasingly, universities have identified the use of new technologies in teaching and learning as a critical success factor. Many of them hope to be able to gain a competitive advantage by introducing technology. We are already at the point where the lack of technical facilities is a clear disadvantage. "The universities which get IT right will attract resources; those that get it wrong will not. There will be winners and losers." (Yetton 1997). Similar sentiments can frequently be found and it seems to be beyond doubt that most universities are more or less willing participants in this competition (cf. Hesketh et al. 1996; Tress 2000; Ives and Jarvenpaa 1996).

2.6 E-Teaching and Vocational Training

Another aspect of the relationship of business interests and e-teaching is that of vocational training. Starting with the industrial revolution, the focus of education started changing from lofty humanist aims, such as enlightenment, personal happiness, and knowledge for its own sake, to more mundane objectives. The industrialized economy needed workers with a higher level of skills, which led to pressure on educational institutions to provide these workers with the necessary skills. This development is still accelerating because of the pressures in the knowledge societies towards more skills and knowledge. Nowadays few universities can resist the call for providing their students with skills that are deemed to be in demand in the labor market. This increased influence of business interests on education is hastened by the use of information technology. IT is one of the reasons why additional skills are being sought. It is also part of the solution of the problem how these skills can be transmitted.

Thus, it can be argued that the potential gains to be made from the market for e-teaching will encourage business interests to further align themselves with third level education institutions. If left unchecked, this could lead to the commoditization of education. This means that

education could be seen as a commodity, as something to be bought and sold. Such a view would be contradictory to the ethical aspect of education. Ethics, no matter according to which theory, is never supposed to be subject to market forces. As soon as it becomes something to be bought and sold, it loses its ethical quality, its normatively binding force, and thus any legitimating power.

2.5 The Commoditization of Information

In the past, information was something that could either be freely shared or closely guarded as it could possibly provide its holder with power and riches. For most of human history, however, information has not been seen as property in a sense comparable to property in physical objects. This has changed in the wake of the international spread of capitalist economic frameworks and the increased importance of information. Capitalist markets tend to judge everything in light of their exchange value and thus regard it as a tradable good.

This commoditization of information has extended to everything related to information as well. "What largely drives computer sprawl at the moment is the marketplace. Opportunities to make significant amounts of money are plentiful, and many, many people are aware of these opportunities." (Moor 2000, 35). This refers to the computing infrastructure, often called the GII (Global Information Infrastructure as well as the entire socio-economic-technical system that we call the Internet (cf. Chapman and Rotenberg 1995). The economic exploitation of the Internet requires information to be treated as a commodity and it also requires several other changes to our commonly shared definitions.

A look at other areas of ICT with ethical importance can support the view that business interests lead to commoditization. The development of intellectual property regulation, for example, can be read as a case study of how economic interests can overpower other viewpoints with the purpose of facilitating profits. Another example is privacy which is increasingly breached through economically motivated surveillance. These are complex issues in their own right that this paper cannot do justice to. However, it should be conceded that there is a considerable number of authors who are critical of the developments because they seem to promote business interests to the detriment of other legitimate interests.

2.6 Ethical Problems of the Business Domination of E-Teaching

So far it has been argued that teaching is a moral activity and that business interests threaten to dominate it, especially through new developments such as e-teaching. In the final part of the paper, we will attempt to demonstrate that these two aspects are contradictory, that is, that a business domination of education and e-teaching would run counter to the moral premise of education and that this may endanger the legitimacy of e-teaching.

3. THE MORAL RELEVANCE OF BUSINESS INTERESTS

Why would business interest in education pose a moral problem? At the heart of the answer to this question is the idea of impartiality. All of the great ethical theories from Aristotelian virtue ethics over utilitarianism to Kantian deontology emphasize the equality of all of their subjects and the importance of the impartiality for the acceptability of moral judgments. Impartiality seems to be an axiom of our modern understanding of ethics and without it no theory can lay claim to ethical acceptability. A similar claim can be made for education. Whether teaching is based on an objectivist or a constructivist world view, its aim is always to convey knowledge and meaning in an independent, unbiased, and unprejudiced way. That means that no single position should be preferred in teaching and that all the relevant viewpoints must be considered. This impartiality axiom of teaching and ethics is reflected in many of the approaches to applied ethics that are prevalent nowadays. The stakeholder approach to business ethics, for example, or the discursive approach to technological ethics, can easily be described as being based on the assumption that all of the involved parties are equal and that the process that leads to moral outcomes must be impartial.

The dominance of any given voice in a discourse threatens this impartiality and that is exactly what the strong position of business interests does in e-teaching. While businesses are a legitimate stakeholder in e-teaching, they are only one group among many, and, arguably, they are not the most important one. De George summarizes the complex relationship between business and university as follows:

"The autonomy of the university is a paradox for some in that it is financially supported by the state or by donors and/or by the tuition and fees paid by students. Yet those who pay the piper do not get to call the tune. The university is accountable to its supporters; but it is primarily accountable for fulfilling its mission, which they presumably endorse."

At the same time that we see that business interests cannot have a decisive say in educational matters, there is evidence that strong business interests tend to take over the different areas they are interested. In fact, in other fields the commercialization and commodification that resulted from the strengthening of business interests has been described as negative and immoral. The most pertinent example in this case is the Internet, whose originally libertarian framework is being completely remodeled due to, and in accordance with, business interests (cf. Yoon 1996).

3.1 Consequences of Business Domination of E-Teaching

With regards to the problems arising from the mix of e-teaching and business interests, there are several areas one can look at. First, there is the question of the quality of education. While this is a difficult and highly contentious topic in the first place, it becomes even more difficult to

handle in e-teaching. To give an example: most universities today offer some kind of introduction to computers and that usually includes an introduction to the standard software used in business, namely, Microsoft Office. This sort of education is especially suited for automation and e-teaching. The e-teaching applications for standard software tend to include automatic assessments which allow the students to check their progress but which can also be used for grading. In this scenario, where students learn something about software by using computers, getting graded automatically raises the questions regarding who determines what is taught, what the standards are, what the aim is etc. The strong influence of business views can affect quality issues and quality relates back to the moral legitimacy.

Another big area of moral problems that is related to business interests in e-teaching is the question of access. Access to education, especially higher education, is determined by many different factors. One of them is the financial aspect. The more expensive education is, the less likely the poorer members of a society are to be able to avail of it. While different societies have different views on how the access to education should be distributed, few would argue that being poor should be an insurmountable obstacle. A dominance of business interests in e-teaching would mean that the price of education would rise and that only those students would be considered interesting that have the means to pay for it. Of course there could be grants, scholarships, etc. in order to alleviate the problem. As a general tendency, however, those students from a financially less endowed background would likely be forced out of the system.

Another problem with access is that e-teaching uses the IT resources that are available and increasingly the Internet. The Internet is very much America-centered and requires skills and possessions which are distributed unequally. That means that the access problem appears not only on the level of an individual society but even more so on an international level. Again, business interests are not the only root of the problem, but it is clear that businesses have little incentive to do anything about it, since providing access to the third world will not lead to profits. It is part of the constitution of market economies that business activity is aimed at those markets where profits can be made. The market for education in the third world is generally not very promising. While one can agree with Fagin (2000) when he states that absolute equality of access to information is not achievable, the question remains how much equality of access is deemed desirable and should be provided by universities or states.

This leads to the last and most fundamental ethical problem of e-teaching; it changes our basic assumptions about education and moves it further down the line toward being a business. There are many tacit assumptions and consequences of e-teaching that we may or may not agree with, but that simply appear when it is introduced. On a very basic level, there is the question that needs to be asked

whenever someone teaches someone else: what is the purpose of teaching? E-teaching often suggests a vocational purpose to education because it is mostly used to transfer specific skills. "What we need to consider about the computer has nothing to do with its efficiency as a teaching tool. We need to know in what ways it is altering our conception of learning" (Postman 1992, 19) E-teaching also supposes a certain sort of metaphysics, usually an objectivist world-view, which is a particular view that cannot claim impartiality. The combination of e-teaching and business interests leads to a strengthening of the idea of competition in education. Although this can be a good thing, and competition between students is often seen as a way to improve results, we should realize that competition, by definition, produces losers and there needs to be a discussion about how many losers in the educational game society is willing to accept and how it wants to deal with them. Finally, the move of e-teaching into universities seems unstoppable and it looks like the moral questions regarding access, competition and impartiality have been taken out of the hands of decision makers. That would mean that our freedom is reduced by e-teaching which, in itself, is a moral problem.

None of these problems are unique to e-teaching. Questions of access, competition, content, examination, and especially the role and meaning of education are constants in every educational system. The argument here is that the use of e-teaching processes or tools has the potential to strengthen one interest group, namely, business interests, to the detriment of others. E-teaching can lead to the exclusion of the less well-off, it can promote business interests in a clandestine way and it can change our perception of education without our becoming aware of it. This is where the danger lies and where this paper aims to promote discussion. The impartiality of education, which used to be guaranteed through formalisms and processes such as academic freedom, may come under threat without the main stakeholders noticing it. This is where e-teaching can pose a threat to education and this is what the paper hopes to draw attention to.

4. CONCLUSION

This article tried to demonstrate that the use of computers and information technology in education, especially higher education, can pose a moral problem because of the business interests that it involves. Education has been shown to be a deeply moral activity that relies on its generally accepted legitimacy. This is where the argument presented in this paper becomes interesting. If the thesis is correct and e-teaching has the potential to threaten the moral underpinnings of education, and thereby its legitimacy, then we are looking at a problem that educators, as well as educational administrators, politicians and the public at large will have to deal with.

A first exploratory study (cf. Stahl 2002b) has shown that at least from the students' point of view the economic implications of e-teaching pose an ethical problem. While

this research was confined to a small and perhaps unrepresentative group, it does suggest that there may be some truth to this thesis. Then the next question will be: how can we deal with the ethical problems related to e-teaching? While there seems to be no easy answer to this, it seems clear that it will require some fundamental questioning of our activities. We will need to go back to the question of the purpose of education and we will probably require individual, as well as institutional, measures to ensure the continuing legitimacy of our educational system. This paper does not aim at prescribing the measures to be taken. If it did it would commit the same fallacy of dominating the idea of education that it ascribes to e-teaching and business interests. Instead the paper was intended to raise awareness and the author would see it as successful if it helped start a discussion about what role we see for education and how we can use technology in this frame.

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