Essay critiques the ideas of Clay Shirky and others advocating higher ed disruption

Submitted by Aaron Bady on December 6, 2012 - 3:00am

Clay Shirky is a big thinker, and I read him because he's consistently worth reading. But he's not always right -- and his thinking (and the flaws in it) is typical of the unquestioning enthusiasm of many thinkers today about technology and higher education. In his recent piece on "Napster, Udacity, and the Academy," [1] for example, Shirky is not only guardedly optimistic about the ways that MOOCs and online education will transform higher education, but he takes for granted that they will, that there is no alternative. Just as inevitably as digital sharing turned the music industry on its head, he pronounces, so it is and will be with digital teaching. And as predictably as rain, he anticipates that "we" in academe will stick our heads in the sand, will deny the inevitable -- as the music industry did with Napster -- and will "screw this up as badly as the music people did." His views are shared by many in the "disruption" school of thought about higher education.

I suspect that if you agree with Clay Shirky that teaching is analogous to music, then you are likely to be persuaded by his assertion that Udacity -- a lavishly capitalized educational startup company -- is analogous to Napster. If you are not impressed with this analogy, however, you will not be impressed by his argument. And just to put my cards on the table, I am not very impressed with his argument. I think teaching is very different from music; that it is so different as to make the comparison obscure a lot more than it reveals.

But the bigger problem is that this kind of argument is weighted against academics, virtually constructed so as to make it impossible for an academic to reply. If you observe that "institutions will try to preserve the problem to which they are the solution," after all -- what has been called "The Shirky Rule" [2] -- it can be easy to add the words "all" and "always" to a sentence in which they do not belong. This not a principle or a rule; it's just a thing that often happens, and often is not always. But if you make the mistake of thinking that it is, you can become uniformly prejudiced against "institutions," since you literally know in advance what they will do and why. Because you understand them better than they understand themselves -- because they don't or can't realize that they are simply "institutions" -- you can explain things about them that they can neither see, nor argue against. "Why are you so defensive?" you ask, innocently, and everything they say testifies against them.

If someone like me -- a graduate student for many years, currently trying to find an academic job -- looks at MOOCs and online education, and sees the downsides very clearly, it's also true that no one has a more strongly vested interest in arguing the benefits of radically transforming the academe than Clay Shirky and a number of others who talk about the inevitability of radical change. As Chuck Klosterman unkindly put it, [3] once, "Clay Shirky must argue that the Internet is having a positive effect -- it's the only reason he's publicly essential."

Which is not to say that Shirky is wrong, simply that he must prove, not presume, that he is right.

I have to go through this excessively long wind-up because of the ways that Shirky has stacked the rhetorical deck in his favor. He uses the word "we" throughout his piece, and in this powerful final paragraph, he hammers us over the head with it, so precisely that we might mistake it for a caress:

"In the academy, we lecture other people every day about learning from history. Now it's our turn, and the risk is that we'll be the last to know that the world has changed, because we can't imagine — really cannot imagine — that story we tell ourselves about ourselves could start to fail. Even when it's true. Especially when it's true."

But what do you mean "we," Mr. Distinguished Writer in Residence? I asked Shirky on Twitter if he considered himself primarily an academic, and though he didn't respond, it's important that he frames his entire post as if he's an insider. But while it's certainly true that I am biased in favor of academic labor continuing to exist in something like its present form, he is no less biased by having nothing to lose and everything to gain if academe is flipped on its head. And yet the cumulative rhetorical effect of his framing is to remind us that no one within the institution can speak knowledgeably about their institution, precisely because of their location within it; when Shirky speaks of "we" academics, he does so only to emphasize that "we" can't imagine that the story we tell ourselves is wrong.

It's because he is willing to burn the village to save it that Shirky can speak for and of academe. Because Shirky never has to show evidence that online education will ever be any good; he notes an academic's assessment [4] of a Udacity course as "amazingly, shockingly awful" and is then, apparently, satisfied when Udacity admitted [5] that its courses "can be improved in more than one way." A defensive blog post written by Udacity's founder is enough to demonstrate that change for the better is happening. And when the academic who criticized the Udacity course mentions a colleague whose course showed some of the same problems -- but does not name the colleague -- Shirky is triumphant. The academic in question "could observe every aspect of Udacity's Statistics 101 (as can you) and discuss them in public," Shirky observes, "but when criticizing his own institution, he pulled his punches."

This is Clay Shirky's domain, and also the domain of so many others who point to one or another failing of traditional higher ed to suggest...
that radical change is needed. The anecdote that illustrates something larger. In this case, the fact that academe is a "closed" institution means it cannot grow, change, or improve. By contrast, "[open systems are open] seems to be the end of the discussion; when he contemplates the openness of a MOOC, the same definitional necessity applies. "It becomes clear," he writes, "that open courses, even in their nascent state, will be able to raise quality and improve certification faster than traditional institutions can lower cost or increase enrollment." It becomes clear because it is clear, because "open" is better, because it is open.

But how "open" is Udacity, really? Udacity's primary obligation is to its investors. That reality will always push it to squeeze as much profit out of its activities as it can. This may make Udacity better at educating, but it also may not; the job of a for-profit entity is not to educate, but to profit, and it will. There's nothing necessarily wrong with for-profit education -- and most abuses can be traced back to government deregulation, not tax status -- but the idea that "openness," as such, will magically transform how a business does business is a massively begged question. A bit of bad press can get Sebastian Thrun to write a blog post promising change, but actually investing the resources necessary to follow through on that is actually a very different question. The fact that someone like Shirky takes him at face value -- not only gives him the benefit of the doubt, but seems to have no doubt at all -- speaks volumes to me.

Meanwhile, did the academic that Shirky criticizes really "pull his punches"? Did he refrain from naming his colleague because of the way academics instinctively shield each other from criticism? It's far from clear; if you read the original blog post, in fact, it's not even apparent that the academic knew who this "colleague" actually was. All we really know is that a student referred to something her "last teacher" did. But suppose he did know who this student's last teacher was; suppose the student mentioned the teacher by name. Would it be appropriate to post someone's name on the Internet just because a secondhand source told you something bad about them? Does that count as openness?

Open vs. closed is a useful conceptual distinction, but when it comes down to specific cases, these kinds of grand narratives can mislead us. For one thing, far from the kind of siege mentality that characterized an industry watching its business model go up in smoke -- an industry that was not interested in giving away its product for free -- academics are delighted to give away their products for free, if they can figure out a way to do it. Just about every single public and nonprofit university in the country is working to develop digital platforms for education, or thinking hard about how they can. This doesn't mean they are doing it successfully, or well; time will tell, and the proof will be in the pudding. But to imagine that Silicon Valley venture capitalists are the only people who see the potential of these technologies requires you to ignore the tremendous work that academics are currently doing to develop new ways of doing what they do. The most important predecessors to MOOCs, after all, were things like Massachusetts Institute of Technology's OpenCourseWare, designed entirely in the spirit of openness and not in search of profit.

The key difference between academics and venture capitalists, in fact, is not closed versus open but evidence versus speculation. The thing about academics is that they require evidence of success before declaring victory, while venture capitalists can afford to gamble on the odds. While Shirky can see the future revolutionizing in front of us, he is thinking like a venture capitalist when he does, betting on optimism because he can afford to lose. He doesn't know that he's right; he just knows that he might not be wrong. And so, like all such educational futurologists, Shirky's case for MOOCs is all essentially defensive: he argues against the arguments against MOOCs, taking shelter in the possibility of what isn't, yet, but which may someday be.

For example, instead of arguing that MOOCs really can provide "education of the very best sort," Shirky explicitly argues that we should not hold them to this standard. Instead of thinking in terms of quality, we should talk about access: from his perspective, the argument against MOOCs is too narrowly focused on the "18-year-old who can set aside $250k and four years" and so it neglects to address students who are not well-endowed with money and time. "Outside the elite institutions," Shirky notes, "the other 75 percent of students — over 13 million of them — are enrolled in the four thousand institutions you haven't heard of." And while elite students will continue to attend elite institutions, "a good chunk of the four thousand institutions you haven't heard of provide an expensive but mediocre education."

This is a very common argument from MOOC boosters, because access is a real problem. But while a "good chunk" of 13 million students are poorly served by the present arrangement, it is quite telling that his example of "expensive but mediocre education" is Kaplan and the University of Phoenix, for-profit institutions that are beloved by the same kinds of venture capitalists who are funding Udacity. He is right: For-profit education has amassed a terrible track record of failure. If you are getting a degree from a for-profit institution, you probably are paying too much for too little. But would it be any less mediocre if it were free?

Udacity's courses are free to consumers (though not, significantly, to universities), at least for now. And Shirky is not wrong that "demand for knowledge is so enormous that good, free online materials can attract extraordinary numbers of people from all over the world." But Shirky doesn't mean "demand" in the economic sense: demand for a free commodity is just desire until it starts to pay for the thing it wants. Why have we stopped aspiring to provide the real thing for everyone? That's the interesting question, I think, but if we begin from the distinction between "elite" and "non-elite" institutions, it becomes easy to take for granted that "non-elite students" receiving cheap education is something other than giving up. It is important to note that when online education boosters talk about "access," they explicitly
do not mean access to "education of the best sort"; they mean that because an institution like Udacity provides teaching for free, you can’t complain about its mediocrity. It’s not an elite institution, and it’s not for elite students. It just needs to be cheap.

Talking in terms of "access" (instead of access to what?) allows people like Shirky to overlook the elephant in the room, which is the way this country used to provide inexpensive and high-quality education to all sorts of people who couldn’t afford to go to Yale -- people like me and my parents. While state after state is defunding its public colleges and universities (and so tuition is rising while quality is declining), the vast majority of American college students are still educated in public colleges and universities, institutions that have traditionally provided very high-quality mass higher education, and which did it nearly for free barely a generation ago.

"Access" wouldn’t even be a problem if we didn’t expect mass higher education to still be available: Americans only have the kind of reverence for education that we have because the 20th century made it possible for the rising middle class to have what had previously been a mark of elite status, a college education. But the result of letting these public institutions rot on the vine is that a host of essentially parasitic institutions -- like Udacity -- are sprouting like mushrooms on the desire for education that was created by the existence of the world’s biggest and best public mass higher education system.

Shirky talks dismissively about his own education, at Yale, and recalls paying a lot of money to go to crowded lectures and then to discussion sections with underpaid graduate students. Let me counter his anecdote with my own, When I was a high school student, in Appalachian Ohio, I told my guidance counselor that I wanted to go to Harvard, and he made me understand that people from Fairland High School do not really go to Harvard. I was a dumb high school student, so I listened to him. But although both of my parents worked in West Virginia, they had moved to Ohio when I was young so that I could go to Ohio schools, and this meant that although my grades were only moderately good -- and I had never had access to Advanced Placement classes -- I was able to apply to Ohio State University, get in, afford it, and get an education that was probably better than the one that Shirky got at Yale, and certainly a heck of a lot cheaper. My parents paid my rent, but I paid my tuition myself -- with part time jobs and $20,000 in loans -- and I didn’t have a single class in my major with more than 30 students. I had one-on-one access to all of my professors, and I took advantage of it.

It’s a lot harder to do this now, of course; tuition at Ohio State is more than double what it was when I started in 1997. More important, you not only pay a lot more if you go to a school like Ohio State, you’re also a lot less likely to get in; the country’s college-age population has continued to grow, but the number of acceptance letters that public universities like OSU send out has not increased. As Mike Konczal and I have argued, this shortfall in quality higher education creates what economists call "fake supply." If you don’t get in to a college specializing in education "of the best sort" (or if your guidance counselor tells you not to apply), where do you go, if you go? You go to an online university, to Kaplan, or maybe now you try a MOOC or a public college relying on MOOCs to provide general education, as Texas now envisions. Such things are better than nothing. But "nothing" only seems like the relevant point of comparison if we pretend that public higher education doesn’t exist. And if we ignore the fact that we are actively choosing to let it cease to exist.

Beware anyone who tries to give you a link to WebMD as a replacement for seeing a real doctor.

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Editorial Tags: MOOCs [9]

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