

## Adult Education as Snake Oil under the Guise of Democracy

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**Abstract: Based on initial content analysis research into the semiotics of advertising for online learning, this paper extends our understanding of the commodification of education via the web by carefully examining the implications of this marketing on the goals of democracy, the just distribution of education and knowledge as resources, and the consequent impact on social justice and equity.**

### Introduction

*Advertising manipulates symbols to create meaning and in our society, the values expressed in advertising mirror the dominant ideological themes. ...by circulating and recirculating certain myths advertising shapes our attitudes and beliefs, and that by learning how to critically deconstruct advertisements we can begin to move away from the role of spectator to become participants in the making and remaking of ourselves and a more democratic society.*

--Cornel West, 1990

Not many people would suggest that the online education movement actively excludes certain populations. In fact, there is much stronger evidence that most believe this will be the opening of the university gates to democratize access to higher learning. American politicians are happy to extol the virtues of technology and the promise of democracy as delivered through this "open access" medium. Al Gore in a 1998 speech to the 15th International ITU Conference said, "We have a chance to extend knowledge and prosperity to our most isolated inner cities, to the barrios, the favelas, the colonias and our most remote rural villages; to bring 21st Century learning and communication to places that don't even have phone service today; ...to strengthen democracy and freedom by putting it on-line." No one would overtly deny access to online learning, but the reality is that the doors are NOT open to all. There are many subtle ways this discrimination, which seems particularly predicated on class, takes hold. One of the most insidious is the fundamental messages being sent through advertisements for online learning programs. As Cunningham (1993) states, "If one listens carefully to the language, one hears the politics" (p. 13). Indeed, advertising is language of a very particular sort. We are concerned by the ways in which this new media may serve to commodify education--to make learning a "thing" which can be easily purchased. One of the main methods by which this commodification occurs is through the marketing of online learning programs. This is the sort of critical issue which we must address in order to more fully understand the online learning enterprise as an entire system and the ways in which this system serves to perpetuate hegemonies of class, race, and gender. Deconstructing the ads from a semiotic perspective, while illustrative, is insufficient.

This analysis must also lead us to understand the ways in which the online learning enterprise, as exemplified in these ads, panders to market forces which subsequently do damage to democratic ideals, the equitable distribution of knowledge and learning, and social justice as a movement. This paper is primarily intended to consider online learning, as exemplified in its advertising, as a fundamentally flawed enterprise that is contributing to inequities in American society.

Because online adult education is so clearly aligned with "learning for earning" (Cunningham, 1992), we think that online education advertisements should carry a warning label, similar to that of cigarettes, alcohol, or Ginko Biloba. Something like, "Neither the FDA nor the DOE have reviewed this degree program for its equity or fairness and no implied promises of a more democratic society are inherent in this program." Most of the conceptual and research work currently underway within distance education today has a decidedly pro-innovation bias (Hara & Kling, 1999) but a few critical works are beginning to emerge (Noble, 1998, 1999). This paper is a necessary contribution to the critiques of the online learning enterprise as it examines the underlying messages that are sent by online education marketers to potential students and the implications of those messages for social justice. We start by discussing the semiotics of the market-driven process of advertising. Turning our attention to a clear description of three sample ads, we analyze the ways in which these ads contribute to covert messages about who should and should not obtain, or purchase, the knowledge that is for sale; who is welcomed into the new online learning revolution and, more importantly, who is not. These covert messages aimed at adult learners exacerbate the unequal distribution of knowledge, social inequities and subsequently cause adult education, as exemplified in online learning, to fall out of alignment with the ideals of democracy.

### **Marketing Online Learning: Reach Out and Touch Someone**

While online learning opportunities are proliferating at an ever accelerating rate, the marketing of online education programs and degrees remains relatively unresearched. From prior research (Carr-Chellman & Carr-Chelman, forthcoming), the main messages have to do with assurances of ease, convenience, and personal, individual advancement. Nevertheless, the importance of brand sensitivity (Blumenstyk, 1999) and famous professors should not be ignored (Beer, 1999). Advertisements are manipulative -- there's nothing new about that. They are designed to make us feel a lack; we are to recognize, in the wake of viewing a particular advertisement, that our lives will be more complete, fulfilled and happy only if we purchase that particular product. Part of the psychology of manipulation in advertising and marketing is based on a notion of "bad faith". Coming from the existentialist tradition (Sartre 1966)), bad faith is a kind of self-deception whereby we want more than anything else to become something we are not or can not become or perhaps should not want to become. Marketing and advertising force us into daily battles against this bad faith: there is nothing inherently inadequate about my existence or yours but our market-obsessed culture convinces us otherwise. Therefore, the marketer doesn't sell you the product, but rather convinces you that you need the product...not necessarily because it, in itself possesses something of quality, but because your life will be better for the purchase. This is the essence of the snake oil analogy. Supposedly a good marketer can "sell anybody anything". It is our contention that this "sell anything" attitude has saturated what has come to be called web-based degree programs such that these degrees have lost touch with the substance of higher

education. This is a process that, in the critical, Marxian tradition (Adorno, 1999) has come to be called commodification.

This commodification is a by-product of the ideological nature of most advertising, a nature that imposes on an unwitting observer the self-interested desires of the producer. It is part of the function of this ideology to usurp the self-interest of consumers with the message of the ad. This seemingly impossible trick of the eye is successfully created, in most cases, by relatively complex imagery. The symbols of these images within advertisements create structures by which we can, in a logical fashion, unpack the apparent significance of its message. This unpacking will locate the ideology of the ad, effectively defusing what was once a powerful manipulative tool. There is nothing ambiguous about these signs/advertisements; it is assumed by the marketer that the signified meaning -- ease, success, convenience, popularity, happiness -- is clearly conveyed by these images. This signified meaning is what we have called ideology, i.e., the sign is not characterized by a definite meaning but by a plurality of meanings. Consequently, there is no clear and definite connection between the signifier and the signified. There is no necessary, actual, real connection between these elements of the sign. The marketer is producing an ideologically charged sign, hoping that the addressee will assume that there is a necessary connection between the signifier and the signified. The signifier is necessarily ambiguous, constituted by a multiplicity of meanings -- its relationship to the referent is arbitrary and any attempt to make it otherwise is ideological. If an ad cannot persuade, if it cannot suck you into its ideological domain, its impotence on a rational level renders it ineffectual as a manipulative tool.

"What is arbitrary is the relation between this sign and the reality it names, in other words, the relation between the language symbol in its totality and the real outside which it symbolizes" (Kristeva, 1989, p. 16). It is this arbitrary aporia, this space or gap in meaning between the sign itself and the reality to which it refers, that permits manipulation on the part of an advertisement. Every advertisement has this ideological gap into which is stuffed whatever meaning a marketer determines will most effectively move merchandise. The key to "undressing the ad" is recognizing this gap. This recognition permits the text's inherent resistance to meaning -- its ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings -- to resurface, and subsequently defuse the persuasive power of a once effective ad.

### **Knowledge for Sale: Critiques of the Ads**

For the purposes of the earlier work, (Carr-Chelman & Carr-Chelman, forthcoming), we examined more than 20 advertisements; 19 sets of promotional materials, and 35 related web sites from 35 distance education institutions including traditional universities, distance education specialty universities, and corporate education providers (a.k.a. corporate universities). We screened these ads and categorized them according to certain themes. We then conducted a semiotic analysis of these ads. This paper extends that analysis to look at the ads through a more critical lens--to examine the ways in which these ads specifically contribute to the unequitable distribution of knowledge and learning experiences--to understand how these ads undermine democratic ideals.

As a starting point for our analysis we looked at the literature in advertising contentanalysis (Kassarjian, 1977; Kolbe & Burnett, 1991). We found Frith's (1997) work on cultural meanings

in advertising particularly useful. Cultural meanings rely on the assumed cultural background of the reader. This is perhaps the trickiest analysis of the advertisement because it relies on shared beliefs and common culture which may not always be assumed. In our case, the most important meaning to be uncovered was the ideological meaning (Frith's cultural meaning), the meaning forced into the sign - the ad - by marketers, and we focused on understanding the implications of that meaning with a critical social justice perspective. Below we describe each ad and the ways in which it targets certain populations and contributes to hegemony.

### **Advertisement #1: Penn State's World Campus**

This first ad, found in an engineering trade journal, highlights the traditional Penn State "Old Main" building which many alumni associate with Penn State's University Park (main) campus. In bold text, the word "Advance" is featured prominently in the center of the ad which emphasizes opportunities to become a leader in the engineering industry. A web address in bold is placed just above the Penn State crest and logo for world campus. The signified message of this ad is that if you buy a World Campus certificate program in Engineering, you will Advance with ease and convenience "without leaving home or work" with the blessings of the good name of Penn State as evidenced by the signifiers of Old Main and the Penn State crest. The use of these traditional university markers would tend to appeal primarily to those who may have considered a traditional university as a possibility for their futures but had perhaps been unable financially. The clean look and globe have a corporate underlying message, appealing particularly to working adults. Many of the other ads also had similar hallmarks, cups of coffee and expensive gold pocket watches seem to figure prominently for instance. These "classed" signifiers have the tendency to privilege a population that is interested in learning for earning and capable of paying for it. It does not in any way invite collective action on behalf of the learners, nor does it assist in any redistribution of knowledge or education to those who have not had access to this information before. This approach enhances the ability of certain populations to use online educational services while the very "least of my brethren" are left behind. It has been suggested that this approach may not be so good for those who do decide to buy the online learning product (Bowers, 1998). For them, time is intensified, the single mother working diligently at 2:00 am is the epitome of anytime anywhere learning for earning. The potential broader impact is increased division of haves and have nots where those who have some money attend online schools, those who have the most money attend face-to-face institutions and those with little or no money are left behind.

### **Advertisement #2: Worcester Polytechnic Institute**

Our second ad is from the Worcester Polytechnic Institute. This is from the airline magazine *Attaché* furnished to patrons of US Airways. The most prominent feature of this advertisement is the half circle of five rendered students sitting at terminals around a half globe. In the background is what appears to be a drawing of a silicone computer chip. The learners are all identical, with no race, class, gender demarcations and none of them are looking at each other. Instead all appear focused on their computer terminals.

This advertisement creates an image in our minds of automatons. The concept of human capital is rife here. It is clear that this sort of advertisement certainly permits if not advocates a

separateness of adult learners. There is no possibility of an organized group of student learners actively resisting "existing power and cultural relationships" (Cunningham, 1989 p. 42). The idea that there are even relationships at all in this image is a little difficult to discern. But indeed there ARE relationships, primarily they are relationships to human capital and the acceptance of the learner as mere extension of computer technology for the purposes of more "efficient and effective production" (Cunningham, 1992 p. 180). This ad encourages those who are interested in solitary work, it invites those who are least interested in social connection and most interested in personal advancement. There is no collective here. Instead the ad communicates a desire to, "help adults technically to become distance learners, autodidacts, self-directed, and aware of learning how to learn" (Cunningham, 1989, p. 42). In fact, the ad would probably appeal even more to a company manager interested in investing in human capital than it might to an individual adult learner. In our view, this sort of advertisement is the epitome of what Cunningham calls the "limit(ing) of the vision and promise of adult education" (1989, p. 42) because it precisely eliminates those who are working with lower class adults with a goal of resistance. There is no resistance, or even anyone who would be considered terribly low class in this advertisement. Everyone in this ad has a computer, a comfortable connection to the globe, along with the ability to pay for a "high-tech MBA (earned) anywhere in the world."

### **Advertisement #3: Colorado State University**

Our third ad is really a pair of very similar ads from Colorado State University (CSU). In the first case, at the top of the ad is a picture of a relatively expensive outdoorsman's tent pitched in the countryside with a backpack and a walking stick laying beside the tent. The black text, "Earn your Master's in Electrical Engineering here" is paired with a pointer indicating the inside of the tent. The text in white box below this picture indicates that you can "earn our Master's anywhere..." followed by the Colorado State University name in bold and prominent text. The second ad from CSU is similar in nature with a picture at the top of a white man in a suit and tie sitting on a fancy wrought iron park bench surrounded by leaves, a clean park, and one large tree trunk. The white text, "Earn your Master's in Computer Science here" is paired with a pointer to the man's laptop.

Both of these advertisements seem to appeal primarily to upper and middle class white men. Camping, a traditionally a white male activity, is depicted in this ad as a solo experience (as evidenced by the backpack and walking stick)--much like the solo experience of online learning. The park bench clearly pictures a white man with very nice clothes in a clean park setting with a laptop. All images of privilege rather than images of resistance. If we were to take this image and re-cast it to show the irony of the advertisement, we could replace the pictures of parks and fields with homeless shelters and welfare lines. Imagine then the text, "Earn your master's in computer science here" with an arrow pointing to the homeless man laying in the streets of DC. Somehow it doesn't quite add up, the ad no longer "works." From a semiotic perspective that's because the lack is no longer there, we don't WANT to be like "those" people, so we resist any temptation to "buy" that education because we might end up homeless or on welfare. No indeed, these ads must promise bright futures, wealth and advancement in order to work their magic properly.

### **Conclusion**

What are the implications of these ads for adult education? Our hope is that this paper may serve as an early indictment of institutionalized web-based education as it is complicit in the necessarily hegemonic nature of market economies. Since one of the authors of this paper is an instructional technology faculty, this critique comes from a stance of self-examination. Our indictment, however, reaches beyond merely identifying the ways in which ads manipulate their readers, to the more disturbing ways in which certain populations are excluded. Our concern is not just for the advertisements but for the enterprise to which these ads are attached. Elsewhere we have discussed the mismatch between the rhetoric of political calls for democratic opening of the university gates through expenditures for online learning infrastructure and the realities of who is truly gaining access to that learning (Carr-Chelman, 2000). This critical analysis of the ads merely illuminates the ways in which certain populations, the homeless, the poor, those of minority background, are excluded. The entire movement of online learning privileges some and excludes others. Specifically, working middle class and upper middle class are invited into the online learning revolution, but poor, homeless and minorities--anyone who most needs it, but is least able to afford it, is eliminated. Why? Well, to the extent that adult education serves as the "hand-maiden of industry" (Cunningham 1992 p. 181), it is reasonable that only clean, intelligent, relatively well-off human capital is being courted for admission into the online learning world.

What Cunningham most advocates is the engagement of adults in their own empowerment, the active resistance to a reduction of adult education to training human capital. In the model of adult education currently represented by the online learning revolution, this is nearly impossible and there are no significant models of online learning that have empowered learners toward social justice in any way. We cannot ignite our learners into social action which will lead to significant learning because online learning is an opiate appeasing the masses and promising brighter futures, advancement, achievement of all goals with no pain or discomfort. This promise is much more appealing to the masses and much more appeasing as well. It is a very difficult thing to overcome these messages with the cry of, "learn what holds you down, understand your captors so you can open the prison bars." Even those who are left out of the advertisements for online learning are more interested in the snake oil promise of online learning for earning than they are in active, difficult, exhausting resistance. But without that resistance, the hegemony is never broken, educational schemes from testing and assessment to online training can come and go and the class, race, and gender inequities will remain unless, and until, we find a way to uncover the snake oil sellers, and instead weave resistance into the fabric of adult learning.

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