David Noble's Battle to Defend the 'Sacred Space' of the Classroom

By JEFFREY R. YOUNG

David F. Noble says distance education is fool's gold, and he's eager to point out who the fools are. In speeches, essays, and countless sound bites, the professor argues that the primary motive behind the craze for online education is profit rather than pedagogy, and that the glimmer of dot-com riches is tempting some administrators to put the core values of their institutions at risk.

"It's been leading to a dangerous relaxation of sound financial-management practices and legal safeguards of the public interest, a bending of the rules of established procedure, and quite possibly even a breaking of the law," he said in a speech last month at a conference on the future of higher education.

Mr. Noble's speech stood in marked contrast to others at the conference, held at the University of California at Riverside. He offered not a theoretical argument, but a juicy description of what he sees as shady dealings between the extension program at University of California at Los Angeles and a company called OnlineLearning.net. (The university and the company deny his allegations.)

Given Mr. Noble's remarks, you half-expect him to be wearing an armband of protest on the sleeve of his tweed jacket.

Mr. Noble is not about to sit by and let distance education happen without a fight. The history professor at York University, in Toronto, is on a crusade that mixes scholarship, journalism, activism, and stubborn persistence. In his view, distance education is the latest episode in a troubling saga of the corporatization of American higher education.

To some faculty members, he is something of a cult hero for passionately speaking out to protect the rights of professors in cyberspace. Some say his extreme views make it easier for those with more-moderate concerns about distance education to voice their opinions. But his critics say Mr. Noble's attacks are so narrow-minded and emotional that they are counterproductive. And some say he has an abrasive personal style that makes it difficult to engage him in debate.

Any way you cut it, Mr. Noble is colorful, provocative, and uncompromising. He has frequently investigated and criticized the institutions that have employed him. He says he is often discriminated against for being critical of technology. He says he is searching for the truth.

During his 30 years of prolific scholarship on the history of technology, Mr. Noble has repeatedly challenged the assumption that technological advances inevitably result in progress. And he has repeatedly asked why criticizing technology is so often taboo.

To Mr. Noble, being called a Luddite is no insult. In fact, "the Luddites were certainly people to be emulated," he says, referring to the group of British weavers who fought against the automation of their profession in the 1800's, sometimes with violence. "They were not at all the mindless, hapless victims that people portray them as. They were essentially demanding a policy on technology."
A photograph of Mr. Noble taken in the 1980's shows him holding one of the sledgehammers used by the Luddites to smash looms. But he has no plans to destroy computers, he says. "It's more important to smash the mental machinery than the physical machinery."

"My scholarly work has really been focused on trying to demystify technology in our culture," he says.

His strategy is to treat any high-tech tool like a political document that needs decoding. "Technology is itself political," he argues. "You should look at it and say, Who's sponsoring it? What are their interests? Who do they represent? What are they trying to do?"

For instance, in Forces of Production: A Social History of Industrial Automation (Knopf, 1984), he shows how the values and interests of engineers and managers -- rather than simple efforts to improve efficiency -- have influenced factory design. In his most recent book, The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention (Knopf, 1997), he traces the many ways in which technology and faith are intertwined in Western culture.

In the latter book, Mr. Noble argues that religious motivations and a desire for transcendence have been the driving forces behind such large-scale technological quests as the space program, artificial intelligence, and genetic engineering. A "politics of perfection," rather than a desire to meet social needs, he writes, has motivated technical innovation. "The expectation of ultimate salvation through technology, whatever the immediate human and social costs, has become the unspoken orthodoxy."

Mr. Noble's books and articles are widely cited by historians of science, says Thomas P. Hughes, a visiting professor of history at Stanford University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He adds that Mr. Noble has been a "pioneer" among historians in strongly criticizing technology. "He greatly influenced a number of graduate students to be more critical of their evaluation of technological developments."

Mr. Noble's scholarly research has always been shaped by his political agenda. He's been an activist since he was a college student himself, and he seems more comfortable at a rowdy protest than a somber faculty meeting.

As an undergraduate at the University of Florida in the 1960's, he founded a group called the Student Board of Investigation to fight for free speech and civil rights. More recently, he was one of the leaders of a 1997 faculty strike at York in which distance education was an issue. In what may have been a first, faculty members won language in their contract stating that professors cannot be forced to teach courses online or to use technology in the classroom.

Mr. Noble also regularly gives speeches to faculty unions elsewhere, urging them to fight for the intellectual-property rights to professors' online materials. Susan Meisenhelder, president of the California Faculty Association, says "people are always very moved and very inspired" when he speaks before her group. "What he does wonderfully well is get people to think beyond the perimeters of their own campus and their own department and to think in larger social terms."

Mr. Noble's example proves that a professor can succeed without relying on the latest technologies. He refuses to use e-mail, despite prodding by friends and colleagues. He says he often writes drafts of his books by hand. He certainly doesn't have World Wide Web pages for his courses, and he even encourages students to write out their assignments by hand. As he sees it, he is more productive.
without the distractions of e-mail or HTML coding.

Even so, it was the Internet that sent Mr. Noble's first assault on distance education racing around the
globe. Three years ago, in the first essay in his "Digital Diploma Mills" series, he warned of what he
saw as the dangers of distance education. At first it was distributed informally, on an electronic
mailing list, but soon it was published in several online publications.

Part of the essay's power lay in its combination of detailed reporting and sweeping analysis. It singled
out U.C.L.A., among others, for striking deals with for-profit companies to "peddle online education."

The essay also argued that an ambitious project by U.C.L.A.'s College of Letters and Science to build
a World Wide Web page for every one of its courses was a related effort. Mr. Noble suggested that
once courses were online, the administration could assert greater control and ownership of the course
materials.

"Once the faculty converts its courses to courseware, their services are in the long run no longer
required," he wrote. "They become redundant, and when they leave, their work remains behind."

In another controversial argument, he said that there was no student demand for course Web sites or
for distance education, and that administrators were creating a market "by fiat."

"In ten years, we will look upon the wired remains of our once great democratic higher education
system and wonder how we let it happen," he concluded.

U.C.L.A. officials dismissed the essay as amounting to a conspiracy theory, saying that Mr. Noble had
distorted the facts to promote his own agenda. "That article was factually incorrect on some important
points," says David C. Menninger, associate dean of continuing education and extension. "He came at
it from a perspective that was critical at the outset, even before he really had all the facts."

Others, too, disagreed with Mr. Noble's approach. "His fear-filled rhetoric and whipping of the
boogie-monster of entrepreneurial corruption of education is misleading, shallow and even
counterproductive," wrote Ben Shneiderman, director of the human-computer interaction laboratory at
the University of Maryland at College Park, in the journal Educom Review.

By many accounts, however, Mr. Noble's essay sparked a worldwide debate about intellectual-
property issues for online courses. Debates raged in mailing lists and on Web-based discussion boards.
Talk of the essay spilled over into technology conferences and faculty lounges.

"What David did was burst a dam of frustration," says Edward J. Valauskas, chief editor of First
Monday, one of the online journals that published the essay. "No one really had the courage before he
brought out that paper to be incredibly critical of some of these ideas for using the Internet for
distance education."

Some distance-education leaders downplay Mr. Noble's role in the debate. "I don't know anybody who
takes him very seriously," says Sally Johnstone, director of the Western Cooperative for Educational
Telecommunications, at the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. "There aren't too
many people you can point to that are as extreme as he is. He's off in another world."

When she was on a radio program with Mr. Noble about a year ago to discuss distance education, Ms.
Johnstone says, he dismissed any argument she made out of hand. "He would just go off on his own
paranoid tangent," she says.

Since the splash made by his first distance-education essay, Mr. Noble has published three online sequels expanding the argument. In the latest, published late last year, he provides a history of correspondence schools in the late 1800's and early 1900's. In the essay, which Mr. Noble hopes to expand into a book, he traces several parallels between such efforts and today's distance-education ventures.

Early education-by-mail efforts, he says, were marketed with the same enthusiasm as today's Internet courses. "The chief selling point of education by means of correspondence, the firms maintained, was personalized instruction for busy people," he writes.

By 1926, Mr. Noble writes, more than 300 private correspondence schools had sprung up. Around the same time, about 73 traditional colleges and universities were running correspondence programs, too.

But, Mr. Noble argues, such individualized instruction turned out to be more expensive than the institutions had anticipated. To cut costs, he says, institutions soon lowered standards for correspondence teachers and expanded their workloads, diminishing the quality of instruction and prompting many students to drop out. The number of such programs eventually fell.

"Like their now forgotten forebears, today's proponents of distance education believe they are leading a revolution which will transform the educational landscape," he writes. "So here we go again."

But this time, Mr. Noble fears, the damage done to higher education will be more profound, because universities are making greater investments in infrastructure and thus will fight harder to make the programs work. He calls such investments "a technological tapeworm in the guts of higher education."

Mr. Noble isn't opposed to all uses of distance education. He says it can be beneficial for military training and in instances where there simply are no in-person educational options. But students in truly remote places are not the target market of colleges and companies starting ambitious distance-education programs, he argues. "Come on, do you think these vendors give a shit about aboriginal people in the outback? That's not enough of a market."

This battle against the commercialization of instruction is by no means Mr. Noble's first large-scale campaign. In the 1980's, he took to the field to criticize the commercialization of scientific research.

In 1983, he worked with Ralph Nader to organize the National Coalition for Universities in the Public Interest, a group that monitors industry's ties with academe.

He was also one of the most vocal critics of a partnership between M.I.T. and a private entity called the Whitehead Institute for Biomedical Research. Mr. Noble was then an associate professor at M.I.T., and he says his views were the reason he was denied tenure in 1984. "The whole thing was rigged start to finish," he says. "It's a joke that I wouldn't get tenure at M.I.T."

In fact, Mr. Noble sued the university, claiming he had been denied tenure because he had criticized the university's collaboration with industry. The case was settled after M.I.T. agreed to release all of the documentation on his tenure review. The American Historical Association reviewed the documents and wrote a letter to Mr. Noble calling M.I.T.'s decision "badly flawed."
Mr. Noble says it is his duty to expose any institution that is acting contrary to the public interest. "I have a responsibility," says the professor, whose parents did not attend college. "I have an obligation to return to society something for what I've gotten." He adds that he is no "muckraker," however, and says he's not trying to make a name for himself.

In 1998, he won the Joe A. Callaway Award for Civic Courage from the Shafeek Nader Trust for the Community Interest, named for the sister of Ralph Nader. The group praised Mr. Noble's "fight to affirm and preserve the primacy of the university's educational and research missions, unfettered by marketplace interests."

Mr. Noble is as passionate about his teaching as about his politics, and waxes eloquent about how the old-fashioned, low-tech classroom is a "sacred space."

"In person, you get a sense of me you can't get online. I'm convinced of that," he says. "We have five senses. Why artificially narrow the bandwidth?"

At Harvey Mudd College, where he was a visiting professor from 1997 to 1999, he made such an impression on students that the senior class voted to invite him to speak at commencement. But the college's president, Jon C. Strauss, nixed that idea, and invited the students' second choice -- Bill Nye, "the Science Guy" of children's-television fame.

Mr. Strauss says the decision was easy: He was not going to risk giving Mr. Noble a soapbox to criticize the college, as the historian had done the previous year when he was asked to introduce a public lecture by Mr. Nader. During that introduction, Mr. Noble blasted a "clinic program" at the college that lets students work with businesses to develop projects. He complained about the college's policy of claiming intellectual-property rights over any discoveries made by students in the program. Mr. Strauss called that introduction a "cheap shot" and says it was an inappropriate venue for lodging such a complaint, because university officials did not have a chance to respond.

"The commencement's a celebration," says Mr. Strauss. "We were concerned about the potential negative impact of having him be critical of Harvey Mudd College in front of the parents who'd just paid $120,000 to send their students here."

Mr. Noble sees the situation as proof that administrators wanted to silence his ideas about the college. "Any criticism of that institution is out of bounds," he says. In fact, Mr. Noble says, after he gave the introduction to Mr. Nader's speech, he was praised by students but "completely ostracized by everyone else" on the faculty and in the administration.

No wonder, says Richard G. Olson, a history professor at Harvey Mudd who worked two doors down from Mr. Noble. Many professors felt that Mr. Noble had been "fundamentally unfair" in his remarks, especially for what Mr. Olson saw as personal attacks on the founder of the college's clinic program. "His personal style of interaction was very abrasive, and he clearly irritated a number of colleagues," Mr. Olson said.

Mr. Olson was on the search committee that brought Mr. Noble to campus, and he says he had been predisposed to like the visiting scholar. But he grew tired of Mr. Noble after a number of what he calls "petty" irritations. The most egregious: "He tended to use my personal library quite a bit, and I would get books back all marked up. Professors are likely to be a little touchy about their books."

Mr. Noble denies even using Mr. Olson's library, and calls the comment a "character assassination."
He gets impatient with a reporter's questions about whether he is "abrasive," saying that he hopes this article will focus on the issues raised by his scholarship.

"There's a tendency to personalize everything in this society -- Noble is a pain in the ass; Noble is a troublemaker; Noble is a gadfly -- rather than deal with the issues."

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**David Noble on the Dangers of Distance Education**

Following are selections from each of the four essays in David F. Noble's "Digital Diploma Mills" series. The essays warn against what they describe as the dangers of distance education and call on professors to assert ownership of their course materials. The essays appeared originally on the Internet -- on mailing lists and personal Web pages -- and some have been published in online journals as well. All of the essays are available at [http://www.communication.ucsd.edu/dl/](http://www.communication.ucsd.edu/dl/).

**The Automation of Higher Education**

October 1997

What is driving this headlong rush to implement new technology with so little regard for deliberation of the pedagogical and economic costs and at the risk of student and faculty alienation and opposition? A short answer might be the fear of getting left behind, the incessant pressures of "progress."

But there is more to it. For the universities are not simply undergoing a technological transformation. Beneath that change, and camouflaged by it, lies another: the commercialization of higher education. For here as elsewhere technology is but a vehicle and a disarming disguise.

**The Coming Battle Over Online Instruction**

March 1998

During the last few years several universities have entered into formal agreements with private firms which give some indication of where they are headed. ...

The implications of these agreements therefore must be considered seriously by anyone who is using or plans to use electronic means to enhance or deliver their courses. Who owns the material you have placed on the Web site or e-mail? Without a clear and definitive assertion of copyright claims by faculty, the universities will usurp such rights by default.

This is a matter of some urgency and it is especially pressing for those faculty who work in a non-union workplace. Unionized faculty have at least an organization and collective bargaining rights through which they might fight for their rightful claims. But non-unionized faculty must invent other means. ...

But by whatever means, collective bargaining, litigation, or direct action, faculty must act, and act now, to preserve their rights.

**The Bloom Is Off the Rose**

November 1998

Increasingly, and everywhere, faculty and students alike are waking up to the realization that it is
High Noon for Higher Education. They are overcoming their traditional timidity and parochialism to make common cause with like-minded people across the continent, to fight for their own and the larger public interest against the plans and pronouncements of peddlers and politicians who in general know little about education.

Having learned that they are not alone, faculty are displaying a new-found confidence in their own experience and expertise, and thus in their rightful capacity to decide what is a good education. Socrates, they have reminded themselves, was not a content provider.

Rehearsal for the Revolution
November 1999

The current mania for distance education ... [bears a] striking resemblance to a past today's enthusiasts barely know about or care to acknowledge, an earlier episode in the commodification of higher education known as correspondence instruction or, more quaintly, home study.

Then as now, distance education has always been not so much technology-driven as profit-driven, whatever the mode of delivery. The common denominator linking the two episodes is not technology but the pursuit of profit in the guise and name of higher education.

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