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Beware of false prophets in higher education

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Regional

Beware of false prophets in higher education

The idea of false prophets has been around among monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) since their inception. The concept of someone predicting things that went against the established dogma, thus, is not new. Lately that concept has been extended to those who challenge the conventional wisdom in areas such as medicine and technology.

There is nothing inherently wrong with challenging conventional wisdom, but those who are not mere charlatans usually do that based on hard facts and well-grounded insights after years of serious study.

It is not surprising that given all the challenges faced by higher education in this country, a number of voices have predicted doom and gloom regarding the future of higher education, from those forecasting that in a few years all teaching will be online to the disappearance of libraries, and education based only on hard knowledge (pure facts) and not on skills.

We are seeing how many of those predictions are failing. The MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) that were supposed to provide free education to all has failed to materialize despite the fact that some very venerable institutions of higher education, such as Harvard, Stanford, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), have been involved in experimenting with it.

Besides the difficulty of making MOOCs work as a business model, study after study (some of them mentioned in this column in the past) have shown that the completion rates of those taking these type of courses is extremely low (usually in the single digits). Further, those who seem to finish these courses are usually very mature students who are willing to invest the time and energy in them. Certainly they

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

do not represent the bulk of the population who after high school aspires to advance in their education toward a degree that will improve their chances to get a well remunerated job.

No wonder that according to some studies, such as a 2011 report by the Pew Research Center, only 29 percent of Americans felt that online courses offered equal value to learning in the traditional classroom.

So why all these and other prophecies have failed so far? The reason is very simple: they see students as consumers of a commodity rather as diverse individuals with diverse needs than want to participate in an activity that is by its own nature very social.

Anybody can learn facts by reading books or exploring the Internet (although in many cases both present challenges when it comes to verification of the information). But this should not be the purpose of education. It isn't to imbue students' brains with facts. After all, they are going to forget most of what they have memorized shortly after exams are over. The idea of education is to provide a space for students to develop skills that will make them more attractive in the job market and as fulfilling individuals, such as critical thinking, communication skills, teamwork and complex problem solving.

These are the skills employers look for in their employees. They do not want to hire people who behave like robots when faced with decisions or who are incapable of foreseeing problems based on their

own insights.

But let's face the fact that the conditions that have allowed for the emergence of these false prophets – those who would substitute teachers with machines – have been created by many faculty members themselves. Because people who teach in higher education rarely receive training on how to be an effective teacher, they resort to be what I have termed as “a talking textbook,” that is, to repeat in class what is already in the textbook while only being available to answer questions about material that can be difficult to understand.

Therefore, it is not surprising that we have seen the rise of false prophets in higher education. How can we identify them? One way is by closely examining the sources of their information. Most (although not all) cite this or that study to sustain their predictions. The problem is that they tend to cherry-pick the evidence while ignoring studies that contradict their own prophecies. This methodology is an old one and is at the root of the very concept of self-fulfilling prophecies – predictions that directly or indirectly cause themselves to become true.

The other is the use of buzzwords. Phrases that include terms such as “disruptive innovation,” “active community,” “collaborative environment,” and the like are another sign of a skilled rhetoric by these prophets who generally use them to impress their audiences, giving their ideas a patina of “new” or “new and improved” as if they were selling a detergent.

The problem is that these are phrases describing things that are neither new nor improved but just old practices embellished with new appearances.

Terms such as “distance education,” whether in their “online education” or MOOCs versions, are just a different form of distance learning first practiced in 1728 when Caleb Phillips started mailing correspondence courses in shorthand. Of course “distance learning” is not a sexy term and technology has changed but the fundamental principle is the same, to let students learn on their own. And the challenges of making that work back then are the same as those today, to engage students and measure how much they really learn.

Those of us with long experience in education in general and higher education in particular know that there is no technological substitute for a good teacher who comes to the classroom well prepared and who transmits students a passion and enthusiasm not only for new knowledge, but also to make them excited about what they are paying for in tuition and fees.

Therefore, in order not become obsolete, teachers need to avoid being superseded by computers. To do that they should not try to compete with them on the same grounds. We need to identify what makes us unique, even “special” if you will. We need to show in the classroom the very conditions that make us human beings dealing with other human beings: enthusiasm, dedication, and authenticity. After all, we are not teaching robots. We are teaching human beings.

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