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When Professors Print Their Own Diplomas, Who Needs Universities?

By JEFFREY R. YOUNG

Who needs college credit when you have a makeshift diploma from a superstar professor?

David Wiley taught an online course at Utah State University last fall and let anyone fully participate, even if they weren't enrolled. In the end, five people the registrar had never heard of joined discussions with the 15 or so regular students and got papers graded by Mr. Wiley, who considered the extra work a public service.

The unofficial students paid no tuition and got no formal credit, but they did end up with something tangible: a homemade certificate signed by Mr. Wiley, who at the time directed the Center for Open and Sustainable Learning and is well known in the area of online learning.

That was plenty of recognition for Antonio Fini, a doctoral student at the University of Florence, in Italy. "I include it in my CV," he says.

Open Teaching is the name Mr. Wiley and others use for their experimental knowledge giveaway. And it suggests how the Web could soon force colleges to re-examine their offerings in the age of digital delivery.

The name Open Teaching is a reference to "open courseware," an idea cooked up by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2001, when officials there pledged to make lecture notes and other materials for every course free online.

MIT's leaders didn't see the move as giving away the store, though. They viewed interaction with professors as the real educational product—the one that students paid tens of thousands of dollars a year for—and *that* remained locked safely inside the campus walls.

Now Mr. Wiley wants to give away the interaction, too. MIT is unlikely to follow his lead.

But plenty of folks outside of higher education might jump in. Imagine the hosts of the TV show *Myth Busters* offering a course on the scientific method delivered via the Discovery Channel's Web site. Or Malcolm Gladwell, author of the best-selling *Tipping Point*, teaching an online business course on *The New Yorker's* site. Or a retired Nobel Prize winner teaching via a makeshift virtual classroom set up on her personal blog.

It's not so far-fetched, according to Joel Thierstein, a leader in the movement to make course materials freely available online. He is executive director of Rice University's Connexions project, and he recently spoke about similar scenarios at a conference.

After all, he says, Aristotle never reported to a dean or had to submit grades, and his students just explained to employers that they had studied with the great man. Now online tools let anyone hold court in chat rooms, Webcasts, or social networks.

The rapid pace of change means employers want the latest skills without having to wait for employees to go off and get whole degrees. Proving you sat through an online course with a relevant expert might be good enough for plenty of situations.

What iPods Teach Colleges

Some say the music industry offers lessons for higher education. Just a few years ago, music lovers had to buy an entire album to get the latest hit song from Britney Spears or other pop sensations. It was a model that worked well for the music industry but not for consumers, who often wound up stuck with several uninspired tracks for every pleasing foot-tapper. The arrival of the Internet and iPods sparked a revolution in music delivery, and now you can buy Britney Spears by the song—for about a buck a pop—at any music-downloading service.

At a recent academic conference on the future of the Internet, Reed Hundt, a former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, said that colleges should consider similar revisions in the way they structure their offerings. Students are going to start asking why they have to take a whole batch of required courses from professors whose teaching performances are flat, he said. Maybe they'll just want a few of the "hit" courses instead.

Universities do have extension programs that focus on continuing education, and those offer plenty of one-off courses. But those programs often operate as smaller offshoots of a college's main campus, with fewer course options and a different set of professors. Perhaps as online education continues to grow, such extension programs will become more powerful and influential.

Naturally, there is plenty about the traditional core curriculum worth defending—and both college degrees and pop albums will probably be around for the long haul. But pressures may force colleges to try some new things in the years ahead.

And some of those pressures originate right on campus. At a recent meeting of college presidents, John C. Cavanaugh, chancellor of the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, said that one potential nightmare scenario for traditional institutions is that a form of college home-schooling will emerge, where students teach themselves using free materials posted by MIT and other leading institutions.

That library of materials is growing rapidly. Just last week Stanford University unveiled 10 free engineering courses online in which students could hold discussions with one another and watch

streaming lectures. And a new “open teaching” course on “Connectivism and Connected Knowledge,” led by two instructors who run popular blogs about e-learning, has signed up more than 2,000 unofficial students. No sign on whether those online auditors will get any proof that they attended, however.

Mr. Wiley never asked his boss for permission to make the certificates he bestowed on participants. (He has since started a new job as a professor at Brigham Young University.) But such moves are bound to raise serious questions at colleges in the future.

“I would have said let’s ask around before doing that,” says Michael K. Freeman, associate dean for education outreach at Utah State. “Simply because I’m a cautious administrator.”

And that’s a reminder that it may take a while for colleges to dance to a new beat.

Campus 2.0 explores how new technologies are changing colleges. Please send ideas to jeff.young@chronicle.com