

Educational illusions and the student kept indoors

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Little by little I'm losing track. Do we - lecturers, professors and board members in higher education - really believe that our students come to us only to achieve the most efficient transfer of knowledge? Don't we see that in the Netherlands large numbers of young people live in single households, while we - parents and lecturers - are proud of the fact that they live with only 25 square meters with their own facilities? Even the "fun" of the annoyance and the pleasures of a shared kitchen and sanitary ware belong to the past.

Do we not see that the "indoor student" trusts for social contacts in the universities, schools and library? Don't we see that a relatively prestigious place / study where you meet with peers to figure out who you are and how to perpetuate mutual relationships involves much more than the most efficient knowledge transfer? In the contacts I now have with graduates via Microsoft teams, students almost scream at me: this is no (student) life at all. Loneliness. They fear that we - staff and management - will be so absorbed in the illusion that we generate excellent distance education, that we'll continue producing virtual classrooms in the future, after the Corona crisis. Don't we see that in distance learning they also lose their last social contact. During the Corona crisis we are angry when students meet in the city parks, while in the very same parks we're almost stepped on by aged runners in their health mania, who we understand perfectly well.

Frankly, I understand the students. Where I was initially enthusiastic about Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), I now know that research by Harvard and MIT, among others, has shown that even the one and a half hour lectures given by the absolute world top are viewed on average for three minutes at most. If we really want to record educational lectures that are also seriously worth watching, then it has to come close to a BBC documentary. Of course this is impossible. Sitting in a classroom, annoying the lecturer, or admiring that energetic professor, or even skipping lectures with fellow students, is part of good education, no matter how crazy this may sound. In this Corona crisis we can learn that colleges and universities are places to be. Therein lies our reason for existence, our être pour-soi. Our reason of existence doesn't lie primarily in being able to work with the apps from Microsoft or Google - that is fortunately childishly simple and that certainly does not require higher education.

Higher education is closed

Now that higher education is closed and in fact, as I tried to argue, we are only going to continue very partially (exaggerated, we "pretend" that we are still open), we run the risk of pricing ourselves out of the market. Because if it really is only about knowledge transfer, there are of course so many more interesting documentaries and in the field of knowledge transfer there is so much more interesting than even top scientists can put together themselves. Not even Einstein was a documentary maker. If we really implement it, listen to the broken English of me and my many Dutch colleagues in clumsily twisted knowledge clips, then it is only a matter of time before no one listens to us anymore. Then we could close the doors of our university, and all of us would perform an essential profession, for example in healthcare.

Or if we don't like that, maybe we would start a school, but one where young people can really come together, work on their identities and relationships, and in the wake of that a profession or science to learn? Fortunately, it is not that far, we will not let it happen, and our beautiful colleges and universities understand that they do much more than just transferring knowledge. But perhaps good to reconsider the position of today's student - in terms of living, living and studying - because I fear there is much more emptiness and loneliness among young people than we see at first sight.