



Cyber schooling: A family's hi-tech nightmare

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Abstract: "Cyber education" may sound like an advanced and fancy way of educating our children, but quite often, new developments in online education are coopted by those who don't have the big picture and best interests of education as a social cause in their minds. In this reflective piece, I share a story of how my family experienced a huge waste of time after we got a treacherous stab on our hope to educate our child in a cyber school in Pennsylvania, US.

Key Words: *Cyber Schooling, Online education, Hi-Tech, MOOCs, distance education, Cyber Charter schools*

"She is doing great!" said my daughter's teachers about her academic progress at one of the PA Cyber Schools in Pittsburgh, in May 2011. As the proud father of a child who had always been an academic star, that's what I expected to hear. However, as I learned the extremely hard and shocking way, that comment turned out to be a polite nothing used for masking the emerging educational scam known as "cyber schools" especially in the state of Pennsylvania.

As a scholar of higher education, I find what happened to my family particularly ironic and somewhat embarrassing to even talk about. But as my child begins to fully overcome the damage inflicted to her academic career prospects by finally joining her peers in college (with her outstanding commitment), I have started to share my family's experience, with her kind permission, in order to alert others about disturbing trends like cyber schools, competency-based learning initiatives, and "open online" courses that funnel public money into private businesses in one way or another in the US (and increasingly in the rest of the world). I must also mention at this point that in late 2013, the CEO of PA Cyber [was indicted](#) for multiple charges including tax evasion and is

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under the radar of State's auditor general. It is painful for my family to follow the news in too much detail these days, but I do want to discuss the broader social implications of what happened to us and also the implications of the increasingly aggressive and shameless marketing of anything "high-tech" as an automatically better approach to doing anything, including such complex and challenging endeavors as educating our children. I wanted to share my story through this journal because there is a lesson to be learned, by analogy, about the ongoing attempts to implement MOOCs as a means for education for the general public. I think that the mainstream discourse about MOOCs is also a manifestation of the same disturbing social phenomenon where those who have no serious concern about education as a social cause (and often no qualification to challenge or "reinvent" higher education the way they want to) are taking the world by storms, and the general public is not yet informed about what is going on.

Until the previous year, when my daughter accompanied me to the US in my pursuit of graduate education with a Fulbright scholarship, she had always maintained the academic "distinction" status back home in Nepal. When we arrived in Pittsburgh, in spite of some hurdles, we were able to get her academic records approved and we enrolled her at a good high school. It was when we decided to move to a more affordable part of town (so that I could support my family on the small stipend), closer to my university campus, that the nightmare in my daughter's academic life started unfolding.

My daughter soon started coming home to tell me that there was a serious lack of discipline among her peers and that there was no academic rigor and motivation among most of them. We made a valiant and clever attempt to get out of that public school by taking a neighbor's suggestion and successfully enrolling at another school by requesting that she be put in the ESL program. Unfortunately, this good new school slammed the door on her the very next day: her ESL teacher declared that her English was too good for her to be in this program. She was now kicked out of the good school, and we could not go back to the previous school. We were stranded. In our desperate search for a school--at this point, any school--we were easily persuaded by people at the fancy-looking PA Cyber. When my daughter met with seemingly loving and caring teachers and administrators at one of their offices, she was convinced that this alternative had as many opportunities and resources as, and perhaps more than, the inner city school that she had attended. As someone who made it from the hinterlands of a third world country to the city of Pittsburgh, all because of education, I wanted to make sure that my daughter could reach even higher dreams than I had; and, coming from where I did, I assumed that the more advanced the technology used, the more advanced the education would be. So, both my daughter and I were bought.

I did think about the quality of my daughter's learning because it seemed that she would be taught--and indeed she would have to learn on her own using web and video resources--online. But I had a deep faith in "America" where I fully thought that everything would be vetted through research, subjected to legal and ethical standards of an advanced society, and proven effective before educated parents would send their children. I looked at other parents, and I trusted that they would know what they were doing. My daughter tried her best to learn about the school system, and she told me not to worry.

To make matters worse, one of the best things in my own life coincided the utter confusion that my family was going through regarding my daughter's education: I had to leave my family behind in Pittsburgh and move to Florida when I received an offer to study my PhD at the state's flagship university. From Florida, I regularly contacted her school, but all I heard each time was that "She is doing great!"

I was happy that she was doing well, but I began to be confused when they refused to provide me with reports of any ongoing assessment. I was afraid that I may have been duped and my daughter's academic future may be doomed, but they strongly reassured me that she "is on track toward graduation" with a "standard high school diploma." Indeed, when they wrote to let me know that they had asked her to apply for being the valedictorian, I lowered my guards.

It was only when I returned to Pittsburgh for her graduation, that reality began to sink in.

My daughter had technically completed her high school, and they gave her a diploma. She participated in the ritual of her graduation, with great fanfare, like I knew by this time that American high school graduates did. However, the Asian parent and Fulbright-winning scholar inside me started revolting.

The fancy ceremony was dislikeable to me because I now realized that my daughter had got very little exposure to her teachers. She and her peers didn't know any teachers. She had not only graduated from a virtual school, she also knew a few teachers and peers from the virtual classrooms. One person who she could recognize as giving some of the video lectures reached out and said that he was her adviser. He gave a really broad smile and congratulated me that my daughter was graduating. Just "graduating" didn't sound so exciting to me, because I was eager to find out her final score reports.

All I wanted to ask anyone I could find was: what is my daughter's GPA? But all I heard was that "She did great!" Now that I learned that they had neither scores like I used to know nor GPA as I had now learned about, the above expression began to disgust me. My daughter wanted to be an astronaut, and I knew all along that she was talented and committed enough to be one if she got the opportunity to realize her potentials. But now I was asking if she would even get to go to any real college at all!

We were shocked to find that "she is doing great!" hadn't translated into the impressive transcript that I had somehow believed she would receive. I have been a teacher, including a teacher of the English language, but I also come from a culture where "great" (as a term of academic assessment) really means great. I asked my daughter why she didn't alert me to the disaster that the school was, and she said that she believed that that was what American high school education was like. Indeed, her other alternative in the city had not given her a better impression. Worst of all, both she and her parents remained in the utter darkness that we did because we were used to knowing a student's "score" in any subject as often as we wanted to know, including a student's position in relation to his/her peers in class. The fact that academic performance is not a private matter in our home country made even the "normal" here so different that we couldn't distinguish between the standard norm and abnormal situations that my daughter was in. We did not have useful reference points, we were systematically misled, and our life was overwhelming due to transition and adaptations as the family had to split and live in different cities.

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It was not until my daughter finally graduated that I realized the insidious design of the cyber high schools that had the intention to hoodwink students into and out of their system, regardless of the knowledge that they gain, the social engagement with teachers and other learners, and the ultimate credential that they have to have when they graduate and seek to go to college.

We have now understood a lot about how we were so badly duped into the scam. But that does not help us to get our daughter into a good college. We not only lost the opportunity to learn about her performance in the process, we also don't have the opportunity to make up for the poor outcome caused by a for-profit scheme that was evidently made to suck public dollars into a monstrous quicksand.

As a scholar of higher education administration and educational policy, I try to take some distance from the disaster that my own family has faced. What social dynamics allow such schemes to work in the name of public education? Indeed, how are public schools being constantly attacked by those who point to these very types of schemes as the "alternative" to solve the problems that are, as my family got to see, that public school systems do seem to have? Is it because our daughter (as well as her parents) could not transition into and understand a new system where there was no competition that we used as a measure of success? What roles do the fancy names, the connotations of technology as "advanced" and "efficient" in the minds of the public, and the trained ability to appeal to the unsuspecting by those who are running the new schemes play? How are the "cyber" schools able to undermine the fundamentals of the American public school system, a system in which my daughter and I now realized had too much faith? How are we going to pick up the pieces and start our journey toward realizing the potentials of a student who wants to realize greater dreams in her intellectual life than her parents have?

By sharing my family's painful story, which is getting further behind us due to the talent and dedication of our daughter, I hope to alert other students and parents to take a more cautious approach to the fanciful attractions that seem to be increasingly successful in duping them in the name of public education. And in the context of this journal, I hope that my experience will add a small new dimension to the academic discussion about the much-touted "disruptive" and "innovative" approaches to improving education for our children all the way from kindergarten to the university.