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The Transition of a French Distance Learning Institution to a Fee-Based Model:

An Ethnographic Study

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Abstract

The results of a three-year fieldwork study within France's National Centre for Distance Education are presented, specifically detailing the impacts on higher education middle management overseeing curricula design for a series of French 3-year degree programs undergoing revision in how students are financially charged for the programs. Following the ethnographic research process model, an amalgam of the researcher's prior knowledge of middle management and the sharing of that knowledge with educational workers are reported.

Findings:

1. An ethnographic researcher's preconceptions and knowledge should be carefully employed when conducting ethnographic studies
2. Possessing a strong base of prior knowledge of the field under study is an important aspect of the ethnographic research process
3. Emerging observed controversies and debates should not be extinguished with the researcher's knowledge base so that these may be documented and examined. (Knowledge, even when academically stabilized, undergoes constant adaptation. It is of utmost importance for the education ethnographer to be able to precise when previous knowledge is relevant to the setting, including the fundamental limits they present.)

Keywords: Distance learning, ethnography, business model of education

Introduction

Due to the nature of this ethnographic study, a brief introduction to the educational structure called “the university” is valuable to set the stage for the study’s results. We therefore briefly describe the university’s historic path before moving into the study itself.

The exact origins of “the university” remains a contested question. Numerous countries lay claim to having the oldest university, and the topic is one that remains populated with as many diverging views as the density of the fog in which the structure itself arose. Even a *definition* of the term has proved elusive over time (Newman 1891). Much of this disagreement can be attributed to differing views as to what constitutes a “university,” with numerous books, papers, and historical analyses within this field of research often leaving the reader with a tantalizing, but nonetheless, incomplete, telling of the university’s birth story. This is ironic, since we actually know so much about the processes and procedures used within the early university, as well as the identity (and actual extant writings) of many early university master teachers (Daileader 2001, 2007; Durant 1950; Novikoff 2013; Ridder-Symoens 1992; Schwinges 1992a, 1992b; Verger 1992a, 1992b). The sometimes-surprising intensity of disagreement that often surrounds identification of the “first” university attests to the value societies around the world place upon this unique educational innovation: for example, it is often the goal of most mid- to large-sized towns and cities to have their own university, and often, in larger cities, multiple universities. In the high medieval age, it was not just the erection of a large gothic cathedral with an associated cathedral school that gave the town status among its peers, but also the presence of a university.

Even 800 years later, “the university” retains a worldwide cachet and status above most any other educational structure.

Much of this historical debate may be sidestepped by narrowing the discussion to the European variant of the university, and numerous scholars, such as Rüegg et al. (2013a) provide compelling arguments that maintain that the university as we understand it today directly arose from medieval Paris, Bologna, and Oxford in the very early part of the 13th century (de Ridder-Symoens 2003-2010). These institutions, established within but a few years of one another, shared common characteristics such as their instructional methods, assessment techniques, and student societies that still today define the essential essence of a university (Abelson 1906; Novikoff 2013). We still speak, for example, of *rectors*, *colleges*, *deans*, *bachelors*, *masters*, and *degrees*, a testament to the durability of the medieval concepts at work in the university of the time. In medieval Paris, the predecessors of universities, the cathedral-based schools scattered throughout the French Capetian Kingdom, coalesced in the early 13th century to specific locations, such as left bank of the Seine River in Paris, where groups of students and masters formed under licensure from Rome to form this new education innovation, in this specific case, the University of Paris, also known as the *Sorbonne* (Aston 1984; de Ridder-Symoens 2003-2010; Southern 1984). Today we witness the ultimate irony of the university’s eight-century existence, for it was conceived of as a *centralized* and *geographically localized* place of study; regardless of what else changed from century to century, the university remained a central locus for teachers, students, workers, lenders, and builders. Today, however, with the advent of network based, computer-enabled technology, some have questioned if the university will lose this essential characteristic of spatial locality (Amirault, 2012; Amirault and Visser, 2009).

Etymologically, the medieval conception of a geocentric universe, where all existence would rotate around a single axis (literally, a “*uni*”-verse), which also framed the concept of “university” at that period, is well known among education philosophers (cf. Renaut 2015). Even with their concentration of scholars and masters at a single geographic location, European universities were a part of a polycentric network of towns in which they resided; this implies, therefore, that they also constituted a “*multi*”-verse (similar to how contemporary astrophysicists today describe macroscopic realities). This social reality of a concentration of scholars and erudite persons, as mentioned above, was neither restricted to the Western world, having been witnessed in other civilizations (Dodge 2011). Even so, the *European* University concept soon spread from medieval Paris, Oxford, and Bologna, moving throughout Europe, and eventually, the Europeanized world. Today, the university retains its standing as the ultimate educational institution, the educational goal of millions of students worldwide.

Another open question surrounding the university is whether we are describing, as was in the case in France, of a corporation of students and masters, or, as in Germany, a rotating system of abstract knowledge. In Paris, it was the master teachers who controlled the institution; this contrasts with the case of Bologna, while though founded at roughly the same time, lent much power to students over their teachers (students could, for example, “expel” a teacher, or fine him for non-attendance or poor performance (Daileader 2007)). Regardless, the first function of these institutions, born between and within royal secular powers and Catholic spiritual influence, was to enable academics to research and teach *knowledge*. It is only after the medieval period that these institutions were “repurposed” for *applied* outcomes, such as the military state administration, with

prime examples being the *Napoleonian Imperial University* and the *Grandes Écoles* in France (Bourdieu 1996), and industry, as in the case of the Germany of Humboldt.

Across the Atlantic, in the United States, the first universities were established in the 17th century. Harvard was founded in 1636, the College of William and Mary in 1693, and St John's College in 1696: these schools were often built using the British model of university education drawn from Oxford and Cambridge (Quincy 1860). By the 19th and 20th centuries, the United States innovated the university movement with a new form of the institution driven by a capitalist society (Barrow 1990). *For the first time, information was subject to monetization and commoditization* (Shumar 1997). This neoliberal attitude, stressing *economic* liberty, threatened the orientation of the European cradle of universities in the late 20th century, particularly in those countries where the State possessed a strong social position, and France represented the epitome of that cradle.

Higher Education and Distance Learning in France Today: Education as a Public Good Offered by the State

Since the 18th century, French education has been State controlled. First, engineering schools, such as the *École des Ponts et Chaussées* (1747) or the *Écoles des Mines* (1783) were created by the government in order to provide trained workers for key functions of the State's administration, including the construction of bridges, roads, and the deposition and removal of weaponry mines. Therefore, medieval universities (*e.g.*, la Sorbonne University, Toulouse University, etc.), fell into competition with newer public state schools. Over time, a new system for the development of elite students was created, reinforced by factors arising from the French Revolution (1789-1799) and ensconced in such institutions as the Napoleonian Imperial University.

After the French Revolution ended, higher education was removed from the licensing power of Rome and became organized by the French State, which now held the right to award diplomas to both universities and public schools. In France, higher education has since that time, and still is, a State-based entity. The *Ministère de l'Instruction publique* was created by the French State in 1838 (Dauphin 2018), then renovated as the *Ministère de l'Éducation nationale* (Pierre 2019), and, finally, the *Ministère de l'enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche*, which is dedicated to higher education (Baudry de Vaux, Deshayes, Grolière, & Tissot, 1996).

Private educational organizations entered the field of French higher education only in the 19th century. The *École Supérieure de Commerce de Paris*, now considered the worlds' first private business school, was created in 1819, and other provincial (*i.e.*, outside of Paris) initiatives followed (Villette 1998). Despite the presence of an element of privatization, these schools remained under the control of the French State and their diplomas were, and remain, evaluated by the French Ministry of Higher Education and Research.

As a result of this now 250-year history, education within France has been considered for more than two centuries as a public service for the common good, provided by State-managed institutions and controlled by the French government. Economic value and monetary concerns have not, to date, been the main value in French education: *knowledge* has been the central concern, and the system has also relied on meritocracy, *i.e.*, the best positions are awarded to the highest achieving learners. The French State provides grants to students coming from low-income families in France, and access to instruction is free. The main selection factor for students is not fees but is rather based on competition: the difficulty of a Grande école's *concours d'entrée* (entrance examination) is the measure of “value” in French higher education (Blanchard, Orange, & Pierrel 2017).

A fundamental ideology of equity between all young French students is consistently maintained throughout all parts of the French educational system. The most prestigious curricula are based on mathematics. Politically, most teachers are assumed to be on the left wing of the political spectrum, and French sociologists (Bourdieu and Clough 1996) are known for their criticism of the system's various imperfections (e.g., elites' social reproduction).

However, with the development of the concept of "lifelong learning" (a concept actually European in origin that can be traced back to the creation of the university), along with adult training and the influence of the Anglo-American model of private education in Europe, France today faces a potential sea-change in its lengthy State-based tradition of higher education. Indeed, many student exchanges, like those generated from the *Erasmus Program* in Europe (The European Union, 2016) confront the French public service with private curricula from other countries. Research activity, of course, necessitates fundraising, and this has now become an integral component of the process of the privatization of science within France (Feyerabend, 1993), and more broadly, of education itself. In France, a 1971 law (Law no.71-575 of 16 July 1971) for permanent education fostered company-based training of workers. A new market for adult training was born, where universities, schools, and specialized organizations, including *universités d'entreprises*, now compete with one another for students (Baudry de Vaux et al., 2002). This competition between institutions soared to even greater heights with the technological revolution of the 2000s, primarily due to the emergence of the Internet and the growth of e-learning.

The educational environment of French distance education has likewise traditionally been that of State-based public service, first created in 1939 to provide instruction to young French learners in parts of France who were under occupation by German troops at the beginning of World

War II. Since its creation, this public service has been a rather innovative institution, and today, as we will discuss, it is anticipating a possible shift towards privatization (Author II 2014b).

Distance Education: from Public Institution to Profit-Driven Institution

French distance education was first begun within occupied France in 1939 with the public institution named *The National Centre for Distance Education*, or “Cned” in French (Sylvie, 1993). Cned reached the status of an *academy* (i.e., an administrative educational unit of high status) in 1986 with 400 000 learners. First situated in Paris, the institution in the 1990’s moved to the *Futuroscope* in Poitiers in the central region of France and now includes some eight sites spread across the country. The institution currently assumes a public administration role under the control of both the *Ministère de l’Éducation Nationale* and the *Ministère de l’Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche*. The institution provides learners with a curriculum that commences at primary school level and reaches to the master’s level.

All throughout its historical development, the institution has grown into an industrial producer of knowledge, transmitting lectures and educational material to hundreds of thousands of learners both inside and outside of Metropolitan France (Cned serves approximately a quarter of a million learners across all grade levels using some 250 courses (Amirault, 2018)). This industrial setting, a key characteristic of mass education, was also connected with the experimentation of new pedagogical technologies: lectures sent by postal mail were soon accompanied by telephone contact, followed by television, then the *Minitel* videotex system (an early precursor to the Internet), and finally the Internet (which permitted the use of web sites, email, forums, chat, virtual classes, and so on). The institution was therefore utilized as a tool in which to experiment with the use of new mass educational technologies in French education.

Nevertheless, French distance education has been less competitive than its international peers with Internet-based distance education. A national MOOC-based agency, *France Université Numérique*, also known as “FUN-MOOC,” was created to address this deficiency and the dissemination of learning management systems such as *Moodle* within schools and universities supported strong growth of French distance learning as a public service within universities and France’s Grandes Écoles (FUN-MOOC 2019). As a follow-on consequence, the French State decided to also require *economic profitability* from Cned’s higher educational offerings. Whereas primary and secondary education (which are compulsory in France until the age of 16) are considered as a public service, paid for with State funding, free for all citizens, and enshrined in law, *higher education* is now reconsidering its traditional position. Indeed, the French Ministry for Higher Education and Research now seeks that Cned be economically self-sufficient within the higher education adult learning levels.

Therefore, French distance learning finds itself in a position where it must reconsider its funding model, perhaps existing even as a private business: the value of each higher education curriculum must now be measured in terms of *monetary profitability*. Whereas in the past, higher education institutions faced very limited competition, all curricula today (*i.e.*, university degrees, master’s degrees, etc.) are now competing in a distance learning market where there are many universities and schools—including private companies—all of which are investing in e-learning tools such as learning management systems (e.g., Moodle) to deliver educational content via the Internet.

It is within this context that this ethnographical study was conducted. Cned, like many others higher education providers in France, finds itself under pressure and realizes that it may very well have to reinvent its current business model as a result. We now examine and describe

this evolutionary process from within the institution, with the change of habits, traditions, and new values that such a change imposes on its workers.

Materials and Methods

A Three-Year Field Inquiry and Identity Shifts: Is the Higher Ed Curriculum Designer a *Teacher*, or *Manager*?

About the ethnographic researcher

Knowing a little about the researcher's (Dr. Olivier Marty) educational background will help illuminate the ethnographic discussion in this manuscript. Born in a family of teachers, after attending a variety of French Grandes écoles and subsequently earning a PhD in Ethics, the researcher proceeded to conduct fieldwork from 2011 to 2013 within the French National Institution for Distance Education. The researcher was hired to work for the organization during the day and then worked within Cnam's sciences laboratories at night. During this time, the researcher also attended conferences and wrote scientific articles about distance learning focused on education engineering and distance education management (Marty ,2014a; Marty, 2004b). After completing services within universities (as an Assistant Professor and then Director of Curricula), this scientific activity led him to defend an "*Habilitation à diriger les recherches*" at the University of Rouen (2017). This represents the highest academic degree offered to academics in France. The researcher's specific field is education sciences.

The researcher has consistently presented distance education engineering as an *activity* (an ethnographic-based action research about instructional design and curriculum management). He

has employed an empirical procedure parallel to that of Hammersley's (1998), who studied in the UK's *Open University*. He has also developed field descriptions about curricula design in order to train students in law, economics, computer and management skills. He additionally demonstrated how these curricula were designed according to both national requirements and students' backgrounds (a curriculum being a way to lead the students from their previous knowledge—their background—to the competencies necessary by law to earn a governmentally-recognized diploma). The researcher has also developed scholarly manuscripts about the monetisation and privatisation of French distance education (cf. Marty 2014b).

The Shift in Distance Learning Institutions: Towards an Industrial Culture of Education, the Mutation of Human Resources

Traditionally, Cned's higher education service has recruited state teachers in order to manage its training courses and programs. These individuals come from high schools or universities and are recruited for a job that is slightly different from what they were formally accustomed to: they now focus on the *administrative* portion of the educational system, and no longer engage in the instructional role. Their job emphasizes recruiting and establishing contracts for authors and tutors, as well as conceiving new curricula and elaborating partnership with publishers or universities. Their position, then, can be described as both an activity of management and curriculum design. The workers studied in this research also are required to harmonize across departments: for example, a production department in charge of printing and sending lectures or for the development of learning websites, and then an administration department in charge of admission, collecting and having tests corrected, along with sending the final training certification.

However, the mode of recruitment changed when the researcher conducted participatory observation. With the rise of New Public Management (NPM), a new direction was established to give priority to workers coming from the private sector (*i.e.*, those having worked with a publisher, an adult training company, etc.) or perhaps trained in private business schools. Being a *pedagogue* and *agrégé* with strong in-classroom experience was no longer the main selection criteria: civil servants, previously the “mainstay” of education, are nowadays in competition with private workers, and everyday life within France has substantively changed as a result.

At a higher administrative level, the researcher conducted informal interviews with Directors who determine and conduct their organization’s strategy. Their very title says a lot about the new public management which they represent: they are called “*Business Unit Directors*” and their functions are defined by the “*market segment*” which they target. Most of them are education “outsiders,” having professional experience in private organizations not necessarily linked with education, even though they may have previously studied at an esteemed school for a doctorate, or perhaps studied and managed at one of France’s elite *Grandes écoles*. These individuals represent a new generation not previously seen in French education: these individuals wear suits and ties, and speak of “clients” and “money”. This is a fundamental change in how the French have traditionally viewed the role of education as a State-offered function that is necessary (and essentially free of cost) for the health of the nation, rather than a profit-driven industry.

Observations and Results

Workers’ Habits are Changing

The researcher first observed confusion in *the vocabulary used to designate the audience targeted by the institution*. Whereas former employees use the word “*usager*” (the French word

for any user of a public service), the new generation more likely speaks of “*clients*” (French, “*les clients*”). The ideology of public service and common good is therefore replaced by the notion of *private interest* and the *transaction of money*, which alters education as a “right” and is now *purchased* by a “consumer”. However, a compromise is found around the notion of “learner” (French, “*apprenant*”), designating neither a student nor a pupil, but an adult engaged in specific training. This term (“*apprenant*”) refers to the institution’s sector of activity and not its mode of operation (public and/or private activity) reflecting this change in thinking about the educational process.

Another difference was easily observed by the field researcher: *the manner in which people dress for work*. Whereas the previous generation of teachers took on a casual style of dress, newcomers are more likely to come to work clothed in dress clothing (a suit and a tie for a man, for example). The notion of *time* similarly tends to be more strictly enforced: employees’ schedules are controlled by a computer-based time-machine (*i.e.*, workers must clock in and out of the institution in order to measure how much time they spend within the “industry of knowledge”), whereas previously this level of time watching was not practiced.

The most important observed change, however, was *the focus on work activity stressed by top management*. Management controllers are hired in order to set up an accounting tool to measure worker’s activity surrounding a course. After having audited all sites and departments, these controllers create an Excel spreadsheet which calculates all the costs associated with a specific training module or unit in order to set up an *analytical accounting profile for the course*. Whereas the most experienced employees had the habit of creating new training courses without knowing in detail how much the course would cost in either time or direct currency, or even whether the course would be profitable (reflecting the original State-based mentality), now such calculated

estimates are used to measure costs, income, and the expected return on investment (ROI) for a course or module. This could be described as a “government by numbers” approach.

Employees are required to enter multiple cost figures within an Excel spreadsheet: *e.g.*, number of days spent conceiving and then coordinating the pedagogical device. These include the number of pages of lectures brought to authors, number of pages to design and to publish a website by the production department, amount of time spent animating the forum and website, number of hand-ins to be corrected by the tutors, and number of days of in the physical classroom when the course is hybrid training (*i.e.*, combining distance and face-to-face instruction). All these costs are summed and compared to the income from learner tuition and the estimated price of the training (fixed by a specific worker in charge of analysing all the institution’s prices). The Excel spreadsheet then calculates a financial analysis, including margins, benefits, and cash flows.

All workers are thus changed in their thinking via this accounting analysis and learn to see reality through the focus of *economics*. This is a major cultural change, since none of these workers had ever before been required to perform this type of cost accounting (and a few among the eldest even had difficulties with using the Excel program itself; this reform led to a great deal of discord among the workers, particularly those from the oldest generation, some of whom judged the Excel program as impossible for them to operate.)

Another tool implemented by top management is a validation of all new projects through a process entitled “the product life cycle”. Like marketers in the industrial sector, the product life cycle view considers all training courses as *products* which proceed through a “life cycle” of birth, development, full usage, and eventual suppression when they no longer generate a profit (cf. Amirault, 2015). Curriculum designers therefore have to complete a Word document related to these various factors, including many business considerations never before considered by these

educators: markets, commercial targets (quantitative data and qualitative comments about this target), general descriptions of the pedagogical dimension of the product (is it innovative? what are the services included?), planning of implementation, income hypothesis, and so on. Here again this marketing process, illustrating new public management, had a cold reception by former teachers. They view this approach as an “invasion” of economics into their pedagogical craft.

This cultural change was epitomized up by an institutional controversy that the researcher witnessed. Was it indeed an administrative public institution (“EPA” in French) or, as rumour had it, would it be turned into an industrial and commercial public institution (“EPIC”)? This change of legal status would be a turning point that represented a clear change in the organization’s culture. Private sector habits and monetization would be the official nature of the institution; unions and older employees criticized this possible change of status, arguing that it would betray the intrinsic traditional spirit of French public education that had been present for more than two centuries.

We next examine how the institution is rethinking its business model. Even if it is now widely accepted that training must consider monetary issues, nevertheless there no consensus of exactly *what* is to be sold.

About the Commodification of Education in France: Selling What, and to Whom?

“Method” versus “Pedagogy”

Commodification of education in America has previously been widely described (cf. Shumar 1997). In our European case described above, we witnessed that this shift for Cned implied a few business tools (such as number on an Excel table and a Word document) to estimate the economic value of a specific training course in order to be profitable on the market. But both the

transition witnessed in France's Cned and the US-based model holds a commonality: *education is a product that can be sold.*

At the institution studied by the researcher, however, there is still a debate about *what* is to be sold. In an interview with the General Director of Training at Cned, the Director declared that *content was no longer the core of the institution's business model.* Delivering a document (either in paper or in digital online format) was not sufficient for a course to exist. The Director reiterated that mere reading material or viewing a video is not the main value-added component of training. It is the job of publishers to edit such content and *sell* it in the market. What the researcher would refer to as "method," *i.e.*, a course's content, is what is traditionally viewed by the consumer as the materialization of knowledge. *Method* is the result of the learning path, that which is learned. However, the General Director of training put forth the notion that another item is more important: *pedagogy.* This shift has occurred as information/knowledge has become commoditized and more freely available to anyone online. But the pedagogy of how that knowledge is to be conveyed to the learner is now more the focus of the specialized skill that holds the true "value" of the instructional experience.

"Pedagogy" can be viewed as the set of services provided by teachers to the learner. These teachers orient learners before any engagement in a curriculum takes place. They help in case of difficulties in the course, perhaps through an online forum, correct mistakes on submitted assignments, come to fully understand the learning sequence by examining earned grades associated with a given learner's performance level in the course, as well as the certificate delivered by the institution, and they give advice about how the course can be modified in the future.

The General Director, however, states that this economy of service replacing the industrial production of content is not clearly defined. There are debates about how content should be sold. Should content be free and extra services bought by the learner? Or should content *plus* services be paid by the learner? There is, in both cases, an inherent difficulty in thinking of the economy of knowledge independently from the two dimensions of a teacher's craft: economy of service (*i.e.*, pedagogy) and economy of production (*i.e.*, method).

This strategic uncertainty may be due to educational content providers using technologies such as MOOC's who are giving away much of their content and services (both method and pedagogy) possibly to "hook" students and new learners on fashionable topics. Business models in distance education, are therefore often opposed by universities and private institutions distributing their knowledge on the Internet for the account of national interests. Decades-old institutions must reinvent what they sell, and how they sell it, in order to become competitive in an Internet-based market.

Designing the Learner's Experience

Another identified controversy focuses on the learner's experience. Influenced by experiential marketing, attention is paid to what the learner will feel and experience during his/her curriculum (during the time of this study, the concept of "design thinking" had not yet been addressed within the institution). A training course (or *formation*, in French) is different than a mere series of informational pieces because the course is larger (and is therefore a more complex and intertwined series of informational components, not simply a single discrete fact) and the experience the course provides reaches deeper into the learner's mind. Learning a single piece of information is an everyday process used to solve common problems. But learning an entire

complex set of informational components (such as when a learner goes through an entire course) is a much more challenging mental activity for the learner. This process takes significant time, the learner tends to identify himself/herself with the knowledge acquired, and he/she will remember it for a longer period. There is also an aesthetic dimension of learning in this manner, because it deals with a complete array of the learner's senses.

The institution in this study has paid careful attention to this type of learning experience. To amplify identification, a service of socialization has now been deployed. Since the experience of learning is stronger within a community, the institution has also established a network tool supervised by a community manager where learners can exchange tips and practical techniques about the course and collaboratively work on the course assignments (as well as share and consider criticisms). Learners feel part of a learning team, and there is both cooperation and competition within these teams. Learners help each other, and they sometimes even compete to outwit one another. There can also be solidarity present when someone has trouble in the course, and a sense of honour amplifies the results of every individual learner. This service has been provided by the institution at no cost to this point in time but is now considering an additional charge for this feature. Here again, we see evidence of the business model at work.

Lastly, the alumni community has been strengthened through use of a web-based marketing tool that collects learners' success stories. Testimonials from students having a double career as athlete or artist are highlighted with many images and positive comments are also presented. A manager oversees the website's forum, answering questions and managing debates about the institution. Such marketing makes the learners' community more united around a few "stars" that can be followed. But it also allows the institution to convert prospective students into *clients*. The

institution is therefore, in a sense, *selling dreams*, associating itself with rather innovative ways of life and learning experiences.

Lifelong Learning and Vocational Training as Profitable Markets

Selling training courses, whether it be a combination of method and pedagogy or a new learning experience, is not common in France. Historically France has developed citizens who believed that education was *innately* valuable by its very nature. However, with adult training development and lifelong learning, France's view on education is also now changing, leading to changes in French law (e.g., a 1971 law passed by the French legislature concerning continuing education created a new market: professional training, compulsory by law, and financed by a company's Human Resources department (Dubar 2008)).

This new market has been targeted by specific training organizations, but also by universities and public schools, adding new training programs to their portfolio. The institution we studied at Cned created a specific department dedicated to this professional market. This department, linked both with the commercial department and the training department, is highly representative of the processes surrounding the commodification of education. Indeed, its main activity is to sell training to professional organizations. The department is located near Cned's headquarters and represents the modernity of the institution. Although most educational activities of this type are scattered across eight different sites in France, this particular one resides within the heart of the institution.

The researcher therefore observed an institution moving from an administrative culture delivering a public good to an industrial culture selling profitable training on the market. Even if what is to be sold is not yet clearly defined, the presence of monetization is clearly valuable. We

next review what the consequences of this new strategy are. We will focus on the very notion of *value* and its estimation, which underlies the worth of money.

Discussion

An Example of New Public Management Hired and Discussed on Field: About Education's Value(s)

Our goal is to identify the debates concerning value in education, and more specifically, those within adult education and higher distance education. On field, when one is designing a new bachelor's degree in distance education inspired by the North American model but still compatible with the European constraints (licence-master-doctorat, for example), or when one is defining a two-year curriculum preparing a national French technical degree (or even a two-day professional program for adults), what are the values that determine whether one should invest or not?

Education Marketing

One uses the plural form when examining values, since one deals with different economic conceptions in the value chain: the value for the *learner* (including human capital, updated skills for career purposes and lifelong employability and also the learning experience that enhances the training's value to an individual), the value for the *client* (the learner who pays for the instruction, or sometimes the company or state investing in one of his/her employee's educational training), the value for the *teacher* (the one who delivers the training and has an understanding on the training's quality), the value for the *curriculum* or instructional designer who designs the curriculum (including an economic approach with costs and revenues and a financial analysis, and

also the professional pedagogical values of the community of practices), and so forth (*i.e.*, aggregated values for strategy decision makers in the hierarchy, perceived value for the internal clients within the education organization, etc.).

Within this multiplicity of points of view, we will focus on curriculum designers within the major education industry (a mega-university of 200,000 students in public distance education). Even through the eyes of the curriculum designer it appears that “value analysis” is a plural concept, since there is often a conflict between a rational economical approach (accounting what is the money involved and figuring out a priced value) and a rather more affective, professional approach (*i.e.*, the pedagogical values of the community of practices dealing with education).

This describes a chain of linked points of views about what constitutes the value of a training course for the curriculum designer. At the beginning is the learner, followed by the client, and then the instructor. Next is the curriculum designer, but he/she is supervised by the strategy decision makers of his/her company, and these are dependent on national policies as to what concerns the regulation of the market in which they are operating. This chain of value can be represented as:

FIGURE 1 SHOULD APPEAR HERE

Figure 1: Accounting and Finance for Curriculum Design

After the marketing approach comes the time associated with cost evaluation. The aim of the curriculum designer is primarily to determine whether the planned training is going to be financially profitable. He/she has therefore to look at the training’s associated revenue and costs to determine whether it is a good financial investment with a positive return. At this point a

difficulty can arise because the tool is sometimes a mere generalized metric and is not strictly followed: certain investments are made on non-profitable training, qualified as “strategic” (because even though not financially profitable, there is a public demand for the content, and the educational organization wishes to be present on an emerging market and to allow a compensation between the different sectors of activities, and so forth). The formal operation of cost accounting is therefore more a good practice facilitating the curriculum designers’ activity control than a strict rule that must be obeyed.

The various costs to be evaluated for a training course are listed below:

FIGURE 2 SHOULD APPEAR HERE

The last spreadsheet of the management tool that was used in our ethnographic research setting was built upon the first two tools: this last tool compared the expected sales (*i.e.*, number of clients, number of years, price of a unit) to the expected costs (*i.e.*, investment costs and variable running costs). This computation is performed automatically by the Excel spreadsheet in order to determine the profitability of the designed curriculum. It provides forecasting thresholds such as the minimal number of clients to become profitable, the minimum number of years of deployment, or the minimum price at which to sell the curriculum in order to be financially profitable. Even if the final price of the curriculum is approved by a price analyst, someone who is specialized in this task due to the division of labor within this industry of knowledge, the curriculum designer adjust prices within the Excel spreadsheet tool in order to determine the optimal option for pricing.

The last figure is used to record the thresholds for profitability of a training course, as seen in Figure 3, below:

FIGURE 3 SHOULD APPEAR HERE

Politics vs. Economics: A Discussion on “Value”

Curriculum designers in this setting formally speak about their training portfolio not only in number of learners but also in total sales revenues, as well as profit margin. This profit margin is required by strategic management to fall between forty and seventy percent. This policy is to be approved if one wants to climb up the hierarchy of the educative organization.

However, one is reminded how particular laws or decisions from the public authorities could force the education organization and its curriculum designers to invest in non-profitable markets or training. In the organization studied, a large website for teaching English to secondary pupils was set up over the course of a year and a half. Development of this website carried large costs but low profit (only half of the training was actually sold, the other half being given for free to French civil society), but the training served an objective of the Ministry of Higher Education regardless of the loss of financial profit.

In the institutions themselves, there exists a conflict between monetary values, which is common to many sectors, and the professional values of curriculum designers. Whereas typical organizations are looking for profits over a short time span, educational organizations are focused on a much longer time horizon, as well as a, accompanying deep change in society and the learner's mind as a result of the instructional experience. This helps to explain why, historically, education has often been oriented within a religious framework. However, after the French Revolution, education within France took on a public orientation. It is but recently, during the second half of

the 20th century, that the French model opened education to the private sector, though the State continued to cautiously control and regulate that education regardless of the body delivering it.

Modeling this Dual Experience: On Distance Analysis

Three types of “distances” can be distinguished and then combined into a unique model existing within a bidimensional space. We here present three distance measures arising from the study: *fieldwork*, the *scientific community* and *one’s self*. We may combine these “distances” into a distance analysis in the graph below.

FIGURE 4 SHOULD APPEAR HERE

We see on the graph how the vertical axis marking the psychology of the researcher (*i.e.*, the distance to one’s self, going from 0 toward an identity tension) is designated by a bell curve function of the horizontal axis designing the social circumstances (“distance to scientific community” vs versus “distance to administration field workers,” on a single continuum). The education ethnographer moves on the curve all along his research, modifying his/her psychosocial characteristics during the study.

This model, initiated within Ethnography and Education (Marty, 2014a), emerged on field while passing from the status of scientist to the one of employed fieldworker in distance education, and then back to science during a full time job within a university – and meanwhile experiencing professional identity tensions (the vertical vertigo). We can show how the researcher can face identity challenges when he/she is at a high peak of distance to himself: it is in an uncomfortable position when the researcher is divided between a scientific belonging equal to his field administrative inclusion. It is a difficult transition during the journey.

This bell curve is useful for education ethnographers to measure their psychosocial position at any time of their research process. It is what we call a “distance analysis” and it is a tool to assist in being aware of one’s position during the educational ethnography enquiry. Education ethnographers can locate their studies on this ethical path in order to locate their position on the curve and the evolution that occurs during the research process.

Moreover, the habit of conducting education ethnography research flattens the vertical vertigo measure: the researcher becomes more used to shifting from a field identity to a scientific identity and is less subject to the critical passage of distance to one’s self. This model is especially true for those only beginning their first educational ethnographic studies.

We now turn from the conditions of the inquiry to the field description itself.

A Method in Ethnography and Education: Management Sciences as an “Indigenous Language”

The researcher can study management sciences as an ‘indigenous language’ in order to be introduced to middle management in a distance learning organization. Learning the language beforehand allows the researcher to optimize the field of expertise and experience (being hired and working full time while being in an education sciences laboratory) for the purpose of the research (describing the inner intricacies, serving as an ‘outsider’ from the inside of the organization).

However, the management language was not totally accepted in the field study setting, and a controversy arose about the method used to measure the value of a curriculum. There was a question of value(s) and a debate arose about the acceptance of new public management in education (it is currently a main axis of research in education science at La Sorbonne University in Paris: is education a *public* or a *private* good?). This is an example of where a piece of

conceptual knowledge, even though it is already academically stabilized, doesn't always encompass all viewpoints, and can be contested in the field.

In a nutshell, it appears important for the researcher to be prepared for the field by acquiring a specific knowledge of that field prior to research. This study made it clear that such knowledge is important to be able to capture the most important elements to be captured and examined.

This study is an excellent example of how higher education, while similar in many of its core elements (degrees, faculty, deans, colleges, etc.) can differ widely between countries. France's historical legacy of "free" higher education is now being challenged with monetary value propositions that have been in place in other countries for many years. This is one reason France is an excellent location for conducting ethnographic research when a high education institution attempts to transfer between financial paradigms. Expectations of both faculty and students can be challenged when undergoing such fundamental change to long-held beliefs about education. This study can serve as the first in a series of observational research that more deeply probes the impact such changes have upon all affected parties. At what point are students willing to pay for education? How do curriculum designers determine where that point exists, and how do they ensure curricula meet that point? At what point does the cost of education become unsustainable over time? And how can the "classical" values of education continue to be met in a financially-oriented educational structure? These are just a few of the additional questions that a researcher can use to build upon this current study.

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Figures

Figure 1:

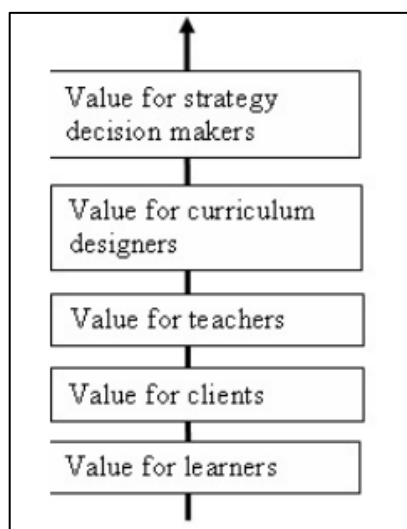


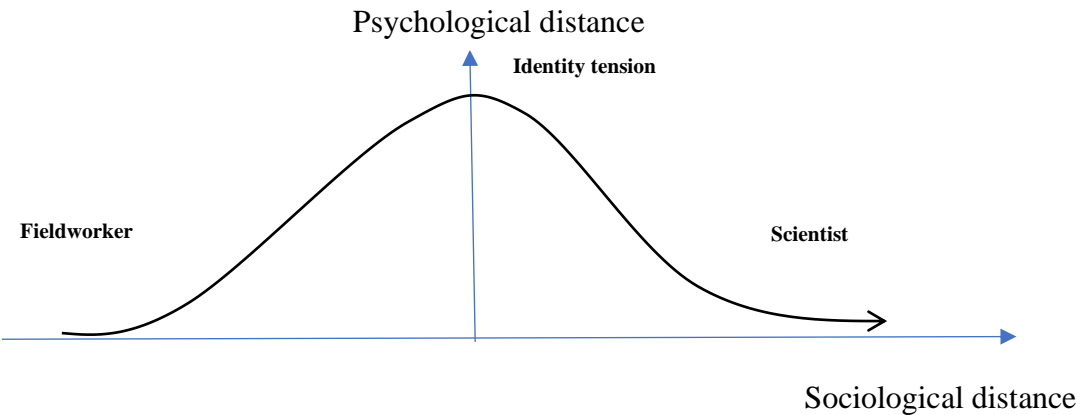
Figure 2:

Investment costs	<i>Depreciable costs during the operating time</i> Days of work of a curriculum designer Days of work of a project coordinator Purchase of pedagogical contents (courses, assignments) Text formatting by production service Website production
Re-investment in a re-engineering	Updating of pedagogical contents due to new national programs, need for new assignments, etc.
Operating costs	<i>Variable costs according to the number of clients each year</i> Days of work for training coordination Communication and selling by sales department Impression of pedagogical contents by production department Mailing of courses (paper/electronic) Assignments correction Learners registration by sales department Animation of online or in-class trainings Renting of an assessment center Website maintenance

Figure 3:

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Expected sales				
Expected costs				
Profitability				
Threshold of participants				
Threshold of price				

Figure 4:



Figures Captions

- Figure 1: *Accounting and Finance for Curriculum Design*
- Figure 2: *Costs Associated with Course Development*
- Figure 3: *Thresholds for Course Profitability*
- Figure 4: *Distance Analysis: A Psychosocial Model for Education*