Chapter 4

Education Within the Knowledge Industry

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Introduction

In this chapter I examine five aspects of contemporary processes of social change and develop some of the implications of these phenomena for how education (at all levels, but with a particular focus on higher education) may be “done” in the coming decade. My position is that education in its root sense is a knowledge “enterprise” and that the logics that are impelling other institutions within the overall knowledge/information environment forces will affect it as well. This presents a grounding for some of the more contentious policy debates in the field of comparative and international education.

These five phenomena being examined here are familiar to many, and are indeed, to some degree, commonplace. In many ways, we have readily adapted to many of the social changes triggered by these dynamics. The position here is that, despite their commonplace character, these are transformative in ways that perhaps we have not completely examined, especially in terms of their implications for how we conceive of and attempt to produce educational outcomes. In the order of their discussion, these phenomena are:

- The increasing “boundarylessness” of our globalized world;
- The continued emergence of networks in society and of a network society;
• Re- and de-statusing as they take place within organizations migrating from industrial to information technology (IT) network models and practices;
• The revaluing of information within the new economics of digitalization as represented by the Long Tail; and
• Search and its implications for how we do information and how it does us.

Five Forces Changing Our World

On Boundaries

As Mary Douglas (1973) has said, boundaries define social life. They are the social frames on which the essential elements of endogeny and exogeny delineate social structure, roles and the symbolic structures that link us, create and preserve identity, and permit ordered and predictable social exchange. Thomas L. Friedman (1999), an early apostle of the increasing global interdependence that is reshaping our world, has offered an arresting and lasting metaphor for the boundary-challenging aspects of contemporary globalization by proclaiming that the world is flat.

The popularity of Friedman’s book and the aptness of the metaphor owe much to widespread agreement on two aspects of his growing global interdependence. One, captured in the title of his first chapter, “While I Slept,” points us to the extraordinary number of ways wherein by becoming “globalized” the conventional boundaries of our everyday lives have changed. The world appears to have changed in remarkable ways “while we slept,” seemingly overnight, hardly within our notice. For Friedman, our world of boundaries has slipped away. The second is our everyday appreciation that, indeed, the world is different. Much of how we experience and “know” the world has changed a great deal in the past two decades. However, because many of these changes are incremental, we fail to “add them all up” in ways that allow us to appreciate fully the implications of these changes across many dimensions of our lives. Our customary and comfortable languages are, in the respect of aspects, obsolete—they refer to a world that in many important respects no longer exists.

In Friedman’s language, this remaking of boundaries results in large part from “flatteners”—social processes that extend out from a given source, engage boundaries, and, through the various quanta of social energy engaged, force them to give way. In making his argument, he