Introduction

The *Curse of the Course Team* article that was produced by Michael Drake in 1979 questions the Open University’s use of a course team to produce courses. This article sparked much debate and research from other professionals that are knowledgeable in the topic and are of many different roles. Michael Drake insists that the involvement of the course teams causes a focal shift towards the academic and not the student, partly because instructors are not involved in the course production resulting in the course team to place more emphasis on content. Drake provides feasible arguments that encourage academics to assess the nature of their course teams.

In the digital diploma debate, David F. Noble (1997) initiates debate on a new kind of digital diploma mill. Noble firmly believes that online education is a product of commercialization, and that universities have no regards to input from faculty or students.

In this paper, we will learn about the course team debate and the digital diploma debate and view the positions of all parties involved in the debate. Further, we will address the commonalities of each debate, discuss actions that could resolve the debate, and identify if the debates are dead or relevant issues today.
Section I: The Course Team Debate and the Digital Diploma Debate

The Course Team Debate

In the course team debate, there are six major players that submitted their thoughts in reference to Drake’s views. Four of six articles were produced within a one year period. Looking at these facts, the influx of opinions and practices of course teams simply identify that this was a subject that now demanded an extreme amount of attention. In essence, Drake’s article helped to open the exchanging of ideas in how to make course teams operate in an effective manner.

As previously stated, Michael Drake initiated a healthy debate on the involvement of course teams to develop courses in writing his analytical article *The Curses of the Course Team* (1979). At the time that Drake produced this article, he was a professor in the social sciences at the Open University. The roles of the major players of note that either agree or oppose to Drake’s article include:

- Andrew Blowers, Dean of Faculty of Social Services and Senior Lecturer in Geography at The Open University
- Neil Costello, Staff Tutor of Social Sciences at The Northwest Region
- Malcolm Tight, Director of the Center for Research and Development in Part-Time Higher Education at Birkbeck College, University of London

In Drake’s assessment of course teams at the Open University, he holds the notion that course teams are cursed if they continue to operate without attacking some lurking issues. His views are as follows:
• Course teams need to place more emphasis on teaching rather than content.
• Course teams need to stop adding more academics to the team and cease to extend set up times of the course team in order to meet deadlines.
• Course teams are detrimental to research since they interact in a social context which allows a healthy exchange of ideas, but the non-course team member that performs individual research needs to be able to successfully communicate with the course team to integrate that research into the content.
• Course teams need to learn ways to incorporate feedback and handle the issues that cause it not to occur such as individuals who are not competent to comment on content, lack interest, have domineering and or shy characteristics, etc.

Neil Costello (1979) not too much longer than the release of Drake’s article published a comment on Drake’s analysis of course teams. Costello, delighted that Drake brought out course teams issues in the open, tends to both agree and disagree with Drake’s points, but offers more of a solution. Costello (1979) firmly believes that the source of the issue lies internally due to the inexperience of academics in management (p. 54). All course teams will have conflicts that need to be resolved, but success will be dependent upon the skillfulness of the course chairman as Costello contends.

Andrew Blowers takes an opposing position to Drake’s points in believing that Drake is “inventing problems for the sake of debate and evading solutions (Blowers, 1979, p. 54).” Blowers’ attributes the successes of great courses to the course team’s ability to collaborate and self-criticize. He half-heartedly agrees
with some of Drake’s claims such as more emphasis placed on content than teaching and the extended discussion periods, but offers four different approaches to overcoming these issues. These approaches are to become more flexible in course production, review attitudes towards teaching, and to add incentive for chairmanship.

Malcolm Tight (1995) takes a similar position to Costello when he says that the crucial role lies within management (p. 49) and that there is too much thought placed on the academic. Tight asks the question “do we really need course teams?” One would expect this question from a professional in the director role since they are not routinely involved in the course building process. As an answer to his question, he simply states “no”, but offers a different identity of teams that build courses of such that are well equipped with a chairman of non-academic status and ‘non academic’ skilled appointed members.

Looking at the course team debate, the application to pedagogy is the main issue of extreme importance in my personal judgment. Drake (1979) brings this issue front and center, by declaring that teaching is not the main concern to course teams (p. 52.). Course teams can only bring so much to the course, but will likely fail to grasp the student with activities and other classroom experiences and tools that could bridge the gap between content and the learning experience. Applying the content to that demographic of students in the best approach that they can understand should make a big difference.

*The Digital Diploma Debate*
In the digital diploma debate, there are two major players of note that respond to Noble’s controversial dispositions. The major players that were part of this debate were Frank White (1999) and Robert Sedgwick (2000). At the time that he published his article *Digital Diploma Mills: A Dissenting Voice*, Frank White was the Library Director at Mary Grove College in Detroit Michigan. Robert Sedgwick, author of *Diploma Mills Go Digital* was an Editor at eWENR (e-World Education News & Reviews).

Noble (1997), the initiator of the digital diploma debate firmly believes that online education is damaging due to the following issues; no student or faculty input in the decision-making process, no faculty control and ownership with their intellectual property, high technology driven costs, etc. Extreme technological focus without much concern on the pedagogical end of things along with the missing faculty involvement equivocates into the digital diploma mill; which is thus taking away everything that makes education sacred.

Frank White (1999) agrees to disagree with Noble’s opposition to technology and suggests that he redirects his attacks elsewhere. White believes that Noble should get over decision-making coming from the top down; that is the administrator’s job, therefore they are not necessarily evil for making the types of decisions that arrive to. White (1999) simply sees it clearly that administrators have different concerns and interests than the faculty, which the faculty doesn’t take into account (p. 2). Further solidifying his opposition to Noble’s tirade against technology and the top-down process, White affirms that Noble is extremely biased and has not provided real or adequate evidence to support his
claims. For instance, he identifies where Noble (1998) proclaims that studies have identified that computer-based instruction reduces performance levels (paragraph 3), and discusses how Noble fails to cite the studies that arrived to this conclusion. Viewing this important type of error makes Noble’s claims that much more difficult to take into account or even take seriously.

Robert Sedgwick (2000) discusses the type of digital diploma mills that Noble should really be worried about. He talks of the digital diploma mills that rake in millions of solicited dollars from knowing and unknowing people in return for a college diploma. Sedgwick (2000) proposes that distance education practitioners and a wide range of supporters should advocate their state for stricter laws to protect all parties against diploma mills (p. 7).

Noble brought front and center the issue of the top-down process, which I find to be the significant issue in the digital diploma debate. Transition of higher education from the top-down without student and faculty involvement in the decision-making process could prove to be potentially harmful to the institution. Administrators should want input from these parties because they will ultimately determine the success of the new processes. It is detrimental for administrators to get faculty buy-in in order to make the transition process smooth and identify any problems that may turn up to be road bumps in the future. Faculty may need training, and in turn may need to train other faculty members, analyze support methods, etc.
Section II: Commonalities of the Course Team and Digital Diploma Debates

The concept of implementing new processes from the administrative level parallels both debates. Noble is distraught with the way that decisions on technology is being made from the top-level without faculty and student insight; whereas what Drake inadvertently is calling for is better decision-making from the management level. The course team has full range of decisions to make, and are lacking chairmen that can make decisions to yield favorable results for the course team. Drake supports this notion in stating that:

“One doesn’t actually have to do anything; no decisions must be made; there are no deadlines to be met. But when the time comes for decisions and deadlines, most academics are well-equipped (p. 51)”

Noble (1997) uses the example of the UCLA administration launching their Instructional Enhancement Initiative (requirement of use of computer telecommunications technology) without faculty oversight (p. 2) to show how administrators are being sucked into the commercialization of higher education by technology vendors.

Section III: Resolving the Conflicts

I agree with some of the issues that Drake and Noble bring forward, but they both could have provided some suggestions on how to resolve these conflicts. Looking at the Drake’s debate on course teams, I would suggest the following solutions:

- Train the chairmen on how to make the proper decisions and when to get involved – Too much chairman involvement can hinder the
interactive social debate and exchanging of ideas, but deadlines must be met.

- Implement a plan to get instructor insight to course teams - Quite often the focus is too much on the content and not of pedagogical concern. It is imperative for chairmen to ensure that the student’s pedagogical needs are being met.

As far as the digital diploma mill debate, it's hard to identify where to begin. I almost feel as if a response to Noble's articles isn’t warranted due to the lack of references to support his claims and solutions to them. We are also not provided personal experiences that made him feel so opposed to technology and learning. As I previously stated in this paper, the digital diploma mill situation identified by Robert Sedgwick seems of much more importance than Noble’s tirade against technology.

After reviewing the debate on digital diploma mills, I would suggest the following solutions:

- Be sure to retrieve proper insight from parties that require buy-in during transitional processes including faculty and students
- Ensure that instructional technology promotes learning prior to implementation
- Get advocates of distance education together in suit to challenge the existence of digital diploma mills

**Section IV: Dead Issue or Relevant Issue**

From my own personal experiences as a course team member in the workplace, I believe that the course team will always have issues whenever there is a chairman in place that can’t make the proper decisions to guide their team to
the desired results. There are many versions of course teams because institutions have altered their characteristics and outputs to fit their own needs. The solutions and examples set by professionals such as Andrew Blowers, Malcolm Tight, and Muriel Stringer (1980) should assist those that need help in building their course teams.

Digital diploma mills will also be a problem that may soon never end. There are those that want to take the low road to wealth, but we distance education advocates must ask for our governments help with this issue to curb the digital diploma mills away. Distance education practitioners also need to play a much larger role in making possible digital diploma mill victims aware of how to spot the diploma mill. This will assist in saving the reputation of accredited online institutions.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, both debates opened eyes and stimulated professionals toward finding solutions to the most outstanding issues. Both debates prove that the decision-making process within upper level management must take into account the insight of those who will be ultimately affected by transitional processes. These issues are still apparent today, but looking to both sides in each debate should guide us to finding the best solutions.
References


