In a famous cinematic moment of the end of the past century, the futuristic character Neo has years of martial arts training uploaded to his brain in mere seconds. His simple statement “I know kung fu” serves as a shorthand for a vision of future educational capabilities driven by technology.

Frequent in science fiction narratives is the idea that future students no longer learn, but rather, upload knowledge. They are thus freed from the temporal and physical constraints of traditional campus-based education.

Some science fiction writers have couched their conceptualizations of the future university and technologically enhanced education in political terms. The hopes of the “computer revolution” said as much about equality as about technology. In their 1993 speech to the National Academy of Sciences Convocation on Technology and Education, the science fiction writers William Gibson and Bruce Sterling urged that all education be put online.

A recurring theme in Gibson’s novels is the possibility of the mind freed from the limitations of the body or “meatspace.” A significant means by which the mind is liberated is through the development of knowledge transfer. Since the prophetic view of uploading information directly to the mind described in Gibson’s *Neuromancer* and *Johnny Mnemonic* and a host of other futuristic narratives such as the earlier mentioned film *The Matrix*, online education has been at the center of debate concerning the future of education.

Although it has lost its revolutionary rhetoric, the idealistic potential of online education is still championed by some. Yet to others online education, particularly in its MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) manifestation, is part of the “McDonaldization” of higher education. According to this line of argument, online education widens the gap between homogenized, pre-packaged degree programs and the ivory-towered elite. Others point to the financial motives behind online education and inflation of degrees.
This collection of essays offers experiential and specialized voices in the current conversation about online education. Professional distance education degrees constitute an important part of the market as evidenced by the categories chosen by *US News and World Report*’s first ever guide to online degree programs. These categories are education, nursing, business, engineering, and computer information technology. However, while acknowledging online degree programs as “an essential part of the higher education landscape,” the editor of the report admits the need to develop new and different standards of evaluation to traditional models.

The variety of programs and analyses represented in this collection testifies to the unique challenges of evaluating online degree courses, as well as other concerns central to ongoing discussions. These issues concern the student experience, peer review, and other possibilities for collaborative learning in an online environment. Perhaps most significantly, the authors present an international perspective to online professional degree courses. Online education has been suggested to be both a product and producer of globalization. As they continue to attract international students outside of the host institution’s physical base, online degree programs pose diverse opportunities and problems for instruction. Furthermore, certain countries are developing programs more rapidly than others. An educational columnist recently adapted William Gibson’s line to describe the lagging progress in online education in some countries: “the future of education is here, it’s just not evenly distributed.” However, the fear is that with an uneven market of online degree programs, knowledge is becoming even more centralized and controlled. With case studies from Sweden, New Zealand, the Asian Pacific, Vietnam, the United States, and the United Kingdom, this collection offers an increasingly urgent perspective on the international phenomenon of online education. However, the cases go beyond merely representing global online communities, interrogating specific concerns of cultural responsiveness and adaptation. In addition, the case studies speak to practical concerns that are shared by all online educational programs, such as the detection of plagiarism and the use of specific tools.

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