

#90 Mail Order Schools: the Past and Present of Distance Learning

Jennifer Berkshire Welcome to Have You Heard. I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Jack Schneider And I'm Jack Schneider.

Berkshire And Jack, this episode has everything.

Schneider Oh, I can't wait. I always look forward to you catching me unprepared for something, and that's guaranteed in this episode.

Berkshire So we're in this moment where we're really hearing a sales pitch for online learning, like never before. Or is it like never before?

Schneider I guess that's my cue to say 'no Jennifer' this *has* happened before. All we need to do is look to the past.

Berkshire Standard education historian jokes set up right there.

Schneider Well, the online component may be unprecedented, but the effort to sell people, an education from far away arriving via internet or television or radio, or even us mail is quite old. And hopefully we'll find a good guest to come on and talk with us. Who do you have to scare up for us today, Jennifer?

Berkshire I have somebody great standing by. And I want you to pay close attention. Because I asked him to jump right in and explain one of the key communications changes that was underway 100 + years ago that paved the way for our first great distance learning experiment.

Bob Hampel It was important to see reliable mail service for rural areas. In other words, we had pretty good postal service for urban areas. In fact, there was twice a day delivery, believe it or not in many cities, but it wasn't until the late 19th century that the rural postal service improved dramatically. So that's a big change.

Berkshire So Jack, do you recognize that voice?

Schneider I would recognize that voice anywhere, Jennifer. That is historian of education—we're a small tribe, you see—Robert Hampel, author of a number of great books, including *The Last Little Citadel*, a new book called *Fast and Curious*, which I was fortunate enough to blurb and was really excited to do so. Bob is a professor at the University of Delaware and, uh, just an overall good person. And I'm so excited that we have him on the show.

Berkshire Well listening to Bob Hampel talk about how the expansion of postal service into rural areas laid the groundwork for America's earliest love affair with distance learning took me back to a recent episode. That would be the one about internet access and how it's still such a problem for rural areas. And then of course I'm thinking about the bleak reality of our present moment, that there's actually a debate going on about whether we should just junk the post office.

Schneider Mail, we have to remember, was a huge technological breakthrough, particularly for Americans living in fairly isolated communities, where, you know, mail was a connection to the rest of the world, not just to the U S but overseas as well. Mail gave people a sense of being a part of a larger community and it connected them to networks that they otherwise wouldn't have had access to. Of course, as technology changes, you know, we tend to look back on older technologies with scorn and disdain. So, you know, once radio comes along, nobody's trying to do correspondence school via us mail. Once TV comes along, nobody thinks that radio is any good for that purpose. Eventually the personal computer displaces television and the internet transforms what we do on our computers, um, which with each technological advance, we're really just seeing the same thing in different fashion. It's people feeling like suddenly they have a stronger connection to other people around the country and around the world.

Berkshire That sense of connection and possibility that Jack was describing, well that's exactly how people felt at the end of the 19th and start of the 20th century. When suddenly the mail opened up the world. And it also opened up the possibility of learning by mail, and accessing the kinds of vocational skills that could help you get ahead at work and in life. And it opened up new possibilities to make money by selling remote learning. I asked Bob Hampel to tell us about the kinds of schools that were popping up AND introduce us to one of the era's new students.

Hampel The best known was the International Correspondence School, which by the early 20th century was signing up about a hundred thousand people a year. And the appeal is career mobility, making more money, getting promotions, although they had some coursework that we'd call their education. The bulk of the sales were for blue collar workers who wanted to pick up a new skill or even transition to white collar work.

So the young Jack would probably be in his mid to late twenties. He probably came from a working class family. He probably dropped out of high school if he even went and then suddenly says, geez, how am I going to get ahead? I see people my own age who went to college or graduated from high school and they're doing pretty well. Maybe I could find a hundred dollars to take a course that would help me learn a particular skill or show my employer that I'm diligent and conscientious enough to do this on my own.

Berkshire So, Jack, how does it feel to meet a version of your 19th century counterpart?

Schneider Well on the one hand I kind of like it, it sounds a little bit like a rapper name. You know, I like, I like Young Jack. I'd buy his album. On the other, it implies that I'm old Jack right

now, which doesn't make me feel good. So maybe I'll just be wise Jack and he'll be, you know, he is not yet one his wisdom in the world yet. But okay, I'll play this game. Let's learn about young Jack and his effort to get an education via correspondence school.

Berkshire Well, I'm hoping that you can set the stage a little bit for us about what's happening in the country with respect to education. This is obviously a time of just tremendous change, right? That you have more people going to high school completing high school, starting to go on to college. What's, you know, what's that like

Schneider In the early 20th century was a time when we really first started seeing education as a device for getting ahead. Um, if we look at how historians have typified periods, uh, in the history of education, uh, often they will talk about the common school era as being an era. This is, you know, the mid 19th century through, uh, the beginning of the 20th century. They talk about that as being a period of strengthening the Republic, of focus on democratic equality as an aim of schooling. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, we see an increasing focus on social efficiency. That's preparing people for jobs, sorting them for their places in society and the economy. But by the 1920s and thirties, we begin to see the rise of a new aim and that's social mobility, the use of education to get ahead. And that's because it's a period in which increasingly Americans have something resembling universal access to public education.

Everybody who wants to go to elementary school, and obviously this is still a racist and classist society and was even more so in 1920 or 1930, but by and large public education had been made available in some form to almost all Americans and increasingly Americans were gaining access, not just to an elementary school education, but to a middle school education, as we would define it these days, and maybe even a high school education.

Given this increasingly universal access, but not universal completion, it meant that students who went to high school or even had a high school diploma were at a real advantage in terms of the jobs they could apply for in terms of the way they can position themselves in society. And eventually what we see through the 1950s and sixties is something resembling universal high school enrollment at which point a college diploma or simply attending college becomes the new mark of distinction for those who are trying to be socially mobile through education. And today again, as we are moving towards a kind of universal achievement with more and more students attending college, it's not hard to see the future in which a graduate school education will be the new mark of status.

Berkshire Well, one of my questions for Bob Hamble was how would young Jack have heard about these correspondence schools in the first place? So are you ready?

Schneider Old Jack on board.

Hampel Many of the schools were very savvy in advertising. They spent a lot of money on marketing, and so Jack would have picked up a magazine or a newspaper. He might've filled in

a little coupon to get free information. And if you sent that coupon in, he'd probably get bombarded with flyers. And even if you didn't respond the first time, he'd get a second or a third or a fourth appeal urging him to sign up. And then he might get called on by a salesman because the, for profit correspondence schools had salesmen who often received 15 to 20% of the tuition when they enrolled students.

Berkshire So Jack, I'm curious to get your reaction to that, but first we have to break for a little announcement from our sponsor, K12 inc.

[Ad]

Schneider One of the most striking things about Bob's book is how he details the just enormous Salesforce than many of these for profit correspondence schools had at their disposal, far more salespeople than they had instructors. And you know, it really reminds me, Jennifer, of the phenomenon that we've talked about on this show that we write about in our forthcoming book, uh, which is advertising that it's a sphere that is completely unregulated that unlike the pharmaceutical industry, which spends billions on advertisements, um, at least has to play by rules with regard to truth and advertising. Um, that simply doesn't apply to organizations that are trying to sell some sort of educational product to people for the most part, uh, schools, colleges, universities, um, kind of keep it in check, right? So they may play a little bit with their US News and World Report ranking by saying something like 'we're the top ranked masters university in Maine,' when there may only be one.

But for profit schools really have always played fast and loose. They still do. And they were doing it at the time. Young Jack was quite vulnerable to their coupons placed in the newspaper. And, um, by the time that young Jack had a telephone in his home, it would have been ringing off the hook with salespeople, inducing him to enroll because, you know, maybe he had come close to winning a scholarship and, you know, therefore he showed great promise, but was not actually going to attend for free or because, you know, his first class would be free. You know, a number of tactics were used in the past. And again, they're sort of astonishingly current when we just mapped them over with new technologies.

Berkshire Well if you listened closely to that K-12 Inc ad, you probably noticed that the company is pitching its product as an alternative to traditional public schools and also an improvement on it. And if we go back a century you would have heard the new for profit correspondence schools making a virtually identical argument. Here's Bob Hampel again.

Hampel: It was part of the effort by correspondence schools to both respect traditional education, but also criticize it. They wanted people to value education, and yet at the same time, they took these little digs and jabs that traditional education, they would say in correspondence schools, you get one on one attention. You don't have to sit in a lecture hall with a hundred other students. Sometimes the correspondence schools would send a little pamphlet with tips

and advice on how to study. And sometimes the advertisements would say, you know, having classmates is a distraction. You don't have to bother listening to them if you're studying by yourself, but they totally underestimated the difficulty of doing it. Particularly when most of the correspondent school students worked full time and they just had to find free hours. And you know, this is a day and age when many of them were working 48, 54 hours a week. And it was, it was not easy.

Berkshire We're hearing very similar arguments right now. And one of them is that you have a number of students for whom being able to learn without the distraction of classmates is really a gift, and Jack, I don't know if you caught it, but just a few weeks ago, there was an op ed in the *New York Times* written by a middle schooler to this effect. And so when I saw in Bob's history that the companies pedaling correspondence schools and learning by mail were making the identical argument, that you're much better off learning alone, I was just, I was shocked.

Schneider Yeah. Well, I mean, what's particularly shocking about it is not simply that, you know, it may not be true. It is absolutely not true that people learn better in social situations. That relationships matter in education, not just with teachers, but with classmates as well. And one of the things that Bob discusses in his book, and one of the things that we see in present day research about people engaging in distance education is that the isolation can really get to people. It's one of the reasons why we see that some students tend to do well in distance education and many others do not. The students who tend to do well are students for whom the isolation is not so heartbreaking, right? Older students, more experienced students, working adults who already have families who are used to spending long periods alone, who are highly motivated to get through even what is a tremendous slog to them. Uh, and it's, it's something that may never change with regard to distance education, but that as long as there have been schools, they have been dependent in their success on strong relationships among the people who constitute them.

Berkshire Well, we need to check in and find out how young Jack is doing. So he fell for the sales pitch, some kind of money. He wrote the coupon, he sent it in, money changed hands. And so I asked Bob, what, what happened next? How is Jack actually experiencing learning by post?

Hampel Young Jack would probably start receiving small pamphlets, for lack of a better word. That's the equivalent of a textbook. And he could put them in his pants pocket. They were that small—16 to 32 pages, one pamphlet per lesson. And he would be urged to return the answers to a set of questions at the end of the pamphlet. And they would be graded. And then he'd get the second pamphlet in the mail in a week or so. So it's very step by step, one lesson at a time. And the correspondence schools were very keen on this. They had a view of learning that was linear. You go from A to B to C, which would drive modern psychologists crazy because many of them argue that learning is more of a zigzag. We take two steps forward, one step back, but the correspondence schools wanted to lay out everything very, very orderly. So Jack would try to discipline himself to do at least maybe two lessons each month and often he could, he could

move at his own pace. He could go faster if he wanted to, or he could slow down. And then at the very end, you would get some sort of certificate saying he had completed the course.

Berkshire So we won't actually know for a bit how young Jack fared, but I was so struck current Jack by the fact that, that, that the same problem that we're seeing right now with distance education is right there from the very beginning, which is this problem of self motivation, that it turns out to be really, really hard for people to learn by themselves. And that, you know, without a, without a teacher, without classmates, without some kind of structure and the fact that this was so obvious back then, and that really has never been resolved, I think is just incredible.

Schneider Yeah. You know, you're really pushing on the relationships piece there. And I think that's really important, Jennifer, because one of the things that current advocates of distance education will argue, and they're not wrong is that previous distance education efforts failed because students couldn't receive feedback in a timely manner from their instructors. So imagine writing your assignment, mailing it, young Jennifer writing her assignment, mailing it into her instructor, waiting several weeks, receiving a reply, right? This is a snail's pace. And young Jennifer is not going to be receiving feedback that is really helping her advance, particularly not if she's sticking to a strict schedule.

Berkshire She's not sticking. She's at home looking longingly at the Sears catalog.

Schneider And while she is warming her hands on the cast iron stove or near the cast iron stove, she is waiting for the invention of a technology like the internet, which will allow her instructor to provide instantaneous feedback. The problem is that she may have no relationship with that instructor may not trust that instructor, may not value that instructor, may not have any classmates who are spurring her on, or at least making school feel like a pleasant place.

One of the observations that I've been struck by as people have been talking about the fall 2020 starting online is that many students moved online after already having strong relationships with their teachers and trusting relationships with their classmates. But imagine being a first year ninth grader at a school where you don't know anybody at that school, and then suddenly you're online, those students will have a very different experience than students who moved over in February or March or April after having spent several months in their classes. And that's much more akin to what we're seeing in this story of young Jack and young Jennifer who are engaging in correspondence education and doing so in isolation, uh, and, and who are quite likely to fizzle out as a result.

Berkshire I think I speak for everyone, not just our listeners, but all of America when I say we are on the edge of our seats. We want to know, did young Jack finish his correspondence program? Because as Bob Hampel explained to me, the rates of completion were incredibly low down near like something like 10%. So when I put this question to him about Jack's completion, I really didn't know what to expect.

Hampel The dropout rate was just frightening. Frequently only 10% finished. Some schools might have been a little higher, some lower. Many of the correspondent schools had a financial incentive by the way, for students to drop out because the students had to sign a legally binding contract if they borrowed money to pay for the tuition, which most of them did. And so many of the correspondent schools tried hard to enforce those contracts because only a small fraction paid a lump sum at the very beginning, paid the full tuition. It was an installment plan, which had become very popular in America as a way to buy cars, refrigerators, and the correspondence schools also use that tactic.

Berkshire In other words, the odds were long, and those early edu-preneurs that were so intent on getting Jack to sign up for distance learning were actually rooting for him to fail. So how did he do?

Hampel Okay. If Jack had the motivation and his job wasn't too exhausting and his family responsibilities were not too great, odds are, he would finish. Then the big question mark is what benefit did Jack derive from this many of the correspondence schools published testimonials from graduates, who said, you know, 50% increase or new job as a manager. And those were very alluring when they were in the advertisements. People thought, wow, this is a ticket to upward mobility. So the question is, would people see Jack's credential as valuable? Would his employer treat it as a mark of Jack's drive and motivation or, or not?

And, you know, some people were very disappointed. For example, there were some popular correspondence schools for learning how to be a writer, make all this money as a freelance writer. Well, some editors confess that when they saw someone bragging about their graduation from correspondence school, they took it as a reliable sign that the writing wasn't very good. So the credential could backfire. So a lot would depend on where Jack got his certificate, if he graduated and whether his employer thought it was a badge of honor or not.

Schneider there are several ironies here, Jennifer. Uh, one of them is that the pursuit of an online credential today or a, you know, a degree by mail a hundred years ago, or 75 years ago, was most often driven by an urge to get ahead by a desire for a credential that would open doors. And one of the ironies is that if the credential actually was acquired and, you know, as Bob notes, the vast majority of students never required the credential never completed the program. And in fact, he's got some great lines in the book where he's got people on records saying they couldn't afford to have all of their students, uh, graduate, that that would require just offering too many courses and hiring too many instructors who was actually a part of the business plan to have people fizzle out, um, that even if you did make it through your credential might not be worth anything.

And there's an additional irony here, which is that a number of highly reputable schools, the university of Wisconsin, Johns Hopkins university, the university of Chicago were engaged in distance education programming. I'm motivated not by profit, but by an effort to actually engage in educational outreach to essentially do the right thing. Um, you know, maybe some of it was

brand building. Maybe there was some future eye towards, uh, a kind of financial, uh, benefit for the university. But really if it wasn't driven by profit, it didn't succeed because those reputable universities didn't have 800 sales people and 20 professors, they had 20 professors and one sales person, and they weren't willing to put the university's name on advertisements that were clearly lies. Um, they felt like they had too much to lose their, they felt like they had good names in the public realm and they wanted to maintain those.

So you've got people like, uh, the president of Columbia university saying, no, we're not going to, uh, print this advertisement. In fact, we're not going to advertise at all because that's not the sort of thing that we do. Uh, as a result, students who ended up completing these distance education programs often overlooked a program that might've had some value in the market and pursued degrees that couldn't really get much for them. And again, there's a parallel with today where we see students who are completing programs at great expense to themselves funded in many cases by federally guaranteed loans, which is where the federal government has played a real role in shutting some of these places down by denying them access to student loans, um, and graduating with tremendous debt debt that can't be discharged through the bankruptcy process. So debt that they will carry forever.

And then finding out that the degree that they have worked so hard to get is actually worthless in terms of getting ahead. And that's the final irony is that if these students were motivated chiefly, by getting ahead, they may not have been paying attention to the fact that the use value of their education, what they actually were learning may not have been very substantial. They may have been focused entirely on the exchange value of the education. And that's what they were being promised that this will open doors for you. Well, if it turns out that the exchange value is zero and the use value is zero, then you're really out of luck.

Berkshire Well, Jack, one thing that I learned working on this episode is that at a time where we are seeing new sales pitches, which are not even warmed over versions of old sales pitches, they actually are the old sales pitches, whether it's online education at universities from like 15 minutes ago, or the correspondence schools of your, it turns out to be really useful to know something about education history. There. I said it.

Schneider Jennifer, nothing could have made me happier than hearing you say that. And now that I'm feeling happy, I feel like we should sustain the mood and cut directly to 60 Seconds of Sunshine.

Berkshire Maggie Moriarty wears a lot of hats. She teaches English Language Arts at Lowell High School in Massachusetts. She's the assistant field hockey coach AND she's in the Leadership Education program at UMass Lowell where she's working on her doctorate. She's been teaching her students remotely since mid March and Maggie says that the big challenge has been trying to hold onto some sense of connection - from a distance.

Maggie Moriarty When remote learning first started, the goal was to make sure that our students still felt connected. These young men and young women are really on the front lines. They're working at Target, at Market Basket, Dunkin Donuts, and we just wanted a way to laugh. And it actually started in a field hockey group text with my players and coaches on TikTok and that spiraled into TikTok challenges with my students and coworkers as well. And at the end of the week, I would have a highly skilled judge. In came my mom to pick the best stick talk of the week. And I would deliver an Espresso Pizza from a local joint to the winner, obviously from a safe distance and with mask. But it's just been such a great way, laughing at my own expense, but staying connected to one another and knowing that school is so much more than academics. I am Maggie Moriarty, an ELA teacher at Lowell High School. And this is my 60 Seconds of Sunshine.

Berkshire Thank you Maggie for that little bit of sunshine. And thanks to our supporters who help us keep the pod going. If you want to support the show, all you have to do is go to Patreon.com/HaveYouHeardPodcast. A small monthly donation gets you extras, like a custom reading list for each episode. And a special extended play version of the show that we call In the Weeds. Our topic for today: the heated debate over when, how and if schools should re-open. Anybody else notice that the elaborate safety precautions seem like they're on a collision course w/ the avalanche of budget cuts coming our way?

Schneider But for everybody else, you can support the show by going on wherever you get your podcasts. Giving us a rating, um, throwing us some stars and a comment always makes us pretty happy. Uh, you can share the podcast with friends, coworkers, family members, send them your favorite episode. Just let them know you're listening to us. Um, and you can send us the ideas that you've got by engaging with the show's Twitter handle at, have you heard pod? We've had some great ideas for shows previously, and we're getting lots of interesting questions and letters from listeners that way right now.

Berkshire Well done, Jack.

Schneider She says mechanistically,

Berkshire Until next time, I'm Jennifer Berkshire.

Schneider And I'm Jack Schneider

This is Have You Heard.