Commentary

A COVID-19 panacea in digital technologies? Challenges for democracy and higher education

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Abstract

Universities have transitioned to online education in order to slow the spread of COVID-19. This transition mobilizes the technological utopian imaginary that digital technologies can rescue populations from the disease. It also raises the risk of deepening neoliberal educational reforms and, by extension, poses a threat to democracy itself. This commentary explores this risk and suggests ways to resist the resulting neoliberalization of education that it could entail.

Keywords

COVID-19, democracy, digital technologies, online education, neoliberalism

Introduction

In efforts to promote 'social distancing'—which, while having social effects, might more properly be called *physical distancing*—many schools and universities around the world have transitioned their educational programs online. They are now making use of video chat rooms like Zoom, online discussion boards and platforms, prerecorded video lectures, and a host of other digital technologies, all to reduce human contact in the classroom and across campuses (Paul, 2020). Importantly, the transition to online education occurred with breakneck speed: some campuses such as mine were given as little as 48 h to convert several weeks of remaining work into the digital sphere.

The thread connecting campuses across the world was the notion that digital technology will relieve us from in-person interactions and thus reduce rates of novel coronavirus transmission. In many cases, such a perspective relies on a techno-utopian imaginary that veils the deeply rooted social and political foundations of the pandemic. It is not merely 'biological' or 'natural', requiring technical knowledge to solve, but emerges from and indeed contributes to sociopolitical processes. For instance, Wallace et al. (2020) situate the pandemic's emergence within capitalist agricultural economies, and Neely and Lopez (2020: n.p.) helpfully conceive of COVID-19 as intervening in 'the individual body, the social body, and the body politic'. In this way, the COVID-19 crisis resonates with the way I think through my research focus on humanitarian crises as co-constituted by the social, environmental, and

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political—all with particularly spatial inflections. And just like in contemporary humanitarian contexts, digital technologies are proposed as a panacea for crises despite those deeply rooted social and political foundations. In other words, as throughout recent history and especially in digital humanitarian circles, the dominant framing is that technology will 'save us'.

Social contexts for online education

My goal here is not to evaluate the efficacy of online education. Still, it is worth unpacking the social imaginary on which the COVID-induced online transition relied. It assumes high—if not perfect—access to the Internet and reliable digital devices for loading resources, which is quite empirically flawed in the United States and likely elsewhere (Floberg, 2020). If it does not assume all students to be citizens, it does assume sufficient security measures to protect international students from privacy breaches, and there is ample evidence that many high-profile tools do not (BBC, 2020). It also assumes relatively even levels of comfort with both teaching and learning in online spaces—again, a presumptuous starting point.

Rather than focus on these technical questions, I want to think through the tensions between, on the one hand, claims that this situation will lead to improved teaching methods, and, on the other, dire political–economic restructuring. Both of these are beginning to emerge in the collective grappling with the online education transition. First, we are seeing an increased recognition that digital technologies can perhaps do a lot more work for educators than what some of us have traditionally conceived. Zoom lectures can enable students to participate when they are unable to be physically on campus, and recorded lectures allow students to return to course material later rather than attempting to capture all important information in real time. Perhaps there is a kernel of truth in the claims that more senior instructors needed to revisit their learning plans and explore new modes of communicating course material.

On the other hand, Naomi Klein (2020) has drawn our attention to the danger of what she calls 'coronavirus capitalism', an idea with strong resonances to the 'disaster capitalism' concept she developed in *The Shock Doctrine* (2007). With this concept, Klein highlights the way major social disruptions—be they natural disasters, political upheavals, or wars—result in a period of time in which the shocked public is incapacitated to respond to massive political–economic restructuring. In the last half century, this has effectively been leveraged by the political right to enact neoliberal reforms such as privatizing public assets, services, and even governance. Klein (2007: 6) quotes Milton Friedman: 'Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around', and recent history suggests that free-market neoliberals have been most effective at having their ideas 'lying around' at auspicious times.

Online education: A neoliberal idea just lying around?

We are currently encountering the novel coronavirus's massive disruption of educational procedures, and administrators are testing neoliberal ideas that happen to be lying around. Suddenly the utopian visions of digitally mediated education, from small online courses to Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), are again within the Overton Window, a discursive terrain finding reinvigorated promise to 'save us'—the first time from austerity funding models, the second time from a pandemic. The advantages of online education have been discursively mobilized to respond to budget cuts and what Nussbaum (2010: 7) calls 'education for profit', including neoliberal metrics like the number of course enrollees and majors as well as accounting calculations like labor resource expenditure relative to tuition payments.

Perhaps the greatest risk that educational institutions face is that administrators will observe the dizzyingly rapid transition to online education and surmise that, with a longer warning and sufficient support resources, digital technologies will provide a long-term, corporately mediated solution to crises of funding. As I have already noted, this has been the case for a while and the current context is likely to renew these discussions. As worthy of concern as this is, some have pointed out a range of

corresponding problematics it also entails: intellectual property of online content, exploitation of instructors who exceed reasonable responsibilities, and the transformation of what we think constitutes 'education' (Kornbluh, 2020). The danger lies in the narrative's indeterminacy and how it might coarticulate with neoliberal educational reforms. As Anna Kornbluh (2020) has put it, academia is facing its own shock doctrine moment.

Almost two decades ago, Giroux (2002) outlined the stakes of broad transitions to online education. He points to the new materials for an enclosure that online courses create, including intellectual materials like recorded lectures and slides, and an expanded 'customer' base for 'purchasing' their education as one would a commodity. In this way, online courses marry corporate culture with the instrumentalization of education, jeopardizing already precariously employed instructors and even the need for academic instructors at all, if corporate leaders can direct courses. For Giroux, this represents a deterioration of the public sphere and the democratic debate that *should* be the zenith of education's goals. Further, we might question the neocolonialist imaginaries of MOOCs' audiences, in which all are *in need of* the same form, content, and media of an educational experience, and those producing the MOOC as *able to satisfy* those needs (Adam, 2019). Here again is a strong parallel with humanitarianism, in that it also relies on the assumption that the humanitarians know what affected populations need and that the providers are able to satisfy those needs.

In short, what's at stake right now is the very future of education and democratic process.

Latent in every crisis is the possibility of enacting new postcapitalist futures, or, at the very least, resistance to existing forms of neoliberal oppression. What I have outlined above is indeterminate, highly contingent on how the left organizes coalitions among faculty, students, and campus organizations; how the left builds a means and momentum of resistance; and the left's ability to influence institutional administrators, like those deciding course offerings and modes of teaching. In the current crisis, our imperative should be to articulate the promises of digital technology approaches in ways that stand uncomfortably with neoliberal reforms. We should articulate the benefits of digital technology as one would articulate steps in a politics of emancipation. What might that look like?

For one, we must enunciate the deeply neoliberal and militaristic (Giroux, 2002) logics underlying the online education roll-out, and the problematic social imaginaries on which they rely. Second, we must underscore the multimodal forms of participation and multidirectional learning that digital technologies may enable. Rather than constructing what Friere (1970) calls the 'banking model of education', in which the instructor 'deposits' knowledge into passive information absorbers, online spaces can enable collective learning through multiple media and forms. Students reticent to vocalize thoughts in high-pressure classrooms may feel more at ease in another format. More generally, we must think of digital spaces as *supplementary* to the community that is built in face-to-face learning environments. Face-to-face instruction is already thoroughly suffused with digital technologies such as smartphones, laptops, and online assignment submission consoles, and to presume purity of either digital or analog misses a bigger picture. Third, we must refuse the 'new normal' that many will claim is inevitable, and continue to imagine and enact better worlds within our (virtual) classrooms.

Conclusion

In sum, we must inject our online pedagogy with a praxis of care and compassion (Head, 2020). This might involve cultivating an ethos of guidance and support rather than punishment by grading, integrating learning between students to foster personal and intellectual community, or centering empowerment as a key learning outcome. Care and compassion can disturb the associations between education and technical training, and between educational institutions with marketplaces for exchanging money for knowledge. Together, these tactics can restore the role of education in the democratic process.

The COVID-19 crisis could mark a momentous shift in social and political structures and processes, much like past humanitarian crises have done. It is incumbent upon instructors—particularly tenured

professors and others in secure positions—to enter emancipatory ideas into public debate, to have such ideas 'lying around'. We must refuse the COVID-induced neoliberal transformation of education that at the moment seems to be unfolding, and instead appropriate digital technologies to offer better, post-capitalist worlds. Moving forward, it is critically important that we accentuate the forms of resistance and potential futures that emerge in this spatio-historic conjuncture.

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