The tyranny of technology:
A critical assessment of the social arena of online learning

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Educators and learners have been sentenced to online learning before we have truly explored the verdict of whether online learning is all that it is touted to be. The vast majority of dialogue about online learning has extolled the virtues of cybereducation as not only the future, but the salvation, of education (Brabazon, 2002; Menchik, 2004). Davison (2004) suggests that we have not mindfully considered how technology transcends mere use and intertwines with our sense of self and the world. Online entrepreneurs have presented educators and learners with a rabbit hole into cybereducation and we have fallen into it. In this paper, we use Bourdieusian interpretation of cybereducation. We conclude with implications for the future of online learning and the field of education.

Overview of Bourdieu

Bourdieu sought to build a theory that synthesized both subjective and objective paradigmatic perspectives (Grenfell & James, 1998). His structuralist approach incorporated subjective schemes of self-embodiment within context—habitus; and objective orientations of positions within a common network—fields. Our positions within any given field are, in part, determined by our habitus and the interactions between positions result in unequal distributions of power, or capital.

Habitus represents a dialectic of how the body is in the social world while, at the same time, the social world inhabits the body (Reay, 2004). It is not simply the representation of belief systems; instead, habitus refers to the whole range of ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. It influences how we walk and talk, how we make decisions, what entertainment we pursue, when we display anger or joy or sorrow, and all of the other elements of ‘being’ within a network of interconnected relationships.

Fields are those interconnected relationships (Grenfell & James, 1998; Menchik, 2004). A field is “a structured system of social relations” (Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 16) that is based upon differential positions who compete for capital; it is this competition that leads to the concept of ‘fields of conflict’. Actors occupy those positions based on their habitus,
which is learned through familial socialization and previous education exposure. Fields are relatively autonomous; however, multiple fields exist within any given society and new fields can emerge (Menchik, 2004).

As actors interact within their field positions, they enact capital (Grenfell & James, 1998). There are three essential types of capital—economic, cultural, and social—which are interpreted as symbolic products of habitus in action (Grenfell & James, 2004). The root of all capital is economic in nature; however, the economic underpinnings and implications of cultural and social capital are often obscured. All positions within a field have capital; however, the nature and influence of that capital is different and unequal and results in a hierarchical field structure (Naidoo, 2004).

Bourdieu argues that habitus and capital are reproduced, in part, through the field of education. The obscuring of economic capital through social and cultural values legitimizes unequal power relationships (Wolffreys, 2000; Grenfell & James, 2004). As a result, those who are ‘dominated’ come to accept their positions as normal and natural. This application of capital to control the field of conflict is referred to as ‘symbolic violence.’

**The Dominant Discourse**

The dominant discourse associated with information technology, internet education, online learning, and similar refrains of the digital age centers on accepting the inevitable reality that universities will fundamentally change. Even though universities have been cornerstones of society for hundreds of years, some have contended that universities simply will not survive the technological revolution and others have supported that notion by comparing universities to the now practically non-existent family farm (Duderstadt, Atkins, & Houweling, 2002). The discourse framed by proponents of cybereducation typically follows three streams—availability of and access to learning, student engagement and involvement in learning, and revenue generation.

Perhaps the loudest argument for adopting cybereducation is that it renders higher education open to anyone (Duderstadt, et.al., 2002) because it transcends the boundaries of time and space. As such, it increases the diversity of students (Sanders, 2001). The implication is that, because underrepresented populations now have access to higher education, cybereducation increases equality among diverse groups in society.

Another voice in the discourse supporting cybereducation is that it enables students to become active consumers of educational services (Duderstadt, et.al., 2002). In this way students are more engaged in the learning process because they have a greater voice in their education. The dominant discourse has co-opted the language of critical and feminist pedagogy by claiming that students have more power in the online classroom. However, this concept of student as consumer has resulted in what Noble (2001) refers to as diploma mills in that students and the market are determining the content of learning instead of faculty exercising their expertise through academic freedom.
Revenue generation is one of the key reasons why administrators are leaping to implement online learning systems (Brabazon, 2002; Duderstadt, et al., 2002). With decreasing government support (Delbanco, 2005), universities are searching for innovative ways to generate funding streams. Online learning is seen as the answer because higher fees can be charged for the convenience of earning a diploma from home, a larger pool of potential students can be reached, and overhead for facilities is minimized. Not accounted for in this equation is the increase of time and effort by faculty to support this online initiative.

Cybereducation: Capital within the Field of Education

Online distance education, or cybereducation, is not yet a field in its own right (Menchik, 2004). Instead, it can be explored as part of the broader field of education. Within that field, technology can be considered “little crystallized parts of habitus” (Sterne, 2003, p. 376). In this way, technology represents a form of capital that is used to perpetuate symbolic violence.

Education is widely viewed as a means to achieve upward mobility (Delbanco, 2005); in the Cold War Era fight against communism, the exclusive doors of higher education were cracked to many who otherwise could never have gained access. Those doors, however, are being pulled shut—tuition is increasing, financial aid is waning, faculty salary is stagnating, and public support is decreasing. As a result, the gap between elites and non-elites is widening. The dominant discourse proclaims that cybereducation is the answer to increasing access and gaining funding (Katz & Associates, 1999). However, we suggest that cybereducation may actually increase this gap.

Technology plays a fundamental role in shaping our lives, and members of society often fail to appreciate this phenomenon (Madaus & Horn, 2000). Such a failure is referred to as misrecognition by Bourdieu (Grenfell & James, 1998; 2004); it is a failure to see how economic capital masquerades as cultural or social capital. In this way, technology serves as symbolic violence that maintains unequal distributions between people who occupy various positions in society.

Technology creates a gap between those who have access to a common language of technology and those who do not. While proponents of online education hail the equalizing properties of distance education and the technological improvements that have made online education more ‘personal’ (for example, Katz & Associates, 1999), these ‘bells and whistles’ make it more difficult for less advantaged groups to access the benefits of education. University administrators argue that online technology increases outreach for geographically marginalized learners; however, studies have shown that this perception is not accurate (David, 2003). Benson and Wright (1999) found that technology actually hindered learning for over twenty percent of their students. And in Canada, for example, members with lower socio-economic and educational statuses were significantly less likely to own a computer; parental education was the largest predictor of a child’s access to computers and that education was also the largest predictor of economic wealth (Nakhaie & Pike, 1998). In other words, education leads to wealth
which leads to increased access to technology. This lends support to the contention that both technology and education produce elites.

One of the ways technology creates elites is by diminishing the purpose of higher education and fostering a higher-level technical college that serves corporate interests (Brabazon, 2002). While the most elite universities are still able to regulate themselves, newer and public universities try to earn their ‘keep’ by serving corporate capital interests. By becoming handmaidens to corporate interests, educational institutions are unable to foster equality among different positions within society (Grenfell & James, 1998; 2004); and, this is exactly as Bourdieu argued, symbolic violence will always occur because differential positions are part of any field (Wolfreys, 2000).

Further, the symbolic violence of online education results in the exploitation of faculty as well. Faculty are encouraged, even brow-beaten, into using online technology to deliver their courses (Brabazon, 2002). This media of delivery is substantially more time consuming than traditional modes of delivery—higher course development time, greater learner expectations of immediate response, increased time in course delivery, greater expectations for technological expertise. And this increase is not remunerated.

Conclusion

University of Michigan President Emeritus, James J. Duderstadt, argued that the advent of virtual universities, or educational institutions with only online education, could be compared to the Nike Corporation. Sadly, we agree, although we employ the analogy quite differently. Duderstadt (1999) suggests:

Nike, a major supplier of athletic shoes in the United States and worldwide, does not manufacture the shoes it markets. It has decided that its strength is in marketing and that it should outsource its manufacturing to those who can do it better and cheaper. In a sense, the virtual university similarly unbundles marketing and delivery. It works with the marketplace to understand needs, and then it outsources courses, curricula, and other educational services from established colleges and universities…and delivers them through the use of sophisticated information technology (p. 13).

We suggest the analogy rests in that Nike exploits oppressed workers in order to profit from their labor and to provide mass produced good at a high price to consumers desperate to create a sense of belonging through brand image. Our contention is that faculty are exploited when pushed to use online technologies to teach without remuneration for the extra work required or be “demeaned as neo-luddites, reactionaries, or has-beens” (Brabazon, 2002, p. xii). Online classes are often cookie-cutter copies created by web-specialists and lack depth of spontaneous interactive reflection. Further, students recognize that they need credentialing in order to be successful and, therefore, seek what they perceive to be the easiest path to achieve that goal. The push for online platforms of learning represents an implicit incursion of corporate capital into the field of education that results in the exploitation of educators, the corporatization of education, and the expansion of the gap between privileged and
disadvantaged. David Noble (2001) sounds a chilling warning about the automation of higher education, “…all too often in the past people had only belatedly realized the dimensions of the calamity that had befallen them, too late to act effectively in their own interest” (p. ix). Let us take a lesson from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865/1961) and be aware of both the reality and fantasy of cybereducation; we call for the field of education to act *mindfully* instead of *mindlessly*.

**References**


