Digital Disruptions: Media, Communication, and New Learning Environments

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Abstract

New and emerging digital learning environments clearly mirror the accelerated and ongoing expansion of digital media and communication in broader social and cultural currents. In both actual physical and pedagogical terms, the traditional classroom is under considerable stress. There is vigorous debate among educators on how to re-imagine teaching and learning practices, and there are calls to renovate the learning environment of embrace a more expansive landscape. Such calls are properly motivated by the broader dynamics and transformations in the continuing emergence of digital culture. These transformations demand that educational practices pursue the assets of an unbounded and malleable concept of the classroom.This paper arises out of a major research project concerned with the design of a university-level educational technology platform that pursued the needs and demands for participatory, collaborative, kinetic models of educational engagement. The project was less about technology, and more about teaching and learning strategies that are compelled to meet students at least partway on their own cultural ground—a ground of intense and daily engagement with digital media and communication. Educational technologies that are above all, driven by the values and principles of teaching and learning, become enabling tools that are deeply embedded in, and consonant with the socio-cultural realities of students.Changes in pedagogical approaches are necessarily informed by the accelerated pace and the quality of social and cultural transformation in the ongoing emergence of digital media and communication. Key in these transformations has been the democratizing dimensions of digital media and communication, new and emergent capacities for engagement and participation in digital media, and the erosion of distinctions between producers and consumers. This paper proposes new perspectives in the contexts and demands of broader currents in media and communication.

1. Introduction

Immersion in, and dependence on technologies of media and communication are socially commonplace, and particularly among students who are in possession of impressive tech savvy and proficiencies. Students arrive daily for their university classes with more activated technology in their backpacks than many of their professors will use in a lifetime. It may be maddening for instructors, but unsurprisingly, these students have the strongest disinclination to shut down their devices during a one-way lecture in the confinements of the lecture hall.

The traditional classroom has always been an enclosure of sorts, where the delivery is unidirectional and the relationship with the instructor transactional. But the classroom is no longer capable of containment, and it has become a zone of social media chatter, breakneck texting, and other digital distractions, as well as of course, the delivery of academic content. Still, the mediaeval model of professorial authority, the proverbial “sage on the stage”, persists and dominates pedagogical approaches in institutions of higher learning, at times with soporific effect on students socialized in a culture of speed and impatience, network and immediacy. Technologically promiscuous students cause considerable anxiety, if not insult in certain quarters of the professoriate, prompting some instructors to invoke a prohibition on the uses of laptops and handheld devices in the classroom in the hopes that a tech moratorium will force attentiveness and recover a deep, literary engagement with course content.

In an article in the *Washington Post* (2014) [1], Clay Shirky, one of the most vigorous and persuasive advocates for pedagogy animated and enabled by digital technology, and an admittedly “unlikely candidate for Internet censor”, offers an account of his shift from affording students latitude and choice with regard to their use of technology in the classroom to banning technology use in the classroom. While Shirky has been a particularly influential critical voice for understanding and supporting the practices and

demonstrated potential of social media to instigate and sustain social, cultural and political transformation, his report from the pedagogical front lines makes clear that he has been struggling mightily with the actual use of social media in his classroom.

2. "Multiprocessing" and skimming surfaces

At issue for Shirky, was the rising level of student distraction that appeared to increase correspondingly with the "ubiquity and utility" of digital devices. Shirky's rumination on his shift in pedagogical approach challenges the validity of "multi-tasking" as anything but attending partially, superficially, and simultaneously to multiple tasks, sources, and platforms. Shirky is but one critic who has pointed to the sacrifice of deep engagement, even knowledge in the demands for speed, specialization, and the economy and acceleration of information turnover. The consequence, critics such as Nicholas Carr (2010) [2] and Maryanne Wolff (2007) [3] argue, is that new media technologies demand "efficiency" and "immediacy" to the impoverishment of deeper, "literary" modes and practices of reading and thinking, attention and engagement.

A research experiment published in *Computers & Education* [4] received considerable play in the media in North America. On the basis of simulated classroom experiments conducted with university students taking notes in lecture, the researchers conclude that "laptop multitasking" is an impediment to "classroom learning" for users and for students sitting nearby their multitasking peers. Students with laptops who were instructed to do other non-related tasks during lecture (to "mimic" typical student browsing during lecture), and other students sitting near those with laptops scored lower in quizzes administered after the lectures. Their "immediate learning" or more simply stated, recall of content delivered, didn't measure up.

These results have been reported in the news media as "why laptops don't belong in lectures", or "laptops lower students grades", and the like. The researchers however, are entirely more measured in their conclusions than the journalists. In fact, they oppose an "extreme and unwarranted" ban on laptops in lectures, and they reflect on the need for teaching practices that could integrate technologies to enrich the learning experience of students.

Prohibitions miss the point; and this point might be that teaching strategies need to meet students at least part way, on their own cultural ground—a ground of intense and daily engagement with digital media and communication. Teaching and learning approaches and technologies need to be relevant to, and resonant with student experience and aspirations, with their social and cultural lives, and with the demands and directions of their potential professional work environments.

3. Old School: bricks and mortar under stress

In both actual physical and pedagogical terms, the traditional university classroom is under considerable stress. Forthcoming waves of digital natives in the classroom will be understandably restless in the confined quarters of the lecture hall, and with unidirectional delivery of information and a transactional relationship with their instructors. There is a lively debate among educators on how to re-imagine teaching and learning practices, and there are calls to renovate the learning environment to embrace a more borderless landscape. Such calls are inspired by the accelerated pace of social and cultural transformations in the ongoing emergence of digital media and communication. Key in these transformations has been the enabling capacities of new media technologies, new and emergent capacities for engagement, participation, an ongoing erosion of the distinctions between producers and consumers, and younger demographics increasingly approached new media as an opportunity to co-create. This environment of change demands that universities pursue the assets of an unbounded and malleable concept of the classroom.

Analyses of broader economic currents and determinants in higher education have recently focused on the disruptive effects of a combination of rising educational costs of the traditional university and the ongoing emergence and affordances of educational technology platforms and the diversity of forms, models, and practices of online learning. It is not merely the classroom, but the entire university enterprise that is regarded as disrupted by digital technologies and culture, and by a constellation of economic constraints, austerities, and exigencies.

Bowen's identification of the "cost disease" in higher education (2013) [5] is a compelling litany of prevailing and likely future conditions that will decisively impact the viability of the traditional residential university. Bowen is perhaps less focused on engagement, depth, and the quality and consequence of

teaching and learning, but instead is concerned with the capacities of the university to sustain itself in its current form in the seismic shifts presented by receding budgets, political disinclinations to sustain, and certainly not expand residential campuses, and the broad societal questioning of the value of baccalaureate education over other types of education and training.

Missing in this conceptualization of "cost disease" is a significant relationship between neo-liberalism and higher education; that is, a 35-year history of effects, including "the corporatization of administration and research, the withdrawal of state financing for public universities, the enrichment of the student-loan industry." (Bérubé, 2009) [6] While frontline educators might appropriately respond to the notion of "cost disease" as instrumentalism rather typical of a political administrative rationale, there is much substance and consequence to attend to in terms of digital disturbances in higher education. Indeed, the need to revise the very logic, the contexts and the practices of higher education move beyond "technological solutionism" (Morozov, 2013) [7], always an unfortunate prospect, and instead, arises out of the social evidences in digital culture; in other words, if we properly attend to the actual social and cultural lives of our students, the revision of pedagogy in the real-world dynamism of digital culture is exigent.

4. Currents of media and culture

We live in an age of techno-obsession. In the images and persuasions of popular commercial culture especially, technology has always been tied to futurist fantasies, to visions of endless horizons of technological wonder, to dreams of a future defined by the realization of technological promise and perfection. The global landscapes of advertising have long been dominated by representations of a technological benevolence, prosperity, advantage, and stylish sensuality (smart phones and other mobile devices, automobiles, laptops, and more). Such persuasions in advertising and marketing are deeply inscribed with inflated promises of technology, whether appeals focus on interoperability or identity, there is the strongest pitch that the future is readily graspable and that products embody the "cutting edge" of technology.

The faith in, and promotion of technological solutions is no less apparent in education, and indeed, the persistent sense of an ongoing crisis in education has been sustained by an equal sense of accelerated technological solutions, particularly for financially put-upon governments and educational administrators. Corporations trading in proprietary educational technology/learning management systems have long promoted their systems software in precisely terms of economic benefit and of course, efficiencies in perpetually harsh financial conditions.

We need to strike a balance between the often inflated promises of technology as a solution to all social and educational challenges, and an ability to address the real technologically saturated world of students; between the educational potential of ubiquitous online access and online spaces of learning, and the urgent and ever-increasing need for face-to-face learning and communication skills. In all cases, the world forcefully demands digital literacy, and universities are necessarily on the front line of responding to, and anticipating societal needs, from employment skills to citizenship.

The digital media environment is dynamic and volatile, and while it may at turns support and expand concentration and control in media industries around the globe (especially in global entertainment industries), it also becomes a site of disturbances, so to speak, in which users or consumer-producers innovate, extend, apply and re-apply technologies to particular social purposes. The digital media environment is in no small measure, made and remade through the cultural practices and social needs of audience-users. This is a media landscape in which the consumer, enabled by digital technology, is also inclined to create, produce, share, collaborate, network, and communicate socially.

5. Embracing disturbances

Universities need to advance teaching and learning practices that can push out the boundaries of the classroom, and promote a more kinetic and participatory learning environment. The linchpin of expansive learning is a freely distributed, open source, widely accessible educational technology platform because learning technologies need to do more than deliver content. They need to be invitations to students to participate, and to co-create. Such depth and quality of engagement is indeed the oxygen of higher learning.

Pedagogical strategies are necessarily and centrally embedded in global, transformed digital media environments. The substantial and ongoing technological and social shifts in media and communication

have decisively and irrevocably revised the ground—the assumptions and the practices—of teaching and learning. As the previous authority of mainstream media and the established sources of influence in the public sphere have given way to new and open platforms, and to an increasing reliance on highly mobile peer environments of social media, so in education there is a recognition that students must never be passive "consumers" of academic content. Instead, they can co-create, that is, repurpose, rework, amplify, and resend content back into a multi-source and dynamic media environment. Cultural practices especially, have been transformed in the emergence of media that afford students extraordinarily productive capacities. Emerging demographics of "digital natives" (Prensky 2001; Palfrey and Gasser 2008) [8;9] are technology savvy, highly skilled in intervening, and at times, creatively reworking a particularly malleable digital media environment, and actively produce as well as consume media.

We must evolve learning environments in which pedagogical practices work precisely in epicentre of technology and media to point the way to progressive digital futures; that is, education must expand and elaborate the capacities of digital media through creativity and invention, through collaborative and participatory practices, through collective approaches and project initiatives, all of which are informed by an open media that is ethical, that enables, enlightens, and activates, and that acts as creator, custodian, and exemplar of education and social change.

References

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