Pedagogical Invention and the Great "Remote" Experiment: Lessons in Engagement and Directions for Change

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Abstract

Imaginative and consequential pedagogy is often a matter of overcoming the constraints of our very educational contexts. At the post-secondary level, these contexts range from authoritarian, transactional models driven by canonical content and undynamic curricula, to the increasing influence of neoliberal, managerial models of administration, to the enclosures and limitations of the physical context of the university classroom. Irrefutably, the pandemic and the move to "remote" delivery under forcible necessity exacerbated the existing and daunting constraints already challenging pedagogical latitude and creativity. In its early phase, remote teaching involved the retrofitting, often inelegant retrofitting, of in-person courses for remote delivery. Of course, remote delivery courses were not strictly speaking "online distance" courses which are designed specifically for online delivery and teaching. The compelling evidence from surveys of national student organizations around the globe demonstrates that students have struggled mightily with the lack of richness and immediacy of synchronous face-to-face teaching and with the awkwardness of and exhaustion with remote platforms. While the responses to remote teaching in the pandemic have been overwhelmingly technological in focus, equally important are issues of educational philosophy and pedagogical practice that must inform and direct our educational priorities in the future. Simply stated, post-pandemic is a critical and opportune moment for educational revision. How do we activate students to be protagonists in their own education, and by extension, their own civic lives? If greater degrees of student autonomy and skills of self-direction were critical for remote education (and not universally achieved by any means), how do we elaborate and sustain these values and practices? How do we develop teaching and learning animated and motivated by social change? This paper takes up these questions and details the urgencies and qualities of face-to-face learning as technology, especially in the wake of the pandemic, becomes increasingly, an article of educational faith.

Keywords: *pedagogical invention, student autonomy, engagement, post-pandemic, educational revision.*

Techno-optimism

Techno-utopian discourses and ideologies have driven and sustained the surges of technology into everyday life over many decades. In the contemporary iteration of this technological optimism, all public resources—education, health care, governmental operations, and more—are re-imagined as ideally and ultimately technologically integrated, and such integration is regarded as ameliorative, especially as we move toward a post-pandemic world. For some such as former Google CEO Eric Schmidt, the seamless and comprehensive integration of technology into every dimension of civic life is a critical foundation and future direction for post-pandemic recovery. (Klein, 2020)[1] Among Schmidt's "first priorities" is remote learning. For others such as Naomi Klein, such systemic privatization of public resources is an enormously problematic trajectory that speaks of the domination of the logic and control of capitalized technology. Klein conjures up a "future being rushed into being" consonant with an emerging "contactless" ideology and enabling technologies because as asserted by Steer Tech CEO Anuja Sonalker, "Humans are biohazards, machines are not." (Lekach, 2020; quoted in Klein)[2]

A consideration of the direction of educational design and delivery post-pandemic must necessarily begin with this broader question of our faith in the corrective capacities of technological solutions. More specifically, our emerging perspectives on the so-called "return to normal" are deeply inflected with our experiences, and more to the point, our students' experiences of an entirely online learning environment. The questions that arise frame this analysis. First, to what extent has the great remote experiment been instructive, even determining in terms of technologically based educational practices in the future; and second and how do such future-facing practices articulate our most important educational philosophies

toward citizenship, civic engagement, and broad and sustained social change? These are not simple questions of technological infrastructures and operations, although irrefutably, these were the questions which dominated our frantic search for online platforms and other resources in extraordinarily daunting circumstances at the beginning of the pandemic. It is of course, understandable that both early and continuing responses to the educational lockdown would be a strategy of technological intervention and application; in particular, business conferencing platforms adapted to teaching and learning environments. However, in the urgencies to find and adapt technology in a compressed time frame, the contemplation of our educational philosophies was neither concomitant nor priority. The urgency was to get students, terms and semesters to the finish line with even just a hint of academic legitimacy. But emergency and thoughtful educational philosophy are hardly compatible.

The Big Picture

The ubiquity, priorities, and authority of technology in the quotidian life of education are irrefutable, and the vision of post-pandemic teaching and learning environments and the economic determinants compelling such vision are inextricably tied to technological solutions. As we proceed with trepidatious but urgent direction toward near future educational policies and pedagogical practices—a near and in fact, long term future of education through technological design and operation—we would do well to heed Edward Hamilton's argument that "sound understanding" of online education cannot be reached by "asking only how technologies work." Indeed, as Hamilton points out, online education cannot be understood outside of highly charged debates over the role and politics of education in society. (Hamilton, 2016)[3]

As technology was evangelized as the key to educational reform at the end of the 1990s, there are unmistakable resonances with imaginings of post-pandemic educational recovery and revision. The brave new world of education promised by proponents of online teaching and learning at that time emphasized the need for entrepreneurial initiative and competitive edge on the part of universities as they necessarily prepared for and entered the emerging and expansive markets of virtualized education. The "traditional", bricks and mortar university was seen as a fossil, woefully lacking the vision and resources to accelerate toward a future in which education and industry were increasingly integrated for advantage in the then transformation toward global information/knowledge economies. Online education was the leading edge of educational reform in this view, an answer for financially distressed educational institutions, administrations, and governments seeking solutions to receding budgets, the managerial demands for "accountabilities" and measurable outcomes, oversubscribed courses and crowded classrooms, expanding marketplaces of education and educational technology providers and developers, and more. These are not distant historical details but rather clear and direct calls in prescriptions for post-pandemic education. As Eric Schmidt asks, "How could the emerging technologies being deployed in the current crisis propel us into a better future?" (Schmidt, 2020)[4] His specific reference to education is critical to his vision of integrative technology at a societal scope no less, as he argues that we should "accelerate the trend toward remote learning" where there is "no requirement for proximity".

The corporatization and digitization of the modern university remains a flashpoint of debate and contestation. Critical perspectives have long regarded online education as "a lever for the economic rationalization of higher education", as Hamilton notes (Hamilton, 2016, p.6). In substantive and expansive terms, these perspectives have argued that education is increasingly commodified and automated as the digitized university is ongoingly transformed in the powerful determinants of neoliberal economistic and administrative models, policies, and priorities. In simple terms, technologies have been developed and applied to maximize revenues and minimize instructional expenditures—the "holy grail" of educational cost-cutting, as Steven Mintz has noted. (Mintz, 2019)[5] As a consequence, enabling technologies for comprehensive online delivery and numerous variants of teaching-at-scale erode educational and institutional autonomy and diminish the values, principles and practices of education as a critical and open public good and an instigator and custodian of democratic progress. (Aronowitz, 1999; Giroux, 2009; Levidow, 2002; Noble, 2002)[6],[7],[8],[9]

A pedagogical foundation in the achievement of the democratic core of education and the "timeless value" (at least since Plato) of higher education is, as Patrick Keeney has argued, "conversation—dialogue—

among human bodies in a room engaged in a real-time, unmediated exchange of ideas and opinions." (Keeney 2020)[10] "Embodied education", rich and immediate, open and dynamic, nuanced and complex, counter-authoritarian, is a dramatic contrast to the distance, mediation, dispassion, and ultimate "indifference" of technological platform teaching. (Gooch, 2019; quoted in Keeney, 2020)[11]

Richness, Immediacy, Remoteness

Consequential pedagogy should be the goal of all educators. By "consequential" I mean that educational values, pedagogical design and practice, teaching and learning environments, and institutional priorities need to be driven by the principles and goals of democratic education and the achievement of citizenship. At its essence, citizenship is the most ennobling mission of our universities, the achievement of ethicality, compassion, engagement, and civic fortitude motivated by a recognition that educational purpose is sustained social change. The provocations and contestations around the design and application of technology, whether advocacy for and endorsement of expanded online delivery, or critical and admonitory of the perils of technological and economic priorities, are instructive as we set the directions and parameters for post-pandemic education.

There is abundant evidence of student dissatisfaction with remote delivery. Space does not permit a detailed account of global survey data (although two Canadian surveys are cited here as examples that typify student responses across numerous postsecondary institutions around the globe; OCUFA, 2020; Abacus Data, 2020)[12],[13]. The dissatisfaction with remote learning among students offers us a direction forward in post-pandemic "return to normal" circumstances. On its own, contactless education is unviable. It works against the principles and practices of experiential learning, authenticity, immediacy, and consequential pedagogy. As responses of students and faculty instructors made demonstrably clear in one Canadian survey, students and faculty feel that "the adjustments to course delivery and campus life compelled by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic have had an overall negative impact on both quality of education and students' general educational experience." (OCUFA, 2020) A lack of interaction, engagement, and communication, as well as social isolation and stress were cited as key factors in this negative experience.

Technology has long been an article of faith in education, with dizzying promises concomitant with the ongoing elaborations of digital culture and the ever-expanding aspirations, and applications of virtual education. The argument here is not meant as a blanket critique of digital learning, or of the enabling possibilities of its accelerated technologies which in the form of conferencing platforms, delivered us from the education-related calamities of the pandemic. Instead, it is a call for vigilance and action in the expansion of digital education, and a case for the critical qualities of richness and depth of face-to-face contexts of communication—contexts that are the foundation and the lubricant of democratic education. The overarching questions of educational philosophy—the activation of students, the pursuit and achievement of ethicality, compassion, and civic engagement, the design of learning environments and pedagogical practices that promote and sustain autonomy and self-direction, and more—are of paramount concern and consideration, and never more so than at a moment when remote delivery and mediated learning have gained their greatest authority and appeal as economic efficiency.

In education, there should be no "return to normal". Rather, post-pandemic needs to be a moment for revision and such revision needs to articulate, sustain, and elaborate the values and practices of democratic education. This is a moment for the renewal and expansion of face-to-face learning and teaching environments, supported by technological adjuncts but never defined by technological enablement. This is a moment when students need to acquire their sense of agency, their capacities of creativity, and hone their collaborative instincts and skills. And to do so demands self-direction cultivated in "embodied" education.

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