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## Introduction

### LATISS Special Issue: Digital Media and Contested Visions of Education

Wesley Shumar, Department of Anthropology, Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA USA
& Susan Wright, Department of Education (DPU), Aarhus University, Copenhagen, Denmark

This special issue focuses on new social media in higher education and the dialectical tension they generate between knowledge as information and knowledge as a creative, social process. There is a long history of using new media in higher education, and their introduction has often been associated with a renewed social purpose for the sector. Now that new social media such as on Facebook, streamed lectures, TED Talks, MOOCs, Moodles and other Content Management Systems are becoming widespread, this special issue questions their potential impact on teaching and learning in higher education. Do these media fulfil some administrators' dream of reorganizing higher education in terms of economic rationality and inexpensive reusable learning modules? Or do they open up new spaces for creativity, critical thinking and social change?

**New media and the social purpose of higher education**

The use of diverse forms of communication in higher education is not new. In particular, the UK's Open University (OU) has a long and impressive history of 'blended' or 'hybrid' learning. Prior to the OU, distance education in the UK and the US was thought of primarily as correspondence courses where people might get a technical training in an applied field. The University of London had been a system for external study since its foundation in 1836, providing opportunities for a wider range of people than usually participated in higher education (Tait 2008: 86). In 1858 it was agreed that London University examinations could be taken overseas, serving not only British colonialists but indigenous populations. In 1882 there were 17 'colonial' centres around the world, rising to 79 centres by 1937 and 39,326 students passed correspondence courses between 1887 and 1931 (ibid.).

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In the 1960s, the use of television and radio in a new university, originally called 'The University of the Air' and later the Open University (OU) was part of Harold Wilson's vision for forging a 'new Britain' with the 'white heat' of scientific revolution. This University was to 'enrich cultural life' and help Britain prosper by opening up education to non-elite people, unlock their talent and 'replace the cloth cap [with] the white laboratory coat as the symbol of British labour' (Wilson 1963). The OU had a radical and open admissions policy: in 1971, its first year, 20,000 people registered on a course, whereas the UK's total student population was only 130,000. To suit 'non-traditional' students' home and work commitments, course modules were made up of documentaries on BBC television and radio, and their tutors mainly gave them feedback by correspondence. The learning used media technology and was blended, flexible and personalized. This quintessential model of an open university has been copied by others around the world.

Recent English government restrictions on part-time students' access to student loans has meant the OU's intake has plummeted from a high of 260,000 students in 2009/10 to 174,000 students in 2015/16. With recorded losses of £24.1 million in the last two years, the OU is investing heavily in a new educational model and business plan called FutureLearn (£7.3 million in 2013-15 and £13 million in 2016-19) (Havergal 2016).Notably, the OU is using mobile phones to provide access to higher education in developing countries. UNESCO has also has also had a programme on 'mobile learning' to improve 'educational access, equity and quality' around the world (UNESCO 2012a, 2012b, 2013). In Africa, for example, where only two-thirds of the population had domestic access to electricity in 2013, the use of computers is restricted (Parr 2013). Yet more people have mobile phones in Africa than in the U.S., growing from 25 million in 2001 to 650 million in 2012. The use of mobile phones in education has the advantages of being cheap and interactive, and sms can be used to keep contact between teachers and students. The disadvantage is that only 6-15% of phones in Africa can access the world wide web (Parr 2013). The UK's Open University's 'open distance learning approach' develops materials suitable for mobiles or for printing in hard copies. According to its

own website, the TESSA programme (Teacher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa) operates in nine countries and has helped train 500,000 teachers since 2005. The project's large bank of materials in Arabic, French, English and kiSwahili are free for teachers to use in classroom activities and improve their practice (Open Learn 2009). Another programme aims to improve the English skills of 25 million people in Bangladesh over 9 years. These materials include resources for students and ideas for introducing new pedagogies into the classroom and they all fit into a memory card for a mobile phone (The OU on YouTube 2014). Similarly, the OU has developed materials for a 5-year programme for training 500,000 health workers in community clinics scattered across Sub-Saharan Africa and has taught MBAs and MPAs to business leaders and public servants in Ethiopia.

The former Vice-Chancellor of OU explains on You Tube that the university is now a 'global university', using new social media in progressive ways to build capabilities in the world as an extension of its original mission for social justice. However, there are also signs that the OU is adopting a neoliberal 'learning as information' model. For example the YouTube video also claims 'We can address the skills gap at the request of *any* government' (our emphasis).

Today the Open University struggles with two images of what it is. Is it the progressive institution that brings a diversity of people into dynamic learning relationships with other students and faculty using technologies to support that process? Or is it one of the world's largest online learning institutions whose business plan is to sell  packages of educational products and knowledge transfers in ways that, according to critics, deviate from the OU's mission of 'promot[ing] social justice in our unequal and uncertain world' (Gourley and Lane 2009: 64)?

### Two Futures

The above story of the OU illustrates that there are two visions of new and social media and their utility for higher education, one is based in a social learning perspective and the other more of a neoliberal vision of information, as a form of capital, that can be efficiently transferred, measured and validated. The social learning vision is based upon

the potential of these new media for increasing opportunities for communication and interaction. At the core of the classic vision of the university is a group of people, students and faculty, reading and discussing scholarly work, and engaging in practices relevant to the field of study. New and social media provide additional channels for ever-wider categories of people to join those interactions and increase the potential for fruitful knowledge production. While it is true that bandwidth restrictions limit certain kinds of interactions, other possibilities are opened up by the capacity of these media to shape our social sense of space and time (Harvey 2006). These new media provide opportunities for to share resources and empower faculty and students by engaging with a wider yet still personal set of colleagues (Papacharissi 2012; Wellman 2001).

In a contrasting, neoliberal vision of the economization of higher education within 21st Century global capitalism, higher education administrators act as regional economic development executives in the business of producing new innovations and technologies that can be sold in the knowledge economy. They talk about technology transfer and bringing creative ideas to market. Students who are faced with declining state funding and increased costs, are pressed to use their tuition and fees to buy new educational products that are delivered through new technologies. In these times when the economic has colonized the university (and the social in general), administrators and policy makers imagine the Internet as a panacea that can deliver quality university course content at a minimal cost. Their visions based on a new imagination of what learning and knowledge are and how they are developed and disseminated, and validated and evaluated both for quality assurance and for efficient processes of transfer

These two imaginations of the future of the university are both a response to the structural tensions and limitations that higher education is experiencing. At the same time, they are a response to the potential of modern universities to provide advanced learning opportunities. Each vision sees the university as very much at the centre of the success of our future society. Each is also connected to a different idea of learning. Below, these two visions of the university's future are called neoliberal learning and social learning respectively.

## Neoliberal Learning

As higher education has been the main route of upward mobility in Western nations and as the information economy has required greater levels of training and skill, more students have sought a university education. One of the positive results of the commodification of higher education has been the opening up of university education to more students. But in the U.K., U.S. and those countries in South America, Africa and Asia dependent on the private for-profit sector, the cost of expanding student numbers have been passed on to students. At the same time as student tuition fees have been rising, the university has becoming increasingly important in a technologically driven world. Large industries such as pharmaceuticals, biomedical industries and information technology firms see the university as a place where innovative research can lead to new products, a supply of knowledge workers and new sources of capital accumulation.

This larger structural context provides the backdrop for how universities respond to information technologies and their potential for teaching and for online and hybrid learning. It is not surprising that upper administrators at universities, given the economic pressures they face, and the increased number of students, might want to develop more efficient ways to deliver courses and content to their students. And it is not surprising that politicians and policy makers see the development of technology and Internet tools as a way to foster growth in their economic region. From within this kind of mass productionist mentality, there are some deeply misguided ideas about what learning and knowledge are. First, there is an assumption that information and knowledge are things and maybe, on some level, equivalent things. Second, these things are resources, which, thanks to the Internet, are no longer scarce and can proliferate and be disseminated broadly and quickly.

From this perspective, Internet tools are central to the teaching and learning process as they aid the free flow of knowledge. Newfield argues that large state universities in the U.S. were dealing with the problem of having too many students to teach by having large lecture halls, standardized lectures and multiple choice exams. Many other universities around the world are also dealing with large groups of students by holding very large lecture based courses. The founders of various MOOC companies saw that if that is what a university course is, then the MOOC can deliver the same lectures, from top

researchers, and examine the students much more cheaply and effectively than universities can in large lecture halls. Newfield's point (this issue) is that if learning is about a personal relationship between faculty and students where they produce knowledge together, neither the large lecture hall of large state universities nor the MOOC, as it is currently defined, can really produce the kind of learning that we need as a society and as individuals.

The imagination of learning as a flow of information that moves from lecturer (or You Tube video) to student has lead to a discourse about higher education that is neoliberal, with an emphasis on strategic management, risk management  and quality assurance. These are all ideas derive from a business perspective. Further, as Shumar discusses in his paper on TED, the talks from the Technology, Entertainment, Design conferences have become a YouTube sensation, so the  university professors are encouraged to think of themselves as commodities. In this regard, the League of European Research Universities' (LERU) advice paper on Online Learning is instructive (Mapstone et al. 2014). While it acknowledges that in research universities online learning is unlikely to replace or even become a large part of their teaching and learning, nevertheless they need strategies to ensure they have an online presence and attend to their reputation management by reviewing  the quality of materials they place in that space. Both of these strategies, being engaged with online learning and attending to the materials in that space, imply that research universities need to think like businesses and engage in a language of business. Further, the LERU report engages research universities in a way of thinking about knowledge and learning that is consistent with a neoliberal agenda. That is to say, knowledge and information flow, they are commodities that can be exchanged, and learners consume these products in order to become educated.

As Michael Peters suggests in his essay in this volume, seeing MOOC and other online educational tools as forms of capital is very much tied up with cognitive capitalism where information, knowledge, finance and media, are all quickly interchangeable. In that context, Peters suggests, the free flow of information is not only a particular ideology of democracy and cultural values; it is also a liberal economic ideology in which the marketplace of ideas is not only like the marketplace of products, but also is concerned with managing risks. Since the beginning of capitalism, capital accumulation has always

been future oriented and about managing potential risks, and this is a major concern for venture capitalist firms, which, as both Peters and Newfield in this volume point out, have started and/or funded MOOC companies.

There are examples of alternative ways of running and funding online courses, with very positive social impacts. A GROOC (a group-based open online course) on 'Social Learning for Social Impact' run by McGill University, focused on how to create, design, funs and evaluate a social initiative. One of the students, along with other online students from Morocco, Canada and Iraq, crowdfunded and established a school for 100 children at a camp for refugees in Iraqi Kurdistan, with a teacher who is also a refugee. They are now aiming to establish internet access to the camp so UK teachers can provide online education for adults and children (Bothwell 2016). Such examples suggest that the key problem to be addressed by MOOCs is not how to make possible the massive dissemination of information but how to foster creative opportunities for students to think about problems, develop new ideas and contribute their knowledge to the development of a more equitable society. If we flip the question around this way then maybe the MOOC should not be concerned with being massive, but rather focus on being an Open Online Course, or what some have been calling an OOC (Bang et al. 2015).

**Social Learning**

In education and the learning sciences, one of the dominant paradigms of learning is social learning. There are various perspectives within a social learning paradigm, social constructivism, situated learning and cognition, group learning and cognition, etc. What these perspectives share in common is that learning is neither an individual cognitive process nor a process of information transfer. Rather, it is a social process that requires discussion, dialogue, and interaction. Jerome Bruner (1996) referred to learning from this perspective as 'inter-subjective meaning making'. If learning is a social, meaning making process, where the ability to communicate is central, then the Internet, social media and other new communication technologies can be a tremendous asset to education. But not in the way imagined by neoliberal administrators. Rather than being a cost-effective way to support information and knowledge transfer via products labelled 'intellectual property', digital media technologies open up new avenues for different kinds of

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Vgotsky was an important early founder in this movement. His research demonstrated that when children were engaged in learning new things, it was not just a matter of whether they were cognitively ready, in their own minds, to understand the material, as Piaget taught. But rather, the context in which the children worked would influence their ability to understand new principles and ideas. In his late work, Vgotsky called this the "zone of proximal development" and it was a concept developed further by followers of Vgotsky. The important piece of this insight was that learning, while influenced by brain development of course, was a shared, social and communicative act. Later

communication and the easy sharing of ideas and resources in order to make an even more robust social space for learning.

This is why the evidence from research into online learning seems to support that blended learning is better than online learning alone. Blended learning implies that there is both face-to-face and online interaction. Blended learning, as a term, is at risk of being reified into something to be transferred to people in a market based way. Nothing is further from the truth. about it is worth focussing on the ways that Internet technology and social media have placed everyone all in a virtual world, where face-to-face and online interactions are interwoven in complex and shifting ways (Shumar & Madison 2013). In this volume, Baker and Sterling's contribution is one example of such a virtual world. When students make their transition to university, they use Facebook as a way to manage both the social and the academic transition. In the transition from their home communities to university, students are using social media to create a hybrid social space where the friends and family can be brought into contact with the alien space of the university. In this way they can increase their comfort in the transition students use. In managing the academic transition, social media is not so much used to merge worlds as to seek information and leverage networks to help them understand university work. In each of these instances, informal learning is being initiated and managed by the students themselves. In a more extreme example of students using new media to manage their own learning, in Czech Republic, students who were dissatisfied with their university education, established their own website and Content Management System, sharing information about courses, curricula, teachers and exams – in a way that provoked academics to make considerable changes (Stöckelová and Virtová 2014). This student-led initiative stands in sharp contrast to the ways universities' are increasingly using Content Management Systems to manage student populations and steer their learning, often with deeply confusing and alienating results (Vonderau 2015).

Ideally, when the Internet and social media tools are used to increase spatial and temporal flexibility and add more channels of communication for students and teachers, they can greatly benefit the learning situation. Learning interactions can be slowed down or speeded up as needed for the learning situation. Students can establish back channels for

discussing work and problems. Professors can be contacted informally for advice and resources can be found online. These and many other ways show the way toward a learning environment greatly enhanced by digital tools.

**Two Futures Entwined in Language**

An examination of the language used in many reports and advice papers on online learning reveals that it is through the use of terminology and the turning of particular phrases that a worldview is articulated. The power in this articulation, its symbolic violence, derives from the assumption that all can agree on this perspective and that it does not interfere with the ways that educators and students might operate in the learning interaction. To take a simple example that reaches beyond the world of online learning, but is certainly included within it, many university teachers (and school teachers as well) have to specify "learning outcomes" as part of their syllabi and lesson plans including an articulation of how these things will be measured. Learning outcomes as a term assumes that there are specific discrete things that students are going to learn. They pre-exist the learning interaction and they will flow from teacher to student. But this idea is completely anathema to a more social constructivist view of learning. From the constructivist perspective, there is a body of work that makes up any field, which teachers and students engage in actively exploring together. In the process, they construct knowledge together. Students will learn new content, but so will teachers. And most importantly they will learn to learn and so the amount of material covered is secondary to learning to think in a particular way. The evaluation of this learning is describable, in the way that Watson and Crick described what the DNA molecule must look like before they had seen it, but it is not really measurable.

A close look at some of the language used in online learning reveals there is often pressure to take a neoliberal view of learning and rarely an emphasis on social learning. Research reports often emphasize "learning outcomes" and the analysis of "learning data". There is a focus on "regular assessment" and the "management of learning". Online learning should be "innovative" and universities and teachers should be focused on "developing innovations". The platforms for learning called "Content Management

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Systems" or "Learning Management Systems" are systems involved in management. Universities need a digital "strategy". Universities need to "strategically" manage their "reputations", "brand" as well as their "financial and intellectual capital". Following Fairclough (2014) there are several things we can point out about this language. First it is mass- produced: it starts with administrators and policy and spreads across groups who are making recommendations about online learning and new information technologies in education in many parts of the world.  Second, the language implies certain kinds of practices and discourages others. When research reports cite 'learning outcomes', there is a presumed ontology and social practice upon which that term rests. The language is coercive, to resist the language is to resist the normal operation of the university, and the process the resisting individual or institution is stigmatized. It is up to educators who employ digital tools and materials to find progressive ways to talk about how the digital enhances the potential for learning. That language would need to suggest that there are other spaces and temporalities opened up for interaction and sharing resources that the digital makes possible for people.

**Summary**

As both of our articles on MOOCs show, digital media is often being used to further a neoliberal vision of education and learning. Their efforts there are to rationalize the flow of knowledge making it efficient, less labor intensive, and profitable. But as our MOOC articles each show in different ways, this is built upon a vision of learning that is not workable and participates in an economy that is built upon false principles. The article on TED talks also shows that the digital can open up a very contradictory space where creative ideas can be shared, but in a context that makes a celebrity out of the purveyor of those ideas.

The other side of digital media is that they can be used to transform the spaces within which teaching and learning take place. They can be used to increase the quantity and quality of conversations and interactions that people have. And they can be used to share resources. These all would be part of a "blended learning" situation, but what is important

is not the notion of blended, but rather the use of digital tools to support a more sound model of learning and knowledge production.

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