

BOOK REVIEW

Education is Not an App: The Future of University Teaching in the Internet Age

Jonathan A. Poritz and Jonathan Rees

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This book was written by two university professors in the United States, Poritz (mathematics) and Rees (history), for the stated purpose of examining the economic and pedagogical impacts of technology on higher education learning. The authors structured the book to examine contemporary manifestations of technological development within education, including fully on-line courses, blended (hybridization) classes, and massive open online courses (MOOCs), as well as various uses of social media in the classroom setting.

The authors cannot be accused of being neo-Luddites since they professed to finding value in educational technology. They cannot be accused of pondering if such technology will play a significant role since this is already the case. Instead, they focused on how technology has affected higher education over the past twenty years in order to answer the question of who should ultimately control these technologies in the future in a practical endeavor to improve the pedagogical process.

The result of their research led the authors to conclude that much of what exists today regarding technology in the classroom was agreed upon with little participation and consent of teachers. Instead, the authors suggest the implementations were performed by administrators under heavy budgetary pressure. The incorporation of on-line courses allowed for less brick-n-mortar construction and upkeep and created an opportunity to transfer a lot of the teaching responsibilities to lesser paid adjunct professors. The authors suggested that the remedy is to “trust faculty to employ technology into the way they teach already” (p. 9). Good courses are created when faculty is “directly involved in the planning and implementation of all online courses” (p. 12) and where there is as much teacher input as possible on any technologically-infused structure.

The term the authors use for this mutual cooperation is “shared governance,” wherein faculty should play an important role, if possible, the “lead role...in determining the university decisions related to its educational and research missions because they are the experts on these areas on campus” (p. 15). Technology must serve its master with the master being the teacher. The authors expressed high criticism for “cash hungry” (p. 22) university administrators who solicited (or where solicited by) instructional designers, most of whom are not faculty – and are not tenured – to create “cookie-cutter online courses” (p. 22) that are then often delivered by part-time, untenured adjunct labor, many lacking doctoral degrees. The authors argue that many private companies (often short-lived consultancies) provide technologically-based courses with “little interest in the teaching philosophies and prerogatives of individual professors” (p. 22). Because of this, they tend to target university administrators while ignoring teachers and keeping them out of the developmental process.

The results are inferior courses where there is little flexibility because substance is sacrificed to form. Teachers are forced to work with the pedagogical structure of non-teachers who, often, know little about the subject of the course they developed. The teacher is left to fend with issues of on-line cheating, the loss of opportunity to teach with the Socratic method, and with the perception developed by many students that on-line or blended courses require less work. The challenge to teach is difficult enough in a post-modernist paradigm that mocks the use of logic, and critical thinking is an exercise within a box of values and premises that are utilized for reinforcement of the prevailing intellectual *zeitgeist* of the academy without the values and premises themselves being allowed to be challenged with any intellectual scrutiny.

The authors argue that the surrender of substance to form impedes teaching *as a craft*. Their solution to preserving craft and art form is a compromise with technology wherein teachers are offered a “rich technological buffet” (p. 115) of support from which they can choose to enhance their teaching while still maintaining creative freedom and avoiding an inferior system of one-size-fits-all courses.

In an added point of what can be described as traditionalism, the authors caution that any technology-heavy class, particularly fully on-line, dramatically diminishes the role of the teacher as a role model. The opportunity for role modeling (both by way of interaction and as example) is present, in ample opportunities, in face-to-face communications wherein mentorship is also possible. The intangible value of this is diminished to a great extent as a result of technological distance. The inability for teachers to have control of their own pedagogical means also sets a bad example for the importance of autonomy when a professor is forced to say “I’m not allowed to decide that” to students regarding the composition and structure of his own course.

This reviewer found himself to be a kindred spirit with the authors on the fundamental observations and recommendations made in the book. However, it is very disappointing that, towards the conclusion of the work, the authors chose to blame the cost-cutting implementation of educational technology on the operationalization of the ideology of neoliberalism. They cited the priority of many universities to build expensive sports complexes and to create “administrative bloat” (p. 113) where far more monies have been allocated at American universities for administrative jobs over tenure-track teaching positions. However, the authors are also aware that, despite some post-graduate degree programs in university administration, most in the managerial class of the academy are former university professors who either self-eliminated themselves from the tenure-track process or were forced out due to lack of scholarly publications. For neoliberal ideology to be the pervasive culprit at American universities is to argue that this ideology was carried into managerial positions by large numbers of like-minded (i.e., neoliberal) professors making their career transitions.

Yet, neoliberalism has virtually no adherents in faculty lounges. In fact, virtually no one self-identifies as a neoliberal since the term itself has no substantive definition. Boas and Gans-Morse (2009) performed a content analysis of 148 scholarly journal articles on neoliberalism that were published between 1990 and 2004. They “did not find a *single* article focused on the definition and usage of neoliberalism” (p. 138). The articles accused laissez faire advocates within the Austrian School of Economics (with a particular focus on Friedrich von Hayek), monetarists from the Chicago School (especially Milton Friedman), and a number of advocates and institutions of corporatism (e.g., the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank) – all of being neoliberals, despite the substantial philosophical and policy differences among these groups.

Lacking any substantive definition, neoliberalism lacks the context to be seen as an ideology or even a paradigm. However, in the 148 articles studied by Boas and Gans-Morse, the term was used with a negative connotation towards anything that resembled “free-market policies” (Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009, p. 154). In essence, it has become a boogeyman term for those who wish to attack capitalism without identifying themselves as being anti-capitalists and paying the consequence, in essence, a combination of deception and cowardice. Neoliberalism is now the boogeyman responsible for poisoning the environment, *Neoliberal Environment: False Promises and Unnatural Consequences* (2007), causing hunger, *Food for the Few: Neoliberal Globalism and Biotechnology in Latin America* (2008), undermining healthcare, *Blind Spot: How Neoliberalism Infiltrated Global Health* (2014), proliferating AIDS, *The Deadly Ideas of Neoliberalism: How the IMF has Undermined Public Health and the Fight Against AIDS* (2009), creating civil unrest, *Urban Uprisings: Challenging Neoliberal Urbanism in Europe* (2016), fostering poverty, *The Poor and Spirit: Neoliberalism and the Political Theology of Poverty* (2017), and implementing malevolent city planning, *Evil Paradise: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism* (2008).

For higher education to have been taken over by neoliberals required a small army of supposedly free-market advocates transitioning from faculty lounges into the offices of administrative functionaries. However, this is improbable since it is easier to find a vegetarian in a steak house than to find a free-market advocate in a typical social science department in the American academy. The administrative bloat that Poritz and Rees wrote about has no connection to the cost-cutting agenda ascribed to neoliberal administrative policies. The answer may lie elsewhere. The past two decades has seen a dramatic increase in university administrative jobs while tenure-track jobs decreased. As an example, the California State University (CSU) system, with 23 campuses covering half a million students, faculty, and staff, saw the number of tenure-track faculty drop 31.1% from 2004 to 2014 while administrative staff rose by 19.2% during the same time period (California Faculty Association, 2015). Benjamin Ginsburg (quoted in California Faculty Association, 2015, p. 7) states:

Every year, hosts of administrators and staffers are added to college and university payrolls, even as schools claim to be battling budget crises that are forcing them to reduce the size of their full-time faculties. As a result, universities are now filled with armies of functionaries – vice presidents, associate vice presidents, assistant vice presidents, provosts, associate provosts, vice provosts, assistant provosts, deans, deanlets, and deanlings....

Indeed, university administration jobs grew by 60 percent between 1993 and 2009 (or 10 times the rate of tenured faculty jobs during that period) according to the U.S. Department of Education (Campos, 2015). Therefore, what has been occurring is not a deficiency of monies (especially with the generosity of the government-backed student loan program) but, rather, a misallocation of funds regarding the function of the academy.

What is at play here may be darker than a boogeyman. Former teachers who now sit in administrative offices are mainly there because they could not or would not compete in the tenure-track process. Many were good teachers who simply did not devote enough time to publish and, therefore, perished in the process. The dynamics of such a process, that amounts to a malallocation of labor, fosters resentment and even hostility against those professors who survived the publish-or-perish game and against the very institutions who reward those for publications while paying little attention to the teacher's primary responsibility of good teaching.

Perhaps this, and other problems, can be solved when the academy creates a binary structure of career teachers (many by necessity) and career researchers (fewer in number) whose employment survival is assessed by established quantity and quality of productivity in those distinctly different endeavors.

The past decade has provided ample evidence of an inverse relationship between the infusion of technology into education and student performance. Standardized test scores (critical reading, mathematics, and writing) for undergraduate college admission continue to drop; scores for the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) – the national standardize test for elementary education in the United States, have dropped; U.S. students' academic achievements continue lag and even drop (e.g., math) compared to their peers in many other countries (Desilver, 2017). The federal government's E-rate program (subsidization of broadband connections, internal wiring, and networking equipment for certain school districts) showed no improvement in student test scores. Books by Carr (2010) and Oppenheimer (2003) indicate that long-term usage of the internet for learning purposes actually triggers neurological consequences that are deleterious compared to the reading of physical books. Carr (2010, p 9) states:

...[d]igital immersion has even affected the way they absorb information. They Don't necessarily read a page from left to right or top to bottom. They might instead skip around, scanning for pertinent information of interest.

Billions in monies have been poured into educational technology without any tangible improvements in test scores or overall student performance. In fact, studies have shown that students using laptops while listening to a lecturer are outperformed by those who do not use their laptops in class (Carr, 2010). This reviewer witnessed a novice, tenured-track professor who was unable to teach a class when the breakdown of the room's audio-visual equipment prevented him from using a textbook company-provided power point presentation for that day's entire lecture. Pushback on too much technology is now commonplace in the academy. What is needed is more thoughtfulness and courage in addressing the organizational and environmental factors at playing in pushing too much technology.

However, despite their conjuring of the neoliberal boogeyman, the authors of this book should be commented on a work that is both necessarily provocative in its analysis and commendably courageous in its criticism.

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