

Education Encounters in the Digital Sphere: Putting in Perspective the Transition to Remote Learning / Online Education

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Due to the present dire circumstances, the transition to remote learning / online education is unfortunately not taking place at our own pace and on our own terms. We are going into it at breakneck speed despite pressing concerns regarding adequate connectivity, access to the necessary computers and gadgets, and preparedness of students, staff members, and faculty. All of these are extremely uneven at this point. Moreover, all these concerns are obviously compounded by the massive psychological, social, and economic impact wrought upon society by the pandemic.

University officials inform us that the COVID-19 pandemic has “catalyzed the overdue transformation of higher education in general and UP education in particular.” They assure us that “we can no longer go back” and that “this is an exciting time for academe” (OVPAA Memorandum No. 2020–68; OVPAA Plans for AY 2020–2021). Though the optimism is admirable, one must voice out a certain degree of apprehension at the celebratory tone and breathless excitement welcoming this “overdue transformation.” On what grounds is this transformation said to be “overdue”? And what is it exactly that we “cannot go back to”? How are we certain that there is no returning to whatever it is that we are not returning to? We are also informed flatly that, “face-to-face teaching is not superior to other modes of delivery.” In fact, it is even asserted that “online modes” can even be of “superior quality” to face-to-face teaching (OVPAA Memorandum No. 2020–68; OVPAA Plans for AY

2020–2021). In what way is this so? And what measures of “quality” were applied to arrive at this conclusion? Aren’t two quite different educational experiences being hastily compared in this case?

Given that universities in highly industrialized countries in the West have gone much further down the road in the transition to online or remote learning, it is necessary to look at the rise of online education as a global phenomenon in order to understand its full implications for us. However, it bears repeating once again that factors such as internet connectivity, access to the necessary hardware and software, and the preparedness of faculty, staff, and students for the shift to online modes of learning are extremely uneven and vary greatly from place to place both locally and globally.

Overdue Transformation for Whom?

Critical theorists of education have observed strong convergences between the tools of online education and the commodified, standardized model of education which currently overwhelmingly dominates educational practice in the United States (Feenberg 2015; Smith 2013). Venture capitalists and corporate interests early on identified online education as representing several clear advantages from a business perspective. For one, it could translate to potentially large reductions in overhead costs in terms of funds which used to be required for staffing and facilities as university campuses are gradually emptied out of students, staff, and teachers (Watermeyer et al. 2020). Layoffs will, however, necessarily be uneven across disciplines, educational institutions, and even between countries depending on already existing vulnerabilities. Aside from workforce streamlining, work-intensification is another expected advantage of online teaching modalities. Faculty can be persuaded to take on larger and larger online classes so that fewer and fewer teaching faculty would eventually need to be

hired or granted tenure. The already precarious state of tenure in higher educational institutions will further worsen while the casualization of teaching staff will proliferate. Incremental and gradual increases of loading will make large teaching burdens seem natural and part of the norm and expectations for satisfactory faculty performance. Instead of lightening the workload of teachers, it seems that online teaching has more often led to the opposite. The constant expectation for engagement at any hour, seven days a week is facilitated by the attendant work-from-home setup. Life-work balance turns out to be severely challenged when one's working space converges with personal spaces. The need to look after children and tackle other home care responsibilities has particularly affected female academics who have had to decrease their research output as a consequence (Watermeyer et al. 2020).

Going further down the road, visionary educational managers and marketers see Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) as allowing for the future automation ("automatability") of educational delivery. Bill Gates, a big supporter of MOOCs, proposes that recorded lectures by "star professors" from the most prestigious universities would replace face-to-face lectures by teaching staff at lower-ranked universities who, according to him, could never hope to compete with the professorial elite (Rhoads et al. 2015). Massive distribution and repeated use of digitized course material will lead to the reduction of a large part of the existing teaching staff to "discussion leaders," "teaching assistants," as well as "clerical workers" assigned to make regular reports on the data analytics generated by the software. In this way, educational automation will result in the deskilling, deprofessionalization, and casualization of teaching staff with the concomitant decline in wages. Artificial intelligence (AI), moreover, can replace the lack of human interaction with automated gamified pseudo-interactivity modeled after the already widespread use of AI in the service

sector. Copyright ownership for such MOOCs courses generated by teachers would be held by corporate entities and considered as “employer-produced commodities.” These arrangements will generate new imbalances and injustices. In contrast with students from “lower-ranking” universities, students enrolled at the elite institutions would presumably still have access to face-to-face discussion with the “star professors.” Universities which do not possess the resources to produce MOOCs at the level of the elite universities would hardly be able to compete with their products on the marketplace and be reduced to consumers. At present, MOOCs from “world-class” and “top-ranking” educational institutions predominantly sustain a one-way transmission of decontextualized and standardized knowledge from the US and Europe which further contributes to the marginalization and downgrading of local and indigenous languages and knowledges, a burgeoning phenomenon which some have aptly called “digital neocolonialism” (Adam 2019).

For public educational institutions, the use of third-party Learning Management Systems (LMS) by commercial providers will represent an unprecedented privatization of an increasingly vital component of the educational process (Smith 2013). The technical design features of such software reflects overwhelmingly managerial and corporate learning models which may appear to the user as givens when these are actually the result of the “delegation” to technical systems of certain restricted and interest-driven pedagogical values, notions, and assumptions (Hamilton et al. 2005). Such software, which have been developed from the ground up to respond to certain market demands, are generally not easily customizable by individual faculty to harmonize with their own pedagogical models and approaches. For instance, once education is reduced to a type of commodity which only needs to be provided with an appropriate “e-commerce” platform, it would be relatively easy to design online technologies which reduce

“education” to a matter of “delivery and acquisition,” where the only questions which matter would pertain to the “amount” and “speed” of transmission of such information or the imparting of skills. Such types of third-party software may also facilitate the surveillance of faculty and students by management for the purposes of performance measurement and competitive accountability (Smith 2013). Teachers may therefore lose a great deal of privacy, autonomy, academic freedom as well as the capacity to decide on matters of academic policy (for example, when grading systems have to be adjusted to the limitations of the software rather than the other way around).

Top-down corporate and managerial forms have trumped collegial and democratic forms of university governance in recent years. Armed with general assumptions about the running of corporations for profit and organizational efficiency, managers in the education sector have become more and more aggressive in pushing for policies which infringe directly on academic matters such that they oftentimes have come in diametrical opposition with those who actually teach and work in educational institutions. Attempts by educators to reconfigure the experience of online education along more participatory and transformative lines have therefore faced seemingly insurmountable obstacles within educational organizations increasingly dominated by managers and the software they promote (Natalier 2015).

The scenarios may seem dystopian, but the future is already here.

Face-to-face and Online Educational Encounters

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the rapid transition to online educational modes something of a *fait accompli*. Universities are being forced to transition, even without adequate preparation, to online modes. Disaster capitalists in education are probably

beside themselves with joy at the sudden opening they have been offered to shape national educational systems according to their whims while triumphantly brandishing the rhetoric of “digital disruption” (Watermeyer 2020; Burns 2020; Brabazon 2020). It is, therefore, more important than ever that progressive educators do not default on their role to pursue critical and transformative pedagogy even within online education platforms in cases where these can feasibly be implemented.

Though the original rationale of “distance education” (as well as its early online forms) was the democratization of education for the working classes, mature and adult learners, women, and the handicapped, a lot of this rhetoric has been considerably distorted since then in favor of projecting its business potential. Furthermore, online education has sometimes been regarded by critics as inherently inferior in quality to face-to-face education. Proponents of online education have opposed this hasty judgment with the equally quick assertion that online education can be equal to face-to-face and have sometimes even defensively extolled the superior quality of online education. But the problem of determining “quality” and its measurement has been elided by both sides. It is a fact that some crucial aspects of the educational process are by definition not measurable or replicable despite the best efforts of Outcome-Based Education (OBE) advocates of late. In order to understand this notion of immeasurability, we would have to think of education beyond commodified model of mere “information transmission” or “skills transfer,” both of which are repeatable and repetitive and therefore measurable and potentially subject to automation. While repetition is undoubtedly an indispensable moment in the learning process, the most important aspect of education is arguably that rare instance when repetition abruptly ceases and the new comes into the horizon. This nonrepeatability is why classifying the “critical faculty” as a skill, as some education

managers have done, is fundamentally wrong-headed. Criticism creates a break in the repetition of the present and strives to go beyond it. Emancipation is the immeasurable in education.

A way of grasping this point would be to consider what has been called the “educational encounter” (Bollnow 1955). Originally formulated by the philosopher Otto Friedrich Bollnow (1903–1991) as a pedagogical idea, his notion of *Begegnung* (encounter) emphasized the discontinuous, unforeseeable, and existentially transformative aspect of the educational process. This concept has in the meantime been further refined and developed by contemporary critical pedagogy proponents (Natalier 2015). The educational encounter is always immersed within the larger society and is always relational with respect to the individual educators and students. In this Socratic and dialogical “problem-posing pedagogy” as it has been called by Paulo Freire (2005), participants may find themselves in a situation in which they come to question their most ingrained and deepest beliefs. This risky and unpredictable enterprise may result in raising uncomfortable existential challenges for all who participate in it, including the educator herself. Nevertheless, the responsibility of the educator is to constantly serve as a guide in the process of formation of each participant as an autonomous and ethical individual. The result of such an “encounter” is necessarily transformative for the individual and potentially for the society at large. A genuine educational encounter is therefore irreducibly unique, and its effects are literally immeasurable. These difficult encounters and the fleetingly “teachable” moments which unpredictably arise within them are hard enough to come by in a regular classroom setting so one can imagine how much more difficult it would be to attain in an online setting (Smith 2013). Even the more interactive forms of video conferencing cannot capture the subtle nuances of conventional face-to-face interaction between the teacher and the students and between the

students among themselves. The cameras on computers or gadgets do not allow for genuine “eye contact” (Han 2013). Bodily gestures, meaningful postures, and facial expressions are more difficult to sense and interpret in an online environment with several students in a class. However, even though face-to-face education may remain the aspiration, as well as remain indispensable for many disciplines, the progressive educator should not renege on her responsibility to try to implement progressive pedagogy through the means available to her online. Ideally, noncommercial, open-source, and home-grown online education platforms and tools should give the progressive educator an opportunity to establish an educational relationship with students who may not otherwise be present in the classroom because of geographical, social, psychological, physical, financial and other barriers.

If, as they say, there is no complete turning back possible, if and when the pandemic ends, we should at least ensure that the worst of possible outcomes for Philippine education does not come to pass. Though online and face-to-face education may be qualitatively different, one of our pressing tasks as progressive educators is now to find and discover the equally emancipatory potentials in online education in a fully experimental spirit. Contrary to certain exaggerated enthusiasms from some corners, it is quite certain that a negotiated and relatively stable balance between online and face-to-face modes will be achieved in the near future. This situation introduces a new field of educational exploration, discovery, and contestation. We must rise to the challenge and learn to resist the hardening coarticulation of current approaches to online education with neoliberal educational reforms (Baltodano 2012; Burns 2020).

In the first place, academic unions, faculty associations, and representative bodies should negotiate for continuous institutional support and incentives for developing online courses, fostering preparedness and skills, while ensuring that faculty, staff, and

students are supplied with the necessary equipment and devices as well as adequate connectivity. Legal measures should be put in place to safeguard the full control and copyright of faculty over the digitized course materials they produce, or, where applicable, these should remain freely available as open educational resources in the public domain. The managerial assault on tenure should be resisted in the new digital educational environment. Moreover, the rights and welfare of contractual academic and non-academic staff should be protected in the face of potential layoffs and rampant casualization. Learning Management Systems (LMS) and, in particular, all initiatives in the area of educational automation should pass through institutionalized processes of discussion, evaluation, and approval in collegial faculty, staff, and student bodies (Feenberg 2015). The development of software and other technologies used in online education as well as the determination of the “technical codes” (Hamilton et al. 2005) which articulate the implicit pedagogical assumptions and which serve as the basis for the design of educational software should be within the direct control and purview of the academic community. The potential use of such software for surveillance and control of faculty and staff labor by educational managers should not be allowed. These are some of the reasons why the in-house development of open-source LMS is preferred over purchasing limited licenses from commercial non-opensource, third-party providers. Educational technologies should be designed from the ground up to respect and encourage faculty autonomy and academic freedom, and to uphold the spirit of experimentation and indeterminacy of the educational encounter.

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