



Standardized assessment: a business in the time of cognitive capitalism

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Summary

Education is no stranger to the changes that are shaping the system of world capitalism. For those betting on the digital information and knowledge economies, it is seen as a gold mine for cognitive capitalism. Standardized assessments drive these economies by creating a need for training, consultancy and advisory services and by allowing the flow of labour competencies from the private sector to the public and redirecting public resources back into the business world.

Over the last few years, we have gone through substantial changes that have impacted the means by which capitalism reproduces itself and a new type of business model has soared to the top of wealth accumulation. Suddenly the owners of on-line sales companies such as “Amazon.com”, social network managers like “Facebook”, and financial on-line software consultants, like “Bloomberg LP” and “Oracle”, are competing against traditional companies to occupy the top positions amongst the wealthiest people on the planet (Forbes, 2016).

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This new economy uses digitalization, knowledge, information, communication and innovation as the foundations of its development, all of which are “abstract”, intangible and immaterial products that have become indispensable to invigorating the world system of our time. Some have named it cognitive capitalism.

Digital economies have disrupted the groundwork of company organization, productive units, and the trading of goods. For instance, we have witnessed a significant growth in pyramid-based companies, direct sales networks and on-line sales.

But these radical economic transformations also disturb, in every possible way, the very make-up and functioning of the state, the corporate council that manages it, and the orientation of state policies. Clearly education policy and the national system in which it is rooted are not exempt from the changes.

Behind each pawn on the chessboard of public educational institutions are the private interests of cognitive capital moguls. Telecommunication, cultural and information and communication technology corporations, through the Mexican faces of transnational companies like Telcel, Televisa and Cinépolis, have created a business association called “Mexicanos Primero” (Mexicans First) to change the governance and stewardship of the education system.

These economic powers of cognitive capitalism have demanded a complete re-engineering of education. That is the only possible explanation for why the “diamond saleslady” of Amway, the direct sales company, was appointed as the head of the National Coordination of Teachers’ Professional Services, the institution responsible for the training of teachers. (Navarro, Miss Amway y la evaluación universal, 2012). She was appointed despite the fact that she has no academic experience worth mentioning, either in research or teaching. However, she is not the only one. The Ministry of Education is full of people from the corporate sector whose business is private education.

In the redesign of educational systems, standardized assessment has been a transversal element in all aspects,

depicted both as an end as well as a means to achieving business quality. Under the shelter of privatized assessment, the companies of cognitive capitalism have made it their business to sell useless data, figures, information and consulting services, at the cost of millions paid for by public funds and without any real success in their ultimate purpose. They present increasingly gloomier scenarios so that later, they can sell even more barren standards and assessment instruments to “improve” the quality of education. (Aboites, 2016)¹.

These assessments also bring disorganized and depoliticized digital, linguistic and organizational competencies that were originally created for private schools into the public institutions. Now for the sake of globalization, they will be displacing traditional teaching content, especially the ones related to the defense of public interest, community development and the protection of the most vulnerable social classes.

In Mexico, the political spokespeople for the cognitive economy have reached such a level of cynicism that they actually defend the idea that anybody can be a teacher, as long as they are approved by the fetish of standardized assessment.² Thus, by offering the unbound possibility of becoming a teacher in a country where there is a high level of unemployment amongst university graduates (INEGI, 2016), the intention is obviously to cheapen and undermine the professional opportunities of well-educated teachers in this competition.

Achieving the standards of teacher evaluation proposed by the private consultants to the government implies the displacement of the educational or pedagogical dimension of teaching. In its place, the acquisition of labor competencies would be promoted for the technical and digitalized handling of education. In other

1. In almost 40 years of Mexican liberalism, 120 million standardized tests have been applied, and the results show no improvement whatsoever.

2. On the website of the Coordinación del Servicio Profesional Docente, the federal entities were instructed to issue open calls for the Public Teaching Service positions not only for Teacher Training Institutes, but to all public and private universities. : http://servicioprofesionaldocente.sep.gob.mx/ba/ingreso_2016/ordinaria/

words, the strategic initial training of teachers would be substituted by a focalized training on the managerial needs of a school.

Once again, it is the business people of the digital, information and knowledge economies who appear with a myriad of on-line courses and who, because they have access to privileged information from the public sector, can design training courses with practice similar to the standardized tests.



In our country, private education corporations, such as Tecnológico de Monterrey, have been able to get a huge amount of funding from the federal government for the ongoing training of teachers who were assessed as “insufficient”, as well as to prepare them for future performance assessments. However those million-dollar contracts are granted only to their affiliated private schools and not to public schools (Navarro, La conexión regia de la reforma educativa, 2016).

Because of the deep and frenzied transformations in the capitalist system, those spaces where learning and knowledge creation were tied to the ideological, cultural and political control of the ruling classes are now seen as an opportunity for profit.

In this scenario, education is undoubtedly part of the machinery of what is now called cognitive capitalism. Clearly it is still one of the fundamental tools for the ideological reproduction of the system, but its organizational logic, as well as its goals, have acquired the shape of the current economic configuration.

In every region of the world there is a growing concern that schools as we once knew them, both the actual structures and the physical interaction between people, will be buried underneath the complex networks, platforms and structures that make up the digitalization of social relationships and growing virtual education.

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The most evil of the intentions behind the assessment of teachers, within the framework of cognitive economics and the complete digitalization of the school environment, **is the elimination of teachers by substituting human participation in educational processes** with technological hardware that only requires maintenance, not labor rights.
