

Education Technology

as a Trojan Horse for Privatization

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Favorite words of technology entrepreneurs are “break,” “disruptive innovation” and “creative destruction.” For example, Uber replaces taxis; Spotify breaks owning music collections; and, Amazon hopes to creatively destroy personal shopping for groceries as it already has for everything from books to appliances to almost any commodity.

The Holy Grail of education technology entrepreneurs is to be the Uber of education - to become the platform that disrupts traditional face-to-face education and replaces it with a technology that dominates learning. Since this search for the singular platform is being carried out in capitalist economies, profit is the major end, rather than seeking solutions to the inequalities exacerbated by the domination of monopolies in day-to-day, technology-driven living. The major technology corporations are in a race to become the basic education platform.

Education technology has developed in ways that reinforce individualization within a competitive en-

vironment, responding to and reinforcing neo-liberal patterns, creating the neo-liberal person. Widespread adoption of education built on this kind of individualization produces a form of privatization within the public education system, one that is based on preparing students for employment in a technological, corporate-dominated system, not on preparing them for citizenship as a collective responsibility.

This presents challenges for critical educators who recognize that ignoring technology is not an option, but who want to find or create space for alternative approaches that support social justice and pursue pedagogy based on critical and social constructivist approaches.

Developing critical alternatives requires first an analysis of the approaches currently being taken by education technology entrepreneurs, then seeking spaces within these technologies that can be used to promote social goals, not just private, individual gain. This article is only a beginning of that type of analysis.

The current education technology landscape falls into at least four different strategies: digital content, learning management systems, education apps, and universal platforms.

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Providing content digitally

One system that is being disrupted is textbooks. Historically, this print technology has dominated in providing content in schools, but the challenge now is what will replace the physical, hard-copy textbook.

The textbook industry as content-providers has been going through consolidation, leaving only two major content-providers of the textbook publisher type in the English-speaking world—the British transnational Pearson PLC and the US-based McGraw-Hill. Pearson has adopted a strategy of offering content digitally and on a global basis as a way of surviving in the new context. However, it has not been entirely successful. The corporation has been losing money to such an extent that it recently had to sell off other forms of publishing--the *Economist* magazine, and its book publishing arm, Penguin Random House.

One of the potential challenges to the Pearson model is open publishing. Groups of authors join together to develop online resources for classroom use. They may be offered at a small cost (teacherspayteachers.com) or made available under a Creative Commons license to anyone who wants to use them in teaching. A major part of the cost of the print textbook is not payments to authors, but the marketing and distribution. Digital distribution reduces the entry costs to compete with the traditional textbook publishers.

Learning Management Systems (LMS)

Learning Management Systems are online versions of the structure of classroom education. They have content loaded onto them; they have areas for discussion, both with a teacher and with other students; they include the ability to give tests to the student; and they provide the capacity to report, both marks and other data. LMSs are used extensively in online learning, but also in face-to-face classrooms, particularly in “blended learning,” a combination of in person and online learning.

As in other areas of technology, many systems were developed, but only a few businesses survive as smaller ones are bought out and consolidated into fewer, near monopoly corporations. The major LMSs still standing are Blackboard and Canvas, with Desire2Learn, a Canadian LMS with a narrower market reach. One open source system, free to use, is Moodle, which has a large user-base.

Interestingly, Pearson sold its LMS, saying that they only work effectively on desktop or laptop computers, not on smart phones. The future market, they say, is in smartphones as billions of people have access, but many fewer have desktops or laptops. For mobiles, Pearson says, apps that have a specific purpose will dominate.

Education Apps

Thousands of apps for education have already been created. Development costs are often covered by venture capitalists. They invest in development of these apps, with the hope that future profits based on a particular app will pay off with a return on investment when it captures a significant number of users. In many cases, the return is based on the data about the teachers and students using the app that is then turned in to revenue. It is the users who are the source of profits when data is sold.

An example of one of these apps is *FreshGrade*, an e-portfolio system developed in British Columbia, Canada. The student and teacher upload work being done by the student, particularly photos, videos and audio. The parent has access to the e-portfolio of their child. The claim for these portfolio systems is that they engage parents by giving more access to what their child is doing in school.

Special purpose apps have been a hot item in the education technology area, with education app venture capital investments of more than \$4 billion in 2015 and about half that in 2016.



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Universal platforms—Google Suite, Microsoft Office 365 Education and Facebook

The behemoths of technology don't require any venture capital for their ventures into education technology. They have huge research sections that can work on projects without announcing them to anyone until they are ready.

The descriptor "universal platforms" reflects that they are a base on which many different elements can be built. They are not intending to develop content, expecting others will do that and find it convenient to use their platform as a way of making it available to others, bringing both creators and users of content into their environment. They prosper when they are the go-to place for any online activity. Education is attractive because it's a mass of folks--more than 30 million teachers and hundreds of millions of students globally - and Google, Microsoft and Facebook all have global reach.

This description of Google's G Suite makes clear the comprehensive make up of the platform that is on offer:

G Suite is a package of cloud-based services that can provide your company or school with a whole new way to work together online—not just using email and chat, but over video conferences, social media, real-time document collaborations, and more....You and your team can begin using Gmail, Calendar, Drive, and other core G Suite services, as well as additional services like Google+, Hangouts, Blogger and more.

Google's strategy for attracting teachers is to use a friend and collaborator approach. It offers training to selected teachers who then encourage colleagues and their districts to adopt G Suite. These teachers offer (often free) workshops for teachers, encouraging the expanded use of G Suite.

Google presented itself as an education platform before Microsoft moved in to compete. Its move to focus on cloud-based services is part of its strategy for competing to be **the** platform for education services.



Illustration: Manrique. Contralínea

Microsoft has announced that teachers and students can use “Office 365 Education” for free. It also offers a free online course for teachers to introduce them to Microsoft education services. Preparing students as workers is made clear when its sales pitch to teachers says it “allows students to create products as if they were already in the workforce.”

Not surprisingly, Facebook is not to be left out. The Chan Zuckerberg Initiative has been supplied with \$45 billion for projects that include education. Facebook is also developing a platform for online education.

Understanding corporate influence on education through education technology

A *New York Times* report identified the nature of the Trojan Horse inserted into public education:

The involvement by some of the wealthiest and most influential titans of the 21st century amounts to a singular experiment in education, with millions of students serving as de facto beta testers for their ideas. Some tech leaders believe that applying an engineering mind-set can improve just about any system, and that their business acumen qualifies them to rethink American education. (“The Silicon Valley Billionaires

Remaking America’s Schools by Natasha Singer,” NYT, June 6, 2017)

Historically, the state has had the primary role in defining the purpose and content of education. Edtech corporations are now pushing the state aside, bringing corporate purposes directly into the classroom -an often invisible shift in power. The aim of these technological forms of privatization is not to create private schools. Rather, they seek profits by integrating into public education. Those seeking to dominate platforms take the longer view on profits, and hope to train students to continue to use their platform when they move into life and work after school.

Audrey Watters, a researcher who tracks corporate and foundation influence in education through technology says of corporately funded foundations delving into education--and it applies to the corporations whose profits have built the foundations - “These extra-governmental organizations have an inordinate influence on politics and policies.”

2. To develop a deeper understanding of the influence of foundations and of corporations on education technology, follow Audrey Watter’s reports published on hackededucation.com.