Democracy and Computerized Higher Education

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Disciplines
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Comments
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DEMOCRACY AND COMPUTERIZED HIGHER EDUCATION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Abstract: This paper examines the relationship between computerized higher education and democracy. Such reflection is especially relevant given the approaching 150th anniversary of public land-grant universities that made higher education broadly available to those of modest means. We first review the historic role land grant universities in American democracy and their alignment with John Dewey’s influential writings about participative democracy. We consider how participative democracy is challenged by omnipresent information technology and the passive “society of spectacle” (De Bord 1967) that it creates. We examine how computers can reinforce or undermine student passivity. We demonstrate our own computer-enhanced inquiry into political representation designed to force students out of a spectator role and encourage active inquiry and experimentation with participative democracy that is consistent with the land-grant ethos.

DEMOCRACY IN EDUCATION AND LAND GRANT UNIVERSITIES

Higher education in the United States always played an important role in shaping political democracy, but until the mid-19th century few educational institutions were focused explicitly upon meeting the needs of a growing democracy. Early colleges trained ministers, lawyers and other professionals, but many schools functioned more as status markers for elites, a kind of finishing school for young men of privilege. The curriculum revolved around archaic languages and literatures but relatively little practical content. Public colleges and universities, especially the land-grant colleges authorized in the 1860s by the Morrill Act, made a practical, useful — but still liberal arts oriented — education available to working classes and others of modest means. Public colleges ensured that higher learning was not concentrated in an already-well-heeled, already-educated elite, enabling greater upward mobility and meritocratic ascendance (Brubacher and Rudy 1997). The inclusion of liberal arts education in public universities was important, for it signaled that public universities would not only train students in industrial arts but also prepare an informed citizenry capable of forming self-governing communities with sufficient political skills to manage deliberative situations, monitor voting, implement solutions and track effectiveness.

Late 19th and early 20th century social change -- rapid urbanization, industrial development, wild business cycles, desperate depressions and fomenting social movements — made transparent the need for increased planning, organization and active management of social life. Newly-created land grant colleges and public universities became locations for rapidly growing pragmatic, reform-oriented research and teaching. New graduate programs in the social sciences developed the disciplines of sociology, political science, economics, psychology and anthropology and trained professors who kept university research and teaching in touch with democratic politics and social reforms (Ross 1969[1942]). By the fin de siècle, American public universities seemed destined to embody John Dewey’s instrumentalism, driven by open-ended scientific thinking and reflexive, experimental social practice.

Throughout the 20th century, American universities increased in size and complexity, training generations of students to staff and manage bureaucratic organizations in government, industry and the military. The university’s growth brought specialization, professionalization and bureaucratization of the disciplines which increasingly became dominated by a “pure science” empiricism cut off from practical, democratic reform movements. Universities functioned like giant intellectual machines whose research output, mostly funded by government agencies and foundations, filled academic journals and served as an almost seamless extension of public administration.

The institutional development of American universities obscured their democratic mission. By the 1990s, higher education was often ritualistically-conducted and confined within narrowly-specialized and heavily self-referential subfields increasingly remote from everyday experiences. Courses often “surveyed” a field or introduced students to cutting edge research that was often little more than a technical extension of other people’s already published work. University research reports, peer-reviewed and published in academic journals aimed only at other technicians, became inaccessible to people seeking answers to pressing social problems. University teaching
became an adjunct activity to the research machine. The democratic mission of the university was troubled long before computers and information technology were integrated into teaching. We have found that far from undermining the democratic educational ethos, computerized higher education is critical to its restoration. In the next section we consider the writings of John Dewey on the relationship between democracy and education.

JOHN DEWELL: EDUCATION AND PARTICIPATIVE DEMOCRACY

Note that Dewey was writing in the emerging world of media: print journalism primarily. It is clear from his opposition to the teaching of romantic stories, folk and fairy tales, entertaining literature, etc. (sentimentality without educative purpose) that he would have been critical of much of information and entertainment. Dewey’s basic ideas regarding the relationship between participative democracy and:

1) Individual freedom and participative democracy are primary values in Dewey’s work: he recognizes that the evolution of modernity, which is being fueled by an economic system (the industrial order), should not be elevated to an ideal end. Rather, a democratic order of self-directing individuals within cooperative communities and progressive society becomes an end. Capitalism remains a mechanism to provision democratic society, it is modernity’s fuel rather than modernity itself.

2) Dewey’s educational philosophy stressed the elimination of boundaries separating schools and society so that life and learning inside the classroom would be coextensive and intimately connected with life outside the classroom. Dewey encouraged students to think of educational thinking and activities as controlled versions of real living, rather than an artificial world unto itself, with its own rules and processes. Educational activity that occurred inside schools but rarely appeared in real life, like diagramming sentences or learning Latin grammar, was to be minimized to promote “...continuity of the classroom mental activity with that of other normal experience” (Dewey 1964: 322). Educators often forget to prepare students for life, instead preparing them for the next step upward in the educational system. Hence, preschoolers are prepared for primary school, which prepares them for secondary school, which prepares them for college, which prepares them for graduate school, which prepares them to pursue a doctorate. Education becomes a perpetual motion machine of graded preparation that so forestalls accommodation to living that it never actually arrives. Each major advance in education, from primary to secondary, secondary to post-secondary, undergraduate to graduate, master’s to Ph.D., recapitulates the problem of relevance. Dewey argues that educators should encourage students to live within and dedicate themselves to learning what is necessary for life within a community (Dewey 1964: 324). To Dewey, classroom learning must be conceived of as a continuing reconstruction of experience.

3) Critique of passivity in education is also central to Dewey. Instrumental action, not abstract or impractical ideas, should dominate educational activity, just as action dominates life. Dewey expressly criticized the ineffectiveness of educational activity that results from spectatorship, when “the child is thrown into a passive, receptive or absorbing attitude” (Dewey 1964: 332).

4) Inquiry, essentially the scientific method applied to everyday problem-solving, as a mechanism for communities and individuals to conceive innovative solutions to the unprecedented problems of modern living. Conventional, pre-programmed definitions of problems and traditional, readymade solutions are often inappropriate, dysfunctional or even inapplicable in the rapidly evolving world of modernity. In modern society, evolving modernity requires adaptive, rational problem-definition, diagnosis and experimentation aimed to discover resolutions that “work when tried.”

5) Educatixe experience should directly address an individual’s and community’s interests. Not economic interests (essentially party interests), but spontaneous involvement in activity… things that occupy your thoughts and activity unbidden. Educatixe interests are defined by the mental territory that the student occupies unplanned. Working against this is suicidal, since these are matters that the individual must resolve in order to live: harnessing these interests is essential to good education.
6) Educational institutions are critical to democracy because they serve as centers of community problem solving, experimentation and social action. They also serve as the training institution for the rules of inquiry and democratic social action, teaching the scientific method of inquiry, rules of order and conduct in deliberative democratic meetings, and active application of knowledge to problem solving. To Dewey, democratic society does not occur without education in democratic participation. Participative democracy, once established in schools, would become the dominant mode of relating in modern life, not only in political assemblies, but in intimate relationships, families, classrooms, congregations, neighborhoods. Dewey's own laboratory school was an exemplar here, but progressive public schools and land grant public universities of the 20th century were likely close approximations/carriers of Deweyian educational ideas.

THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE AND DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

Guy DeBord (1967) argued that we live in a "society of spectacle." Satellite and cable television that provides perpetual programming on hundreds of channels, omnipresent DVD and VCR's that enable on-demand viewing and time-shifting of virtually any television program or film, high-speed Internet with powerful new video and image-based search technology (YouTube and Flickr, for example) and even images on portable devices such as video iPods have created a media-saturated world. Already, time-use studies consistently report that young people spend the bulk of their life - two-thirds of their waking hours in a recent Ball State study - jacked into media rather than (or in addition to) interacting with human beings (Lamb 2005).

To summarize Debord's (1967) argument, in the society of the spectacle, *administered experience* has replaced spontaneous living. Passive spectatorship of prepackaged entertainment and information becomes normative and citizens relate to each other only indirectly when sharing a status as spectators of same spectacle. The primary preoccupation of consciousness is to the spectacle itself rather than to life. Fatalism replaces fatefulness as spectators lose capacity to have significant influence upon the outcome of the events to which they attend. Spectators lose the capacity to understand and react to cause and effect relationships and are unable to directly forecast consequences of different lines of action. Within a spectacle, the outcomes are either predetermined (as in movies, plays, television programs), deeply structured (games, sports, politics). Even when spectators have some active control over outcomes of a spectacle (like Mardi Gras or a video game) these outcomes are not causally linked to other spectacles or to life.

Much of Debord's (1967) argument highlighted the increasing dominance of the spectator role - passive, silent, essentially-inert - in human social life. As attention is devoted to spectacles, the human capacity to actively engage in social life is lost and the remnants of social life that remain are often focused on shared media consumption. Critically for educators, young people in our classes are essentially *student-spectators*, socialized to passively absorb the simulated worlds (dramas, video games, sports) that appear on their glowing screens. Educational institutions are reformulated to build spectatorship. Active learning and living that foster mastery of one's environment, command of self and development of practical skills and potency are replaced with passive absorption of materials, information that is prepackaged and fully administered. Parents encourage/allow children's consumption of media and entertainment, fitting them for the later bit of spectacular society. Schools encourage students to assume passive, audience role in classes, in assemblies, in extra-curricular activities and sporting events. Separation of planning and execution in schools becomes total: superiors in a hierarchy plan (textbook publishers, state curriculum designers, principals), middling people execute (teachers and their assistants), and subordinates passively absorb (students) or respond in non-spontaneous way to prepackaged materials.

As global capitalism expanded in the very late 20th century, Debord (1990) viewed the emergence of an *integrated spectacle* as economic, political and religious imagery welded into a seamless, mutually reinforcing environment. Like earlier integrated spectacles, such as that found in high medieval Christendom, church, state and society are mutually reinforced and supporting in their shared iconography and inter-penetrated ceremonies. The contemporary integrated spectacle is more diffuse, constituted by the sum total of far-flung media presentations, entertainment, tourism, political advertising, consumer advertising, etc., all of which is dominated by the political economy of late capitalism (Debord 1990). In very recent years, the neo-liberal ethos of that dominated the integrated spectacle in the late 20th century has expanded to incorporate neo-conservative political themes: traditional religious symbolism...
and discourse, blood-and-soil nationalism, and imperial militarism are now frequently found in diffused events and media presentations (NASCAR races, for instance). In the integrated spectacle, aggressive capitalism becomes self-legitimating, consumption and advertising support the political order, political spectacle supports the economic order and religion supports them both. Democracy is reduced to a consumer choice of “themed environments” and candidates packaged as products. In the integrated spectacle, nominally democratic elections are covered as geographically diffused, multi-episodic sporting events, with greater attention paid to surface appearances and shallow strategies than to emergent issues of the underlying population. Such passive spectatorship is the antithesis of participative democracy.

The integrated spectacle always had an ambivalent relationship to activities within land grant universities. Family and consumer sciences often directly linked to spectacle of consumption, advertising, design, fashion. Collegiate athletics, colleges of business, engineering, agriculture: all linked in tightly to evolving capitalist and industrial order and hence all linked into the spectacle.

Decreased Fatefulness and “dramatic tension” reduces drive to learn and eliminates motive for sustained involvement that might give purpose to learning. Without some sense of mastery over one’s life, or at least a sense of potential mastery over the direction of living, resignation and ritualistic completion of tasks with low psychic involvement and investment.

We distinguish between computer-delivered courses (distance learning classes accessed by remote enrollees via computer) and computer-enhanced courses that meet in a classroom with a traditional “live” teacher. In our judgment, based upon several years of designing and offering distance-learning classes, democratic education is particularly difficult to achieve via computer-delivered courses. Like the joke regarding wheelbarrows, the problem is not the content but the form, which reinforces spectatorship and precludes most forms of active engagement.

**COMPUTERIZED HIGHER EDUCATION: AIDS TO DEMOCRACY**

Proponents of computerized higher education, including those who advocate for and provide computer-delivered courses, argue that computerized distance-learning helps universities fulfill their democratic mission. Distance learning provides expanded access to education, so that students geographically dispersed can participate in university learning. Part-time students with careers and families can flexibly self-select the time, location and duration of study. Many other democratic advantages follow from the enhanced multi-media capabilities of computerized higher education. Since multi-media is often a more efficient and accessible way to communicate ideas and images, computerized education should better spur imagination, increase psychic involvement and student interest, increase student retention. The power of multi-media should assist the comprehension of diverse student populations (especially those who are not in text-rich environments). Multi-media’s power should also allow educators to increase the sophistication and expand the range of topics covered.

Dewey was critical of artificial efforts to engage student interest in educational activities that are (mostly) valueless. If educators allow students to pursue educative activities (those that enhance their capacity to live their lives right now, solve problems that are immediately before them and their community), artificial stimulants will be unnecessary. Life presents problems that already fully engage our consciousness and activity: we can not help but be spontaneously caught up in them. Solving such problems is educative, and it is also the central activity of life. Rather than struggling to capture attention or limit distraction in the pursuit of hollow schoolwork, Dewey suggests that educators engage themselves and their students in real-world problem-solving.

Multi-media capability often enhances symbolic learning and especially enhances the depth of imaginative learning, improving student’s capacity to see the relationship between concepts we are trying to teach and experience. We have found it possible to thicken student’s imagination about a wide array of topics (from bureaucracy to fascism to utopian communes) by exploiting computerized information technology in class, sometimes on-the-fly with quick searches of Google and YouTube to find visual and auditory back-up when student comprehension fails. Sometimes we locate these materials after class and email them to students to view before the next class meeting. The rapid, flexible access to historical, comparative and contemporary visual materials has dramatic possibilities to increase student comprehension.
There are also surface negatives to computerized higher education and the democratic mission of universities: computerized education further immerses student consciousness in the spectacle, with eyes focused upon glowing screens and ears resonating with layered electronic sound. The consumption of spectacles, even educative ones, is inherently isolating. As the spectacle takes over larger portions of human life, we recognize that the college classroom is one of the few remaining sites where actual living human beings are brought together in co-presence to participate in unpaid problem-solving activity (learning). But, from our perspective, the main threat that computerized education poses to the democratic mission of universities is the reinforcement of the passivity inherent in the spectator role. This is true of both computer delivered and computer enhanced courses. The active, spontaneous, uncontrolled engagement with the minds of professors and fellow students ceases: education consists of sitting in front of another glowing screen, indistinguishable from the rest of spectacular living.

We have had the same experience as many other educators: sometimes the best way to capture student attention is to show a film or video in class. Clearly, students are comfortable with the passivity and spectatorship of film-watching: students who are nervous and tense when asked to participate in a discussion relax when watching a film. We have seen these students increase their participation and involvement in discussions when talking about the film afterwards because this is a primary way that they relate to the others: talking about media. We have found that this is sometimes the best way to get students to “break the fourth wall” of the class, to begin talking to other students about their shared (vicarious, mediated) experience.

We have seen a tremendous increase in the arsenal of information and computer technology that students bring with them into the classroom. Cellphones, text-messaging, laptops (with video games, Facebook), and Ipods are omnipresent in our classrooms. While some professors (including us at times) have banned the use of these devices in class, returning students temporarily and artificially to a simpler technology-free world, we ultimately view this approach as self-defeating. The proliferation of personal technology will only increase in coming years and it is already difficult to be considered a respectable, competent adult without the capacity to split one’s attention among several devices at once while maintaining a conversation. The colonization of consciousness by competing information technologies habituates us to the spectator role and decreases our capacity to concentrate on engaged social activity with others. The total percentage of social contact that is mediated through computers and information technology is increasing and the percentage consumed by focused face-to-face interaction declining.

Because students and citizens are living in media-saturated worlds, we are certain that democratic higher education can no longer be accomplished without heavy integration of computers and information technology. In the same way that it is impossible to prepare students for a text-based world without teaching them to read and write, so too is it impossible to prepare our students today without teaching them to think and act critically about and through computers. The classic book, “Fine Arts of Propaganda” by Alfred McClung Lee, sought to undermine the effectiveness of propaganda by revealing how it is constructed and how it works (simply by revealing that it is intentionally constructed to mislead through emotional manipulation and to prevent rational consideration of cause effect relationships and consequences). Even highly complicated, powerful spectacles can be successfully analyzed by breaking them down into their constituent, basic propaganda techniques (name-calling, glittering generality, card-stacking, “big lie,” etc.). This essentially textual critique is best augmented with criticism of manipulative emotional framing within the visual arts.

NEGATION OF THE SPECTACLE AND THE CRITIQUE OF PASSIVITY:

We feel that it is important public land-grant university in furthering the goals and objectives of a self-managed society of relative equals. Actually teach or at least point to the basics of participative democracy, inquiry, scientific reasoning, etc. This sets up a kind of ideal against which really-existing politics and society can be measured. In our classes, we have used computerized information technology to help students understand weaknesses of our current system of political representation through illustrative examples of political representation from a) history, b) other countries and c) political theory.

Historical political representation is illustrated in the early modern estates-general. Computer-generated graphics are used to highlight how local assemblies practiced direct democracy to deliberate upon and compile “lists of
grievances," how elections were used to pare down these lists and to select representatives to carry the lists to regional and national assemblies, how strict mandates operated to ensure that elected representatives complied with the instructions of their constituents, etc. Contemporary political elections in the U.S., by contrast, lack direct participation, clear mandates and the capacity to enforce representative behavior. Comparative political representation is illustrated in European parliaments. Computer-generated graphics reveal the structure and functioning of multi-party systems, with high rates of voter turnout, close identification of constituents with political parties, and proportional representation. These are contrasted to the two-party, winner-take-all electoral system in the contemporary U.S. that has low rates of voter turnout and low levels of identification of constituents with political parties. Political representation in political theory is illustrated with Emile Durkheim's influential recommendation to cease representation based upon geographic districts, which made sense in traditional, mostly-agricultural society but makes little sense in a modern, industrial capitalist society. Durkheim argued that representation should be based upon one's professional affiliation (doctor, lawyer, accountant), industrial employment (auto worker, retail worker) or organizational membership (homemakers). Rather than an assembly of representatives of geographic districts, parliament would be an assembly of the representatives of the major professions, industries and employment groupings in society. Such "organic" representation would enable rational politics of real, visible interest rather than simulated propaganda, close identification of voter with their representative, clarification of mandates and the capacity to discipline representatives who did not follow constituent instructions. Durkheim's ideas are used to critique contemporary representation in the U.S., including the artificial construction of gerrymandered districts and the impossibility of discovering coherent interests of those who share a voting district (and hence a representative) but little else. Students are encouraged to imagine how computer-saturated society might incorporate reforms of representation: a) use computers to call, organize and report upon local assemblies that generate lists of grievances, elect representatives and monitor their activity, b) use computers to compare quality of life measures of countries with parliamentary systems with those of the U.S., c) Use computers and computer technicians to construct an adequate yet parsimonious system of "organic representation" that would reflect changes in the industrial system.

Resolved: Computerized Education is essential to move from the Society of the Spectacle to Participative Democracy. Those who wish to promote democracy in education MUST embrace computer enhancements to effectively reach student spectators. The dynamism, visual power and flexible content of computer-enhanced education increases a professor's ability to overcome the resignation and passivity of the student spectators who appear in our classes. With care, we have been able to use computer-constructed and disseminated content to clarify thinking about issues of democratic process and to expose students to Dewey's teaching about the role of inquiry in modern life, encouraging them to see the value of experimentation and an instrumental, "works when tried," standard of judgment when assessing political initiatives. Democracy's future requires that we understand the post-textual world of our students. Educators should seek to negate the power of the society of the spectacle, to clarify the principles and purposes of democratic society and to encourage practical, experimental thinking about political reforms that are possible given computer technology.

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