Chapter 5
A Cyber-Apple for the Teacher:
A Case Study of Anti-Hegemonic Adult Education Practices in a Cyber-Education Environment

Mark Federman
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada

Marilyn Laiken
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In an age seemingly defined by near-ubiquitous access to Internet-based communication, there is little wonder that adult educators are turning to online, distance education as a means to reach their participants. In the traditional academy, post-secondary institutions increasingly include online courses and programs as elements, or comprising the entirety, of both undergraduate and graduate degrees (Allen & Seaman, 2006). Even in the realm of non-formal adult education, "hacktivism[1]" has become one of the most effective mechanisms through which engagement for social change – especially on a global scale – occurs (Day, 2004; Ganesh, Zoller & Cheney, 2005). Ironically, rather than truly integrating the philosophy of emancipatory and transformative adult education, cyber-education environments as typically implemented throughout the academy, overwhelmingly – if unwittingly – reproduce and reinforce the hegemony of traditional teacher-pupil power relations. By examining the mechanism of hegemony, and its pervasive presence in contemporary pedagogical technologies, this chapter will demonstrate how organized power is maintained through these mechanisms. In contrast, a case will be offered that demonstrates how engaged intellectuals can reconstruct the cyber-education environment in order to challenge the pretensions of entrenched academic power, and manifest adult education principles. In particular, the case will explore how the many years of research on how adults learn can be applied with the use of technology, so that the cyber learning milieu is as dynamic, personal and collaborative as the physical presence classroom context can be in the hands of a skilled adult educator.

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THE RISE OF CYBER-EDUCATION

Online[2], distance education has grown to comprise a significant fraction of post-secondary, institutional education. In a survey of 2,200 post-secondary institutions in the United States for the academic year 2005-2006 (Allen & Seaman, 2006), 3.2 million students were taking at least one online course. This represents approximately 15% to 20% of total enrolment, a 39% growth year-over-year – more than double the number added in the previous year. Almost all (96%) of large institutions, defined as having more than 15,000 enrolled students, offer online courses, with two-thirds of them offering at least one fully online degree program. Among institutions offering graduate-level, research-oriented degrees, more than 80% have online offerings.

With online courses and degrees gaining credibility and acceptability among both faculty and employers (Allen & Seaman, 2006), it is not surprising that nearly 60% of post-secondary Chief Academic Officers consider that online distance education is not only important, but "critical" to the long-term strategy of their institution. The reasons for such a strategic emphasis are not difficult to fathom. Post-secondary (and especially graduate) enrolment is increasing among working adults in a societal environment that actively promotes so-called lifelong learning. Distance education enables learners to gain access to education and advanced degrees without significantly compromising income, thereby creating a potentially large, lucrative market. Additionally, institutions are no longer limited to geographically-bounded markets consisting of a local population proximate to the physical institution. Distance education programs offered online – what we refer to as *cyber-education* – create a potential student population from which to draw that is geographically unlimited (Hiltz & Turoff, 2005). Moreover, once the initial investment in technical infrastructure, instructor training, and course management templates has been made, the marginal financial and instructor-time cost for additional cyber-education courses and programs is no more than that for adding conventional face-to-face programs of equivalent quality (Allen & Seaman, 2006).

André Grace (1998) describes how, in the post-war period, the focus of adult education emphasized post-industrial skills, knowledge, and planning, particularly in scientific and technological areas. This instrumental focus diminished the relative importance of social and cultural education in favour of utilitarianism. Despite – or perhaps because of – a rhetoric that nominally values notions like the distinctive nature of the adult learner in an environment of self-directed, goal-oriented, "facilitated" learning, adult education as contextualized by utilitarian knowledge acquisition is inextricably linked with a knowledge hierarchy that is, not coincidentally, foundational for the traditional academy (Federman, 2005). However, such an instrumental practice represents not adult education, but a "counterfeit" of adult education practice, at least according to Thomas Heaney; that is:

Practices in which knowledge and skill are transferred, in which the assumed superior knowledge and skill of the educator dominate the learning environment, in which the task is to impart knowledge that is already given, and in which learning is assessed in relation to the normative expectations of others. (Baptiste & Heaney, 1996).

Heaney's description of the counterfeit version corresponds closely to the characteristics of utilitarian and instrumental "lifelong learning," that focuses on "worker performativity in a global economy in which knowledge is commodifed and information literacy is valued" (Grace, 2004, n.p.). Indeed, the discourse of lifelong learning as framed by Grace establishes a normative expectation throughout contemporary society that would tend to favour cyber-education of a form that delivers commodified knowledge from an