

Chapter 19

The Right to Technology in Education

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ABSTRACT

Following the lead of geographer, David Harvey (2008), this chapter argues that many contemporary trends in the use of technology in higher education prevent the development of capacities for critical democratic citizenship. Too often, technology is deployed in a top-down fashion to shape student learning. Thus, to enhance the full emergence of students as active, engaged, critical citizens, it is crucial that they be granted access to the right to technology in education.

INTRODUCTION

Unlike many other chapters in this volume, which deal more with the specific challenges of creating, developing, and implementing educational technologies, this chapter attempts a much broader assessment of the place of technology in higher education contexts. It argues that, despite a growing rhetoric of student centeredness in higher education supported by burgeoning social networking technologies, the prime purpose of technology in education is still to control student

learning to meet definitive learning objectives. Formal education contexts remain dominated by a knowledge transmission/reception notion of learning that conceives of learners as passive vessels and educators (and, increasingly, education managers) as powerful possessors of privileged knowledge. Rather than being an open-ended, creative, and collaborative process, university educators see learning as a realm to be controlled to meet specific ends. For the most part, educational technologies serve educators to determine, shape and measure learning processes. Although students can possess advanced tools to aid them in internalizing new knowledge, for the most part,

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educational technologies remain in control of educators. My main contention in this paper is that to enhance the full emergence of students as active, engaged, critical citizens, it is crucial that they be granted, what following David Harvey (2008) I will term, the right to technology in education. This right assures them power to guard against imperial uses of technology over their learning and to use technology in creative and critical ways to participate in convivial and collaborative teaching/learning relations with others.

“THE RIGHT TO THE CITY” AND “THE RIGHT TO TECHNOLOGY IN EDUCATION”

In a recent article, geographer David Harvey (2008) argues that widespread liberal promotion of human rights has done little to address rising social inequalities throughout the world. Harvey is particularly concerned that contemporary trends in urban development are generating social spaces within which democratic decision-making is increasingly difficult. In a vicious circle, declining capacities for democratic participation creates even more opportunities for a powerful few to develop urban contexts that serve their narrow economic and political interests. Harvey contends that a first step towards seriously addressing human rights requires establishing what he calls “the right to the city.” Increasing democratic participation in urban development (both its material and social aspects), Harvey contends, is the only way to generate contexts that can support further democratic participation. For Harvey, struggling for “the right to the city” is a powerful first step towards building a democratic society capable of resisting the imperatives of a runaway global economic system.

Working the same vein as Harvey, I would like to suggest that, just as trends in urban development are making democratic engagement more difficult, many contemporary trends in the use

of technology in higher education are restricting opportunities for people to develop capacities for critical democratic citizenship. Just as in the case with urban development, when opportunities for critical learning decline, it reduces democracy in education. This, in turn, results in ever fewer resources for critique. In an escalating downward spiral, teachers and learners lose their capacity to resist an even more destructive intrusion of controlling forms of technology into the learning context. Only by establishing the right to technology in higher education, by reclaiming, refurbishing, and developing techniques for participating in collaborative learning can students and teachers acquire capacities for participating in robust, democratic learning contexts.

Following Harvey’s lead, in this chapter, I call on teachers and students to reclaim “the right to technology in higher education” as a way to build capacities for critical democratic citizenship. I argue that, although people can learn teaching techniques to interrupt, deflect, and control the learning of others in ways that benefit privileged social groups at the expense of the common good, they can also learn techniques that can enable them to participate in collaborative learning in communities of practice. Reclaiming the right to technology in education, I suggest, requires that we stop viewing teaching and learning as a process that allows one person to use technology to transfer knowledge into the mind of another person. It also requires us to refuse the view of technology as a body of freestanding and politically neutral tools, machines and processes that can be uncritically used in educational contexts. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it necessitates that we remain wary of ideological justifications of new technologies (especially social networking technologies) as enhancing capacities for critical democratic citizenship. While it may seem that these technologies support more student engagement, used uncritically, these educational technologies can exacerbate the individualization of learners and deepen cultural commodification.

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