Chapter 14

Social Networks, Online Technologies, and Virtual Learning:
(Re)Structuring Oppression and Hierarchies in Academia

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ABSTRACT

The disruptive communications technologies to higher educational structures today mimics the disruptive nature of ideological advances to learning technologies that were experienced in past decades regarding higher education. Online cloud computing in the areas of interactions, communication, social networking, and online information resources are applicable technologies to higher education. Educational establishments have the option of offering virtual online educational experiences as well as credentials that challenge traditional modes and practices of many colleges and universities. The dilemma facing educational structures is to recognize which conditions and practices need to be restructured into the learning environment and what cultural norms need establishing regarding these new technologies. This chapter is organized by situating education and academia within a technological/historical-ideological context, follow the global progression and distribution of communications technologies as disruptive technologies, and applying social network theory in establishing cultural practices as articulating global revolutionary/counterrevolutionary practices of virtual education.

INTRODUCTION

New technologies that enhance online interactions for the global masses has emerged full force in recent years. Technological advances in communication means (i.e., mobile devices with text messaging, instant messaging, broad-based WIFI connection to internet sites, and skype), social networking sites (such as facebook, myspace, second life, and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG)), and online information resources (e-libraries with ebooks, ebookstores, online journal databases, electronic encyclopedias,

online video streams, wikis, and informative web pages) forced a disruption in many aspects of well established social structures related to education and in higher education specifically. This essay focuses on the disruption in educational hierarchies and practices as related to new communications technologies. In recent years, a profound number of educational establishments have emerged offering virtual online educational experiences and credentials that claim to be equivalent to or superior to traditional modes and practices of many traditional colleges and universities; many of those establishments are capitalistic in nature and concretely proprietary. The technological advances in educational online software can also be understood as a disrupting technology that is transforming traditional authenticated standards and hierarchies of higher education by moving the university classroom from the traditional "brick and mortar" classroom to a virtual online environment as well as in some cases taking the dissemination of knowledge out of the hands of scholars and into the hands of savvy users of the internet or to the "canned processing" of computer software.

The emergence and spread of capitalism during the Industrial revolution is mostly responsible for transforming global educational structures firmly into the business sector challenging traditional, educational elitism by the establishment of state universities, vocational schools, community colleges and secondary schools. However, the traditional elitism was also a desirable feature of education spurring the establishment of nation-building universities by many nations to give their nation a global presence and to possibly position their nation into the upper tiers of a global hierarchical system (i.e., Marginson 2002). Typically the traditionalism of the Italian, British, or German model of the university was utilized followed by disrupting economic and discoursive debates about the role and purpose of a university education and the position of knowledge within

and outside of the protective so-called "Ivory Tower" of traditional universities.

Today, new technological advances in communications are impacting the university education and situating a new discourse related to a marginalized element of the university -- its distance education or extension programs and online communications forcing disruption requiring a response to situate new constructions of educational social networks. Responses to new modes of teaching university level courses using new communication technologies if used appropriately can be genuine, unique, and authentic. While accessibility to education is enhanced with new forms of communications and information technologies and its low cost distributed availability (laptops, online reading tablets, I-pad technology, and smart phones), the traditional hierarchies and structures of oppression and domination that were founded on educational elitism within a capitalistic framework and market are manipulated, disrupted, and restructured. Additionally, such technology can also produce canned, processed learning techniques as well as authentic or deceptive relationships between and among students and their teachers similar to the issues that have arisen in the MMPORGs. In a sense, one could look at online education and distance educational practices and its evolution as an emerging, unarticulated revolution where currently, the players are fluid and malleable and to some extent mimics a massively multiplayer online role playing game situated within a capitalist ordering that emphasizes markets, profits, and domination.

This chapter is organized by situating education and academia within a technological/historical context (the Background), followed by an exploration of the issues, controversies, and problems related to technological advances in global communications related to higher education and distributive knowledges as well as articulating the global revolutionary and counterrevolutionary practices of virtual education in terms of a

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