

CJLT Special Issue Editorial

Tensions & Intersections: Exploring Philosophies of Education & Technology

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Tensions et intersections: regards sur les philosophies de l'éducation et de la technologie

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Introduction

Technology and education have long been closely intertwined. From the emergence of cultural technologies such as the alphabet, through the invention of the blackboard, to the latest developments in mobile and social learning, educational practice and technology have changed together. New combinations of technological possibility and educational practice such as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) have raised and continue to pose a long series of questions. These range from issues related to institutional public profiles, through international student demand and academic credentialing to the commercialization and openness of education itself.

All of this presents fertile ground for philosophies of education and technology, which can help inform responses to and also be informed by ongoing developments. This special issue, we believe, mobilizes this rich interdisciplinary interchange, and points to ways in which it might be deepened and continued. It begins with an invited editorial by Andrew Feenberg, one of the pioneers of online, socially-based learning and teaching, and features, among others, articles that employ philosophically-oriented methods --such as hermeneutic phenomenology, critical theory and actor-network theory—to critically analyze recent developments in technology and pedagogy. Additional articles offer analyses of philosophies or beliefs of teaching and technology among practitioners and decision-makers, as well as engaging critically and rhetorically with the MOOC as a neo-colonialist construct.

Feenberg's opening editorial, "TextWorlds: What happened in cyberspace," examines the critical and political potential offered by forms of online social interaction in cyberspace, both new and old. Through a discussion of case histories that highlight the origins of online education and instant messaging, Feenberg considers what is to be learned from these relatively stable written forms of interaction in the context of present-day changes and uncertainties.

In their article on “Online education: A science and technology studies perspective,” Edward C. Hamilton and Norm Friesen argue that the implicit philosophical perspectives on technology adopted in online education research frame and predispose this research in significant ways. Following their critique of essentialist and instrumentalist perspectives (which they argue are pervasive in discourses on education technology), the authors advocate more nuanced philosophical approaches for the field, and suggest how this development may occur via contemporary technology studies.

In her article, “Shape shifting smartphones: Riding the waves in post-secondary education,” Peggy Jubien uses research into everyday uses of smartphones in educational contexts to illustrate principles of actor-network theory. She discusses how both human and non-human actors form overlapping networks, “protean” assemblages that are of direct relevance to educational practice. From this analysis, smartphones emerge as objects of “fluidity” and “fire,” artifacts through which contexts, times and space (dis-)appear, intersect and dissolve.

Heather Kanuka, Erika E. Smith, and Jennifer Kelland’s article provides “An inquiry into educational technologists’ conceptions of their philosophies of teaching and technology.” In assessing the consistency between what educational technologists say in collegial deliberations and how they self-identify their philosophical orientations, the authors examine whether educational technologists know, or can accurately identify, their philosophical orientations towards teaching and technology. This is done with the intention of bringing broad and often tacit assumptions and valuations regarding teaching and technology to light, and to connect these more closely and explicitly with practice and particularly, with policy- and decision-making.

Lisa Portmess’ perspective piece, “Mobile knowledge, karma points and digital peers: The tacit epistemology and linguistic representation of MOOCs,” offers something rather different in tone and substance. It is a polemic (in the best sense of the word) that seeks to overturn breathless, recent media coverage of massive open online courses (MOOCs) to reveal the neglected and desultory underside of such technology enabled global knowledge sharing initiatives. Through this inversion, Portmess emphasizes that MOOCs are at least as much about the possibility of democratized education as they are about the reality of post-colonial knowledge export.

Last but not at all least is Derek Tannis’ “Lost in the lifeworld: Technology help seeking and giving on diverse, post-secondary campuses,” a penetrating exploration of the lived experience of needing and giving “tech support.” Many campuses now verily bristle with high-tech devices and service points that bring with them the expectation to be readily and effectively put to use by students –despite the ever-greater heterogeneity of student abilities and backgrounds. When these contexts and expectations serve to challenge and frustrate students rather than enable and facilitate, a bewildering array of experiential possibilities open up that challenge basic premises of ICT help seeking and giving. Tannis demonstrates how a phenomenological approach to methods of ICT help giving, including support and training, could be interwoven within post-secondary learning environments as an integral part of personnel training and support-provision.

It seems fitting that this collection ends with a poignant reminder that even some of the most basic premises that underlie our conceptions of technology use, non-use or misuse can be completely challenged through the cultural and social “otherness” of the next student who may walk through the lab door. Technology, in other words, has the power to shape experience and possibilities through its preconceived design, but the social and experiential possibilities it opens

up, however directly or indirectly, always exceed any preconceptions. This excess presents at once the promise and the peril of these technologies: Smartphones or MOOCs may have been intended to address the need or desire for manifold and spontaneous social and intellectual involvement, but at the same time allow it to be shaped, channeled and leveraged for ends alien to those of users or learners. These and other tensions are both explored and negotiated in this special issue; and they are a part of broader philosophical and theoretical work that we as guest editors, in some small way, hope to have enriched.



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