

# Challenges to social justice and collective wellbeing in a globalised education system

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## Abstract

Access to educational opportunity is undoubtedly extended by the availability of open learning materials, networked learning communities, and forms of open accreditation. Networked learning has, in that sense, fulfilled many of the promises of its early pioneers. The evidence is weak, however, that access to digital opportunity translates into educational success for those without other forms of educational, social and cultural capital. The distribution of functional access to digital opportunity in fact mirrors other kinds of inequality very closely, so the proliferation of networked learning opportunities can actually amplify inequalities of outcome.

Beyond individual cases, an open digital landscape for learning favours globally successful institutions, as shown by the scramble to form 'gold standard' open course networks among leading universities. A global market in educational content risks amplifying the hegemony of the languages, educational cultures and knowledge practices of the English-speaking global north. A parallel global market in the most able and motivated students puts further pressure on the local education systems that are most able to support those currently disadvantaged.

This symposium examines the globalised educational landscape from a radical, critical perspective. Some of us write from within schools of education with the experience of research and publishing behind us. From this perspective we assert the value of theory-informed research to highlight the contradictions, the political negotiations and the vulnerabilities of hegemonic discourses, to encourage scepticism and to challenge determinist views of our technological future. Some of us write from situations of responsibility in practice and policy settings. From this perspective we assert that there are no technological solutions to inequality, only political and emancipatory educational actions. What tools of resistance are at our disposal within the academic labour force and in the 'world of work' adjacent to it?

Our discussions and the links among our papers represent the hope that the divide can sometimes be bridged, and that theory-based interventions in education are always possible, on the side of social justice and collective wellbeing.

## Introduction

In 2013 a group of us came together at a Technology-Enhanced Learning (TEL) symposium in France, known as the Alpine Rendezvous, to discuss *'the role that digital technologies in education have played and continue to play in the emergence of various discontinuous ruptures and crises [and] to understand the role of TEL in generating and sustaining crisis and disruption, as well as in ameliorating some of the effects and enabling a principled response.'* One outcome of these discussions was the proposal of a new 'Grand Challenge' for TEL research in Europe: 'How can TEL contribute to addressing educational inequalities?' (Beetham, Perota and Holley 2013). This symposium represents an ongoing exploration of that question through the work we have each conducted since.

Access to educational opportunity is undoubtedly extended by the availability of open learning materials, networked learning communities, and forms of open accreditation. Networked learning has, in that sense, fulfilled many of the promises of its early pioneers (Steeple *et al.* 2002). The evidence is weak, however, that access to digital opportunity translates into educational success for those without other forms of educational, social and cultural capital (Bach *et al.* 2013). Participation in open and networked learning is hugely biased towards those with higher qualifications already (Christensen 2013). Even given a 'level playing field', students who make effective use of digital resources are typically the same students who make effective use of lecture and seminar time and traditional printed materials. The distribution of functional access to digital opportunity in fact mirrors other kinds of inequality very closely, so the proliferation of networked learning opportunities can actually amplify inequalities of outcome (Wessels 2013, Zillien and Marr 2013).

Beyond individual cases, an open digital landscape for learning favours globally successful institutions, as shown by the scramble to form 'gold standard' open course networks among leading universities. A global market in educational content risks amplifying the hegemony of the languages, educational cultures and knowledge practices of the English-speaking global north. A parallel global market in the most able and motivated students puts further pressure on the local education systems that are most able to support those currently disadvantaged (Olaniran 2008, Marginson and Orgorika 2010, Altbach 2014). While minority educational practices may survive in the 'long tail' of a highly networked system - finding new connections to sustain them - the dominant effect has been to amplify privileged discourses.

The TEL project has also coincided with the growth of technicist, managerial and commercialised discourses of education (Noble 2003) which have weakened commitments to education as an emancipatory project and a democratic right. Business models for digital provision favour mass instruction via online resources over contextualised, participative or negotiated learning. Even in conventional settings we see an ever-greater involvement of data systems to measure 'learning gains', to micro-manage features of the curriculum, and to place student learning behaviour under surveillance. In a global education system which functions as a market – in both knowledge and students - transferability, interoperability and reproducibility of learning outcomes are important. So not only is it becoming technically feasible, there are also financial and competitive pressures for rich learning experiences to be rendered into 'learning data' or closely specified 'competences' that function as an international currency, floating free from the lived experience of learners or the cultural life of institutions. The price is the systematic devaluation of those aspects of the educational experience that cannot be rendered as data. And it may be precisely these aspects - such as

identity work, building repertoire and resilience, recruiting cultural resources, one-to-one personal and peer support, developing a critical stance towards knowledge and practice - that disadvantaged learners need most.

As with other kinds of free market, open learning delivers on some of its promises to individuals – especially those resourced to enter the market on their own terms – but the systematic effect may be greater stratification. This is true inter-culturally, with the entrenching of elite global institutions as the custodians of valued knowledge and qualifications. It is true intra-institutionally, with a stronger focus on centralised management and performance metrics. And it is true interpersonally, with ‘star lecturers’ garnering mass audiences on TedX and iTunesU while casual teaching staff, lecturers in off-shore colleges and learning support teams see their pay and conditions cut. As with the knowledge economy, the digital learning revolution offers high status to an enterprising few, and more precarious employment for the many.

All this takes place in working and learning environments – whether home or campus-based - where digital technologies are introducing new threats to well-being. These include eroding the boundaries between work, learning and leisure; constant monitoring of performance (and underperformance); and transforming the quality of the relationships for which many teaching staff entered the profession in the first place.

Our papers examine aspects of this globalised landscape from a radical, critical perspective, such as we find in the works of Freire, Giroux and McLaren, and in the networked learning tradition (see e.g. Lally *et al.* 2010, Jandric and Boras 2015). As a group we straddle a fissure in the field of education - and another source of inequity - between researchers and practitioners. Some of us write from within schools of education with the experience of research and publishing behind us. From this perspective we assert the value of theory-informed research to highlight the contradictions, the political negotiations and the vulnerabilities of hegemonic discourses, to encourage scepticism and to challenge determinist views of our technological future. Some of us write from situations of responsibility in practice and policy settings. From this perspective we assert that there are no technological solutions to inequality, only political and emancipatory educational actions. What tools of resistance are at our disposal within the academic labour force and in the 'world of work' adjacent to it?

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## **Paper Abstracts**

**Critical TEL: the importance of theory and theorisation**, Madeleine Sclater and Victor Lally

This paper explores the role of theory in Technology Enhanced Learning, and the research community. We consider Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as an example, but we strongly feel that our argument has broader application to the use of theory as part of the intellectual ‘self-defence toolkit’ that researchers and practitioners in the critical TEL community need to consider if they are to ‘resist’ the crises arising from educational globalisation. Theory can offer us the language, history, scope, and power that we need to be

reflexively aware of both our own interests and those of others who are actors in the settings in which we are working.

### **The Social Life of Data Clusters: The Potential of Sociomaterial Analysis in the Critical Study of Educational Technology, Carlo Perrotta**

This paper draws on Actor-Network Theory to argue that methods used for the classification and measurement of online education are not neutral and objective but are involved in the creation of the educational realities they claim to measure. The paper examines Cluster Analysis (CA) as a ‘performative device’ that, to a significant extent, creates the educational entities it claims to objectively and neutrally represent through the emerging body of knowledge of Learning Analytics (LA). In the conclusion, the paper suggests that those concerned with social justice in educational technology need not limit themselves to denouncing structural inequalities and ideological conflicts. At the opposite end of the ‘critical spectrum’ there is the opportunity to analyse in a more descriptive fashion how hegemonic discourses in education are legitimated through techniques and devices.

### **‘Employability’ and the digital future of work, Helen Beetham**

This paper discusses the role of networked technologies in education through the lens of work, both the work carried out by academic and professional staff – refigured by the demands of digital institutions – and the ‘employability’ of graduates and college leavers that stands over their educational experience as its supposed rationale, justification and destination. The paper draws on a recent literature review and interviews with staff in UK tertiary education to elucidate the changing nature of academic work and the demands for digital capability and engagement placed on education professionals. It goes on to explore academic work as exemplary of large-scale shifts not only in the kinds of work people do but in the way work is valued, engaged in, and managed in the lifecourse. It concludes by arguing that employability needs to be opened up within the curriculum as a series of critical explorations rather than deployed as received knowledge about the kinds of learning outcome that are desirable. In the spirit of radical pedagogy, it suggests that academics support these explorations when they engage critically with the circumstances of their own digital labour.

### **Inequality as Higher Education Goes Online, Laura Czerniewicz**

This paper discusses Higher Education (HE) and changes in HE, using inequality as a frame. It provides an brief overview of the changes in the HE landscape; explains how Therborn’s 2013 equality/inequality is framework suitable for this discussion ; considers some of the key questions and implications at the global, institutional and course levels through this inequality lens; and finally asks some questions and make some suggestions for how the issues of inequality in HE could be addressed going forward.

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