

Challenges from Past Practice, Moving Fast Forward

We have been stressing the range of opportunities and the transformative possibilities for learning at all levels as a result of readily available and emergent digital technologies. We are not naive, and we realize also the challenges, limitations, and misdirections—in short, the opportunity costs—resulting from these developments. Some of this comes inevitably with the unsettling of long-established ways of doing things. When well-established modes of making knowledge sediment, they can become at least restrictive, if not unproductive. As new modes challenge, the old institutional structures can either dig in and refuse to respond other than to dismiss, or they can seek to work out renewed and renewing regimes disposed to take advantage of the possible productive elements.

The challenges by participatory learning to institutional order in higher education (though these challenges count too in thinking about other institutional levels and formations) range from the banal to the constitutive, from the disciplining of behavioral breaches of protocol and expectation to normative conceptions of what constitutes knowledge and how it is authorized.

Conclusion: Yesterday's Tomorrow

We have been re-examining some of the key premises and the roles they have played in shaping learning institutions in general and higher education more particularly, especially since the end of World War II. Access to education at all levels for larger and larger segments of the population was crucial to settling class conflict and the development of middle class aspiration in the wake of the Great Depression. Publicly funded schools, community colleges, and technical training institutions as well as universities drew rapidly expanding numbers, shaping what it meant to be an educated citizen, a productive employee, and a moral person. As a consequence, income and wealth expanded from the 1930s to the 1980s, though significantly more so for some groups than for others. Demand for labor for the most part outstripped its supply, creating an upward spiral for wages and subsequent wealth and quality of life, in particular from one generation to the next.

All this began to change at the onset of the 1980s. The neoliberal cuts in state services, including notably to educational resources at all levels, driven in the past three decades by the

marriage of political economy and the culture wars, have meant a resurgence in inequality tied to educational access, the insistence on test-driven pedagogy, and the class bifurcation, racially molded, in access to creative learning practices. The earlier emphasis on public education has given way to its privatizing erosion at all levels, whether through experiments in corporately run schools and school districts, through charter schools and vouchers, through distance learning programs for the racial poor on reservations, the dramatic privatization of higher education, or through the introduction of user fees for the likes of libraries and especially museums and their transformation by the cultural industry model of urban branding into sites for tourist attraction.³¹

No institution of higher education in the country today has tested in a comprehensive way new methods of learning based on peer-to-peer distributed systems of collaborative work characteristic of the new Internet age. We have mentioned earlier a couple of experimental examples emerging at the school level. Social psychologists such as Joshua Aronson and Claude M. Steele have established quite conclusively that collaborative learning is beneficial across class and culture, race and religion. These new modes of distributed, collaborative engagement are likely both to attract a broad range of motivated learning across conventional social divisions (think of the anonymous interactions across classes and races in online gaming) and to inspire new forms of knowledge and product creation. But can we really say, in 2009, that the *institutions* of learning—from preschool to the PhD—are suited to the new forms of learning made available by digital technologies? Is there an educational enterprise

anywhere in the world redesigned with the deep assumptions of networked thinking core and central to its lesson planning? Has anyone yet put into institutional practice at the level of higher education what John Seely Brown is calling a “social life of learning for the ‘Net age’”?³²

If we face a future where every person has (easy access to) a laptop or networked mobile device, what will it mean? What will it mean for institutionally advocated, mediated, and activated learning? How will educators use these tools and this moment? How will users—learners—adapt them to learning functionality, access, and productive learning possibilities? Will what is learned and the new methods of learning alter as a consequence, becoming quicker but shallower, more instrumental and less reflective? Or will the social networking possibilities prompt greater reflexivity, a more sustained sociality in which the positions and concerns of the otherwise remote are more readily taken into consideration in decision making? How *can* we use these tools to inspire our most traditional institutions of learning to change?

It is to the illustration of what learning institutions currently offer that we next turn. In the book-length version we discuss at length also the obstacles learning institutions now traditionally pose to innovative learning that takes advantage of the online learning practices and possibilities available. It is our hope that, by assessing some of the institutional barriers as well as some of the institutional promise, we can begin to mobilize our institutions to envision formal, higher education as part of a continuum with (rather than a resistance to) the collaborative, participatory, networked engagements that our students participate in online today.

It would be easy to fall into handwringing, to say our institutions of education are antiquated and therefore doomed. In fact, their persistence suggests that, outmoded as they may be, they are not only not doomed—but thriving—at present. The baby boom of the baby boom, in 2009, makes admission to a college or university more competitive than it has ever been. A college degree is still the key to success, as all comparative studies of income levels and educational attainment attest. So it is our objective in this report not to simply dismiss, excoriate, or condemn, but to look at places where institutions *are* and *could be* productively changing in order to provide examples for those innovative educators, administrators, students, and parents who seek change and are not sure where to look for models.

MIT professor and digital learning pioneer Henry Jenkins has usefully spoken of the “convergence” resulting from networking a culture of new models and forms and contributions with older models. The convergence is not just the new working on and not simply around older forms, but thoroughly remixing and modding them, transforming them piecemeal, expanding and enlarging access to them.³³ So, too, we believe, is the charge and challenge to the immediate future of learning institutions. Remixed learning institutions may well be the model of the future.

Rather than describe that model in words, we offer here a portfolio of models, with URLs and screenshots from Web pages, of educational enterprises that are seeking to change not just the tools of the trade of education—but the trade itself. How successful these experiments in new institutional formations will be remains in question. We offer these concluding

examples simply to provoke thought, not to foreclose it, to prod imaginations. In the book version we engage a more sustained account of the possibilities, challenges, and indeed failures posed by such examples. It is our hope that, in thinking together with all of those who have contributed to our forums—face-to-face at HASTAC gatherings as well as online with the Institute for the Future of the Book collaborative tool—we have begun a process, together, of envisioning better ways to think of the future of learning institutions in our digital age.