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Rage against the Machine? Symbolic Violence in E-learning Supported Tertiary Education

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ABSTRACT The move toward online course facilitation in tertiary education has the intent of providing education at any time in any place to any person. However, the advent of blended learning and e-learning innovations has ostracised, marginalised or ignored those who cannot afford or who are unable to access the latest hardware and software to take advantage of these opportunities. The Web 2.0 age is an era of assumptions: assumptions of participation, literacy and democracy. Yet such inferences are based on the need for high-speed Internet connections, and the latest computers are standard requirements. Those without the ability to access these necessities are being indirectly marginalised by the universities, which is particularly ironic in an era of 'widening participation'. This article reveals a few tears in the fabric of wiki-enabled democratic education. The authors argue that there is a community of students that are subjected to what Bourdieu termed symbolic violence. Digitisation in tertiary education is reinforcing what it has always been through its history – a haven of the wealthy and the advantaged.

Introduction

When designing new papers, subjects and courses for university students, educators are encouraged to utilise digital technologies in the delivery of education (Bates, 1997; Inglis, 1999; Oliver, 1999). However, students who do not have personal computers or broadband access to the Internet are disadvantaged, marginalised or ignored by those who focus on delivering online components as part of their university programme. There has been much literature written about the imperative to incorporate technology within university courses (Paulsen, 2003) and yet for all the discussion of the digital divide, the inequalities suffered by university students through the assumptions about available digital technologies is underwritten and under-researched.

The speed of change in the last decade is remarkable. Ten years ago, it was still possible for students to submit handwritten assignments, but now they are required to be word-processed and have specific formatting requirements. As a recent development, tertiary educators have taken on the use of email, synchronous and asynchronous discussion fora, downloadable PowerPoint slides, i-lectures, e-readings and text messaging, all of which have consequences for students who do not have the economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986) to access these developments. This recent history has shaped the behaviour and attitudes of university students, university teachers, and university learning and teaching (Lambeir & Ramaekers, 2006).

E-learning is a complex, diverse and dynamic formation. The particular mode of e-learning that is at the core of the authors' work includes face-to-face courses that are offered on campus yet which have electronic readings available for downloading via a Learning Management System or have lecture notes (typically Microsoft PowerPoint) available for access by students who wish to review lectures or did not attend them. E-learning also refers to courses where the Internet is essential for communications between staff and/or students. Seven universities in Australia have at least 99% of their units requiring Internet access (Holt & Challis, 2007), which includes the capacity to access learning resources and assessment, including the completion of online tests and the

submission of assignments. These courses are sometimes referred to as ‘blended learning’.[1] In this article, when we refer to ‘e-learning’ we are not incorporating off-campus, Internet only courses, or those that can be titled ‘distance education’ courses.

Almost all universities provide computer laboratories or suites where computers and highspeed Internet can be accessed, but this provision is subject to availability and annual budgets for software and hardware from often financially-challenged institutions. Importantly, the assumptions about ‘access’ to computers are confused with literacy to use them. Concurrently, the availability of ‘new’ software and hardware to academics and administrators is assumed to be intrinsically useful. The ‘new’ does not necessarily facilitate learning outcomes. The Web 2.0 age is an era of assumptions: assumptions of participation, literacy and democracy. In recognition of these suppositions, this article deploys Bourdieu’s (1990) notion of symbolic violence to understand this current moment in education. Because the article focuses on e-learning in tertiary education, a number of examples are given and explained to add both application and an example to Bourdieu’s concept. We commence with the context in which these decisions for e-learning have emerged.

E-learning – e-rror?

Although unfashionable to admit, computer-mediated learning and assessment operate at their best when handling concrete ideas. They are best in the recalling of facts, the reinforcement of concepts and the operation of multiple choice quizzes. They are inappropriate to grasp the abstract, the philosophical and the qualitative. With the nuances of face-to-face communication absent (Brabazon, 2002, 2007), the immediacy of verbal and aural exchange is lost from screen-mediated scholarship. In pondering the rush to the Web, teachers need to ask how we have mobilised the other technologies – and the other senses – in analogue education. Scent and sound, for example, are underplayed cards in the teacher’s deck. All the senses and experiences are important, and build a matrix of experience and expertise to create conscious scholars. An important literature – and a journal from Berg publishers – is emerging on *The Senses and Society*. Yet digitisation compresses this sensory complexity into a particular mode of textualised, visual literacy.

The primary goal of good teaching is to form learning communities, a group of students/citizens who are reflexive about their context, ask difficult questions of themselves and others, and actively care about their place in the world. Many educators mobilise this imperative in their practice. James O’Donnell reported that

The approach I favor to teaching critical reception of the past might best be called ‘teaching the surprises’ ... So my teaching strategy starts students where they think they are comfortable and then seeks to disorient and defamiliarise them so that they actually look at what they are studying. For a teacher who thinks such moments of epiphany vital to education, such a moment is a godsend. (O’Donnell, 1998, p. 120)

Teaching well is difficult and innovation can be even more difficult. That is why there is confusion between technological and curricula innovation. It is easier to benchmark, track and acknowledge a change in software or hardware than to discover and validate a transformation in thinking. Reflective online discussions and group analysis can be effective, but can also be clumsy. Equipment budgets possess a greater quantifiable verifiability than subtle shifts in reading, writing and scholarship. When teaching and learning in an analogue classroom, there is nowhere to hide or deflect from view. When e-teaching, we can mask fears, confusions and ambiguities through a screen. Analogue teaching is so rewarding because of the diverse students attending our schools and universities. It is complicated and intricate to teach students from different backgrounds because there are no singular narratives, truths and curricula that can encompass all their histories. To lose the complex mixed-media strategies in favour of a digital platform, no matter how convergent – particularly when encased in a WebCT/Blackboard suite – is to cut away a myriad of

literacies that are developed and improved through a movement between mediated environments. Therefore, the Internet cannot stand alone as a single mode of delivery or shell for media used in teaching. The online environment has been developed in part due to marketing imperatives and managerialism. Theories of viable and useful knowledge are being stretched and questioned through online educational imperatives. While the sending and receiving of emails is rapid, the transformation of ideas into action, or data into wisdom, is not as swift. The distinct world-views of senders and receivers must be considered. It is not only a question of content, fact and data.

If critical thinking and pedagogical imperatives have been reduced to questions of content and downloadable data, then how are students to be heard, taught and empowered? Teachers are much more than content providers. They are arbiters of ideologies, weaving a critical approach to the world and a network of realities. It is framed as a great strength of the new online environment that educators work with 'a team' of technicians. Too often, educators are left maintaining an entire system, without acknowledgement of the workload consequences, stress and institutional redundancy such a scheme configures. Teachers do not have control over the delivery process, the reliability of the server or the capacity to handle website traffic. Teachers face students with apologies. Technicians hide behind placating emails.

The asynchronous learning network, or discussion forum, is a useful pedagogic intervention, particularly for mature-aged scholars managing diverse demands on their time. However, it is clear that already empowered, confident and bright students – that is, the least in need of teacherly assistance – are the most active participants. No software or hardware application or platform is an antidote for under prepared university students. It is those who are already enthusiastic, committed and focused who most use digitised learning 'tools' such as blogs and asynchronous and synchronous discussion fora. Invariably, those who contribute most to digitally-enhanced learning environments do well. They are receiving all the advantages of analogue education, through lectures, seminars and tutorials, while also gaining increased spaces to test, question, fail and improve, thereby building and reinforcing knowledge.

In other words, those who were on campus, who were already present for lectures, workshops, tutorials and consultancy appointments, gained another node of learning or 'form of instruction', as Oliver & Trigwell (2005) suggest. Anthony Smith & Frank Webster described the reasoning for this odd result: 'technologies are more often supplements than substitutes' (1997, p. 13). Therefore, to argue that the Internet is an effective mechanism to alleviate the isolation of online education is not addressing more intricate accessibility issues that will be explored through the use of Bourdieu's theories in the second half of this article. Unfortunately, the funding imperative is online learning, which brings along its own set of problems (Power, 2007). The money is placed on technology in education, not education in technology.

It is also assumed that distance education will be absorbed by online Internet. We have found the opposite to be true. While very few students enrol online, the number of students studying through distance education – with the online environment supporting print-based materials – is increasing. It is important to remember that all learners, but particularly adults, require a variety of learning styles. For students, the ideal pedagogic environment includes as many nodes of nurturing, reinforcement, discussion and reflection as possible.

Problems continue throughout education. There are difficulties confronting teachers on a daily basis. One of these difficulties is how to unravel the belief that the Internet and computer mediated communication will invariably improve the quality of education. Those who teach real students – with valid fears, tears, hopes and desires – know that nothing can replace the affirming nod, pithy statement or deep commitment that teachers have for those in our care. Anything that decentres teachers from their work in creating better scientists, politicians, lawyers, philosophers

and journalists must be treated with suspicion.

Education reveals its benefits in the long term. It is a blue chip stock, and superannuation for the mind. It does not create an easy, quick return that can be assessed in terms of the first pay cheque, the first bonus or a new car. Any society that is not prepared to invest in education is demolishing its future. It will take a generation, but if we lose the capacity to create, desire, imagine and critique, we destroy the memory, intensity and inheritance of our history. Therefore, money must be set aside for educational infrastructure. The imperatives of more hospitals, more prisons and more warships will always appear more urgent and more popular at election time. Politicians can never ‘win’ using education, because the results are only revealed through a lifetime of social and cultural contribution to citizenship, rather than the quick fix needed for the next political debate. But if education – in its sensuality, boldness and breadth – is denied, then we deny our own potential.

Antonio Gramsci listed one of the most important political actions as ‘renovating and making critical an already existing activity’ (1971, p. 331). He spoke about a language of possibility, even when imprisoned for his ideals. There are few more significant already-existing activities than education, and educators have a responsibility to speak out and resist those ideologies destructive to the disempowered. This technocorporate matrix – a new, improved and different capitalism – transforms software and hardware gimmicks into pedagogical truths. In this discourse, teachers are digital butlers. The reification of all teaching and learning considerations into the workplace is unfortunate, particularly in an environment of labour surplus. With such imperatives emerging from Labo(u)r governments and parties, political debates about education have corroded already rusted, crumbling economic decisions. Martin Lawn’s review of the Blairite third way tracked the deep consequences of this political retreat.

To speak of the ‘teaching profession’ is to speak the language of the past in England. The ideas and practices upon which the great post-war education system was built have been thoroughly demolished so that, in effect, a new vocabulary now has to be used to explain the purposes and practices of teaching. (1999, p. 100)

In the United Kingdom, teacher professionalism and public service were entwined by both the 1942 Beveridge Report and the post-war Attlee-led Labour governments. Through the 1990s, the hegemonic shift to the right and the movement to post-Fordism and deindustrialisation resulted in the market rate paid for public service. Teaching and learning has become a systematic list of competencies. Making teaching more efficient, benchmarked and evaluated triggers a loss of motivation, respect and responsibility. Without the good will of staff, the system will fold like a deck of cards.

The standardisation and templated nature of higher education have not only reshaped what is expected of graduates, but how students wish to be treated. This is no surprise. To grasp the Web’s role in education requires an analysis of aesthetics, interactivity, vector map creation and visual communication in mixed media. But teaching requires something more: an integrated pedagogical agenda of taste, sight and discovery. The words of John Henry Newman in 1852 attacked those with a simple notion of a university’s purpose: ‘they insist that Education should be confined to some particular and narrow end, and should issue in some definite work, which can be weighed and measured. They argue as if everything, as well as every person, had its price’ (1999, p. 139). In summoning Newman, socially aware teachers must affirm that we will not reify the value of education to the capacity of a software application. Through this act of objection, a political vocabulary can be assembled beyond the technocratic and philistine. Competency is not good enough for our students, our education systems or our nations.

Now that the context in which e-learning decision making takes place has been outlined, we

investigate how Bourdieu's understanding of symbolic violence can assist teachers and curriculum designers into making decisions about education, rather than technology.

Bourdieu's Conceptualisation of Symbolic Violence

The concept of symbolic violence was introduced by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to account for forms of coercion which are effected without physical force; that is, 'gentle, invisible violence, unrecognised as such, chosen as much as undergone, that of trust, obligation, personal loyalty, hospitality, gifts, debts, piety' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 127). The use of symbolic violence by the dominant is often so entrenched in cultural and sociological norms that the dominant party may not be aware that they are perpetuating the norm. In fact, the dominated tend to be accepting of the domination. Pierre Bourdieu's work emphasises how *social classes*, especially the ruling and intellectual classes, preserve their social privileges across generations despite the myth that contemporary post-industrial *society* boasts equality of opportunity and high *social mobility*, much of which is achieved through education.

Other theorists have also probed the conceptualisation of symbolic violence. Webb et al defined the term as:

violence which is exercised upon individuals in a symbolic, rather than a physical way. It may take the form of people being denied resources, treated as inferior or being limited in terms or realistic aspirations. Gender relations, for example, have tended to be constituted out of symbolic violence which has denied women the rights and opportunities available to men. (2002, p. xvi)

The notion of symbolic violence stems from liberty and equality. Crossley (1995) gave the example of a homeless individual who 'is not free to attend an opera or a fine restaurant, even if they are not barred from as such, because they lack the money required to engage in these pursuits' (p. 87). The homeless person is exposed to symbolic violence as s/he is being excluded from taking part not in a physical sense but more ruthlessly and alienating, through finance and class.

We now move to give explicit examples of real-life experiences where symbolic violence is (un)knowingly being deployed. Our criticism is of the notion that in order to be considered as embracing the 'latest' and 'best' technologies, students are marginalised and disadvantaged if they cannot afford access to the 'latest' and 'best' technologies, namely high-speed (broadband or ADSL) Internet.

Broadband adoption increases markedly with household income level. Higher income households (\$95,000 and above) had a broadband connection in 55 per cent of cases, compared with 26 per cent of low income households (less than \$35,000). Adoption has also been higher among metropolitan households: 40 per cent of metropolitan families have broadband compared with 13 per cent of families living in regional areas. (NetRatings Australia, 2005, p. 16)

Symbolic violence is reinforced through students not being able to access high-speed Internet because the areas in which they live are lower socio-economic areas and do not maintain the demand of the ruling intellectual classes. In the twenty-first century, one aspect of symbolic violence is embodied when stating – or assuming – that broadband (high-speed) Internet is necessary in order for students to complete required work. Decisions about 'access' to on-campus students or the ability to manage and utilise teaching materials remotely are also questions of curricular justice and equality. High-speed Internet connections can only be afforded by those who are privileged and possess the economic capital necessary in order to purchase this convenience/necessity. Not only is this unaffordable for many tertiary students, it is also not physically available in some locations. Through neglect, marginalisation or ignorance, students are blocked from using rich, digitised, convergent material. If they do not live in the 'right' area (deemed by Internet providers to be worthy of provision) then they do not have the means to achieve the 'support' that is supposedly offered. Thus, by making more materials, dialogues and teaching experience available via Internet resources, tertiary education is further alienating those

who are unable to access the resources through economic and location limitations, a significant aside to the argument presented by Journell (2007).

Because attention is placed on technological change rather than curricula innovation, there are frequent mismatches between learning objectives and media platform choice. Tertiary students are being excluded and marginalised with or without their knowledge. This equates to a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1990). Not only are universities actively pursuing the addition and integration of courses onto e-learning spaces, there is an Australian National Award for the university that achieves the best in 'Preparing graduates for the e-world' (Good Universities Guide, 2007).

University administrators and managers see the rightness in what they are trying to achieve by ensuring that what they are offering is available to all (who pay the fees) and that there is no discrimination as to gender, race, age, or disability. However, as detailed elsewhere (Johnson, 2004), technological efficacy is arguably a new identity category and is not only comprised of the ability and confidence to deal with digitally convergent platforms; it now necessitates the ownership of a personal computer and of 'high-speed' Internet. This is also witnessed within governmental services.

A critical shift is occurring in the social fabric of countries: as governments and enterprises increasingly migrate services online, those without reliable Internet access are in danger of being disenfranchised. (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2007, p. 13)

Notions of 'the public' are transforming. The digital mediations of services and education are under-researched. Similarly, the layering of access is increasing. A computer is not sufficient. Neither is dial-up access to the Internet. A personal computer with an internal processor fast enough to cope with the intricate bits, bytes, and downloads is necessary. Indeed, sometimes it is not enough to have 'only' a personal computer, but possession of a laptop contributes to the idea that the 'www' of the Internet could stand for 'whatever, wherever, whenever', which is a dominant discourse found in media and advertising (March, 2005).

Bourdieu's Forms of Capital

Linking closely with both symbolic violence and access is capital. The term has multiple meanings within Bourdieu's theory of practice. Bourdieu used economic capital as the basis for writing about and developing the concepts of other capitals: cultural, social, and symbolic. Bourdieu (1986) described three types of capital:

Capital can present itself in three fundamental guises: as economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalised in the form of property rights; as cultural capital, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalised in the form of educational qualifications; and as social capital, made up of social obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalised in the form of a title of nobility. (p. 47)

Each of the capitals that Bourdieu described are the products of an investment of an appropriate kind, from which an investment can be secured and returned (Moore, 2004), and are also symbolic, neither concrete nor physically present, though it is possible for physical representation of capital to exist, for example, having the 'right' accent in speech.

To understand capital, it is important to remember that it is accumulated over time. In addition, forms of capital are intertwined in that most forms can be converted into other forms. Bourdieu (1986) proposed that economic capital was at the root of the other types of capital, and that the other forms were transposable and disguisable forms of economic capital. Indeed, there seems to be a strong link between possessing money and the acquisition of cultural, social, and

symbolic capital. This suggests that one cannot have cultural capital without economic capital. Moore (2004) claimed that economic capital translates into cultural capital, but economic capital still must be spent to acquire objectified cultural capital (material objects).

Examples of Symbolic Violence in Everyday Practice

What follows are concrete examples of the challenges facing students enrolled in blended learning courses. The following response was from a lecturer to a student who had difficulty accessing a file from the e-learning site that they had set up to assist students within their course:

I can't explain why you're unable to download it, especially since you're able to download the other pdf's. It may have a lot to do with the size of the file. I have an efficient system at home here, broadband etc. but it still takes about 20-30 seconds to download this file from the eLearning site. Have you sought assistance from [the university technical support division]? They should be able to help. I'll also contact them and the eLearning people for advice. Let me know how you get on. I can try emailing it but you may have the same problem.

Students are expected to know how to deal with technological problems, and lecturers and tutors are also expected to know how to deal with these problems. The difference lies with the fact that lecturers and tutors have the opportunity to engage in professional development, and they also are likely to have available to them technical support staff. Students are unlikely to have these opportunities, and even if they do, their frustration levels mean they focus on 'doing without'. Many universities are moving toward the latest versions of their e-learning software. These software solutions tend to have more functionality and offer more options but are also increasingly bandwidth hungry. They require faster and faster Internet access to function effectively. An example of this is Blackboard Vista 4, which has been adopted by various universities within Australia. It is considered to be the 'latest and the best'. The tertiary institutions that utilise this recently released platform are considered to be leaders in the field. There is however, increasing frustration from students (and indeed lecturers/tutors) who try to access their online e-learning sites from home on dial-up Internet connections.

Allied with this assumption is the increased problem of maintaining systems that are not interlinked. There are elements of the new Windows operating system, Vista, that do not blend with the e-learning software 'Blackboard Vista'.

Yes I've heard that the new PC operating system 'Vista' is a nightmare and that all the software that needs to be used on it is different to the older versions and not backward compliant. Fabulous!!! [sarcastic]

In fact, the latest versions of Java cause the Blackboard Vista 4 e-learning system to freeze and it is necessary for the computer users to use an older version of Java if they wish to use the latest version of Blackboard Vista.

Similar problems arise as the most common piece of software, Microsoft Word, is updated:

Hi ... [Joe Bloggs] from the Law Faculty informed me that one of his students submitted an assignment through Vista formatted in Word 2007. The file arrived as a zip file which was unable to open. He contacted [the information technology people] and was told that Vista doesn't support Word 2007 and advised the student to save the file as a 2003 version. This will become an increasing complaint as more people upgrade to Word 2007.

This problem was brought to the attention of some information technology support staff. Their response was: The recently released Microsoft Office 2007 introduces a new file format (e.g. .docx, .xlsx, .pptx) which is not currently supported in the eLearning space. This means that assignments submitted in Microsoft Office 2007 format will not be recognised by earlier versions of Microsoft Office for Mac and PC. To avoid problems during Spring Session, it is recommended that students using Microsoft Office 2007 be advised to use the 'Save As' function and select:

-Word 97-2003 Document for Microsoft Office Word files (.doc file extension) -Excel 97-2003 Workbook for Microsoft Office Excel files (.xls file extension) -Powerpoint 97-2003 Presentation for Microsoft Office PowerPoint files (.ppt file extension)

Online course designers need to be aware of the complexity of their subjects when written in and through diverse word processing packages. The inclusion of complex video and audio files does not necessarily equate to effective learning. The assumption that all students taking the course have access to video cards, headphones to listen to audio files and an Internet connection fast enough to download and play these files is presumptuous at the least. This is demonstrated in the next and final example: a subject (paper) that was well known for being innovative and exciting as it implemented the very 'latest and best' in its blended learning approach. There were videos (produced by the faculty), audio files and large colourful graphics. When students were asked to evaluate this particular subject, they vehemently expressed their frustration at how it 'sucked' because they were unable to access the documents and various facets of the online e-learning space, not to mention their disgust at how the site 'crashed'.

Java on the communications page of ... seems kinda buggy, I had java 2.0 and it wouldn't work.

(Student in Student Forum common space)

It is unethical, but also unnecessary to give the details of this particular subject, faculty and focus, but the message of the example still stands. The 'latest' and the 'best' are not necessarily practical, nor is it necessarily going to provide a positive educational experience.

Many years ago, students had to purchase textbooks, read them, attend lectures, attend tutorials and complete assignments. Students now have to complete this array of tasks but contend with new digitised expectations, captured through the cultural capital of a personal computer and obtain the economic capital to be able to purchase monthly instalments for high-speed Internet.

Conclusion

It is not just those who are unable to access high-speed Internet but also those who are not technologically literate that are being exposed to symbolic violence. Students require technological expertise, web literacy, economic mobility and financial support as well as a measure of intellectual ability to attend university. If universities wish to engage and teach students within the socioeconomic disadvantaged demographic, then they will not only have to continue addressing the issue of affordable fees, but need to contribute to providing more computers, as well as additional high-speed Internet access both on and off campus. These status symbols are now becoming the sign of the successful in university education. It is crucial that those of us who believe in social justice, in and through education, intervene in these assumptions of ownership, and add sociology and context to learners.

Note

[1] We note that Oliver & Trigwell (2005) have critiqued the definition and use of the phrase 'blended learning'.

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