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Temporalizing Pedagogy and Technology: Pressing into the Future

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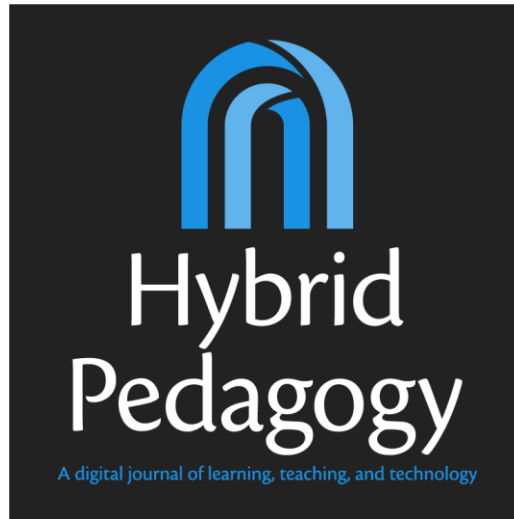
TEMPORALIZING PEDAGOGY AND TECHNOLOGY: PRESSING INTO THE FUTURE

Written by Matthew J. Kruger-Ross

In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger writes with surprising brevity, "Temporality temporalizes as a future which makes present in the process of having been." While we may speak and write of a distinct past, present, and future, when we stop and think about how we experience time, a glimmer of possibility, an opening appears. As we look to tomorrow, we hold expectations of what will happen based on what is occurring around us right now and also based on what has happened to us before. Heidegger's insight is the singularity in our experience of time.

I am most interested in sponsoring thoughtful and inclusive conversations to help me answer a simple question: Do online and collaborative technologies transform how we teach and how students learn? I want to use the clearing this question opens to challenge claims that we should be preparing students for a "21st Century" or for jobs in an "uncertain economy." Even if these aims of education were legitimate, they are founded on some troubling assumptions, namely that education is under the sway of technology. Returning to Heidegger's temporality, it is human beings whose everyday experience of time shapes how we encounter and understand technologies. The clearing the question

provides allows us to see that we have a great deal of say over the charting of our educational future and the role technologies play.

Technologies have not transformed teaching and learning. Some may hear this as a challenge, but it need not be (In fact, those who are most bothered might need to think further why they are bothered). I have been running around like the best of us proclaiming the wonderful world of "new" technologies and, after a decade, I do not really see much of a difference made in teaching or learning. But, I SO want there to be one. I want to be proven wrong, to be shown a strategy or approach I haven't considered. I really know how to sing the 21st Century Technology song, but the melody sounds just like the traditional education song, only played on new [battery-powered, wireless] instruments.

It should be clear that I am skeptical as to the reality of the claims of educational technologists when it comes to the ability of technology to transform — literally to create or generate a context that was heretofore unknown — teaching and learning. These approaches to using technologies are just older pedagogical strategies cloaked in digitization. This is important; we should be able to distinguish what is going on here in education.

Is it technology, or is it human beings sponsoring all of these so-called revolutions? I believe it is the human beings, and we should stop kidding ourselves that it is anything else that is responsible for the present and future of education.

What might the conversation look like were we to stop speaking of technology transforming education and return to an understanding of teaching and pedagogy that honors the profession? Sure, calculators and rulers, laptops and smartphones, seem to speed up the transmission of information, make certain things easier and others more difficult. But it is the teacher — gathered in a room with their students — that makes the important decisions related to teaching and learning. We can have quite fruitful conversations about whether or not to incorporate iPods or smartboards or "clickers" into the classroom; but, only after the pedagogical concerns have been expressed, analyzed, and determined.

Within his critical theory of technology, Andrew Feenberg describes his idea of an instrumentalization theory (Feenberg, 2010). Every system (technology) possesses two levels of instrumentalization: primary and secondary. A primary instrumentalization focuses on the function of the technology while the secondary contains the meaning associated with the technology. The trouble with modernity, he argues, is that our understanding too readily collapses the primary and secondary

instrumentalization; we forget that there does lie a realm of meaning associated within technical systems.

For example, the function of the Internet could be to enable the buying and selling of consumer goods, but this understanding ignores the social choice implicit in such an understanding. If the function of the Internet is economic, we too quickly forget that is was our choice in the first place to make the technology *mean* as such. In this same way, pedagogy and technology seem to get collapsed in recent hype over the transformation of education. Applied to the classroom, iPads could be tools for distraction, or could support the integration of media-rich representations of difficult course concepts. It would be better for us to stop, pause, and pull apart this primary/secondary instrumentalization collapse to remember that technologies (and other systems as well) do not only exist via their functionality but also through the meaning that is imposed and decided on them.

In the same way that using the phrase "social media expert" or "guru" in a biographical description makes me wary, anyone who claims to "predict" the future of education and technology also leaves me uneasy. Too many variables, too much hype, not enough thought. However, I do want to end on a positive note, and I do think it might better prepare us for pressing into an "unknown" future.

In my Masters thesis I quoted Dave Warlick, an educational technology consultant and speaker, who used to begin and end his training sessions with some phrase to the effect of "We are preparing students for an unknown future, where we do not know what jobs and careers will exist by the time they get there, and we have no idea what skills they will need either." A brief look at common technological innovations in education shows that this isn't quite true.

What will happen tomorrow? Well, barring a natural disaster, probably something quite similar to what happened yesterday. Shouldn't we prepare students for jobs within the knowledge economy? The statistics (much less the logic) on the reality of a knowledge economy aren't very promising. I think it might be more practical to focus on the students and technologies we have at present to address the challenges that face us right now. In particular, educators should stop listening to the predictions of educational technologists and focus instead on teaching their students.

Are there tools and technologies available to make some management practices of the classroom more efficient and less painful? Sure; pick one. Are there resources that can help demonstrate and explain concepts more effectively? Sure; pick one. But we need to stop kidding ourselves and focus on what we can do — teach. And teach well.

I do think there are some approaches or programs that offer an interesting shift in our understanding and practice of pedagogy. These are applications and web-based tools that encourage shifts in the traditional roles of teacher and student, that re-imagine what teaching and learning is in a time of great information and knowledge, but offer too little thinking and much less wisdom. Possibilities for this transformation could be facilitated by such technologies as Twitter, social networks, blogging, and WYSIWYG web-editors that allow for the simple and easy creation of websites. But, ultimately, it falls to the teachers and students to enable, live, and experience their everydayness with these technologies. In the phenomenological or lived experience of the day-to-day lives of students and teachers, technologies are part of a much larger context of meaning and social practices. Any transformation of teaching and learning would be authorized by human beings who, incidentally, would also take responsibility for these revolutions.

Teaching is about relations, about human *being*. Somewhere along the line we forgot that we're dealing with humans and not objects or things or widgets. Teaching well cannot be reduced to technical understanding. To teach is to be in conscious awareness of our responsibilities to ourselves and those around us. This includes relations that involve the earth and the environment. Whatever our aim or goal for education, technology will be there as it always has.
I want to see educators turn around the traditional relationship toward technologies and start calling the pedagogical shots.