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Disaster Capitalism, Rampant EdTech Opportunism, and the Advancement of Online Learning in the Era of COVID19

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Abstract

The authors consider the ways in which educational responses to COVID19 exemplify opportunistic disaster capitalism. Prior to the pandemic, neoliberal influence increasingly impacted education systems all over the world, pushing for increased privatization in/of schools. COVID19 has created conditions for private technology companies to push for increased participation in public schools. That is, corporations are using this health crisis to further mobilize the neoliberal agenda, and encourage policies, practices, and technological infrastructure that will be used to rationalize ongoing online learning. In turn, we ask: What are the motivations and implications of inviting private EdTech into public education? How does EdTech encourage a move to online learning; c) What are the overall impacts of online learning? Under the veil of the panic of a global health crisis, our public education systems in Canada are being put at risk.



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Learning from a computer is not education; the machine does not care. Learning from a person behaving like a machine is not education; that person's capacity for care is being suppressed. It is care that is the basis of the creativity in teaching, at all levels from Kindergarten to PhD supervision, as the teacher's practice evolves in response to the learner's development and needs.

—Connell, 2013, p. 104

There is a special place in Hell for people who cash in on tragedy.

—Singer, 2020, February 27, para. 1

Meeting the hurricane of COVID19 was unexpected, fast, and furious, as it swiftly took hold in the Canadian prairies. The first presumptive case of COVID19 in Manitoba, Canada, was announced on March 12th, 2020, and by the following day four new confirmed cases were reported. Friday the 13th was the last day of classes in the Bachelor of Education program at the University of Manitoba, where the three authors teach and research. That same afternoon, a student mysteriously set fire to the University Centre. Ambulances arrived, police converged, and smoke ensued. The fire did not spread, but COVID19 did. On Tuesday, March 24th our academic lives completely moved to an online platform. By March 31st, following an announcement from the Minister of Education, Kelvin Goertzen, K-12 classes were “suspended indefinitely for [the] school year” (Manitoba, 2020a). Educational institutions in Manitoba were effectively closed for in person classes. Manitoba was not alone in this move. Suddenly, a world health crisis became an education crisis.

Due to the global pandemic, educators have been tasked with moving their face-to-face (F2F) classrooms to remote learning environments, often online. In some cases, teachers are using EdTech¹ designed with a specific educational purpose in mind. However, many teachers are using EdTech that was not designed for education *per se*. Through this rushed transition, students, teachers and professors have turned to “free” and/or easily accessible EdTech. To be clear, many educators are working hard to connect with their students and continue their courses. Regardless, this remote teaching is not so much designed as it is “cobbled together under duress” (Supiano, 2020, para. 5). Despite their efforts, what teachers are mobilizing at this moment has been called different things--but many would be hard pressed to call this online learning. After all, online learning is a field with its own research and best practices² (Supiano, 2020).

Understandably, scholars and educators have felt protectionist about the use of the term online learning in relation to current pedagogical practices. However, our concern is less about the terminology, although we recognize that there are important distinctions. Rather, our concern is about the ways in which the rush to save education may actually result in its deterioration. As teachers and school boards struggle to maintain classes through COVID19, there is very little time to consider the long-term consequences for students, teachers, and public education more broadly.

¹ While the definition of EdTech varies, we will be using this term going forward to encompass technology, applications, online platforms, and learning management systems that are intended to facilitate the delivery of educational content. Certainly this definition is fraught with issues, as is the EdTech industry.

² We will articulate our understanding of online learning further in a later section.

In this paper, we consider how educational responses to the pandemic represent a form of opportunistic *disaster capitalism* (Klein, 2007). Klein (2007) uses the term to describe the ways in which governments and/or corporations exploit crises in order to impose neoliberal reforms. In the name of the crises, many governments declare states of emergency which grant them extraordinary powers and often suspend democratic norms. While people are distracted, disoriented, or preoccupied with survival, changes are implemented that have long term impacts on society. The crises are also often used to silence critique legally, logistically or rhetorically. Many provinces have followed the disaster capitalism playbook through COVID19.

In Manitoba, for example, the Emergency Measures Act was implemented to help the province respond to the crisis. In this way, the pandemic increased the powers of the government. In April, the government announced amendments to the Emergency Measures Act that would give the Manitoba government “increased ability to respond effectively during a state of emergency and protect vulnerable Manitobans” (Manitoba, 2020b). This amendment to power was made under the veil of the crisis, and supposedly on behalf of vulnerable citizens. However, the provincial government ran an austerity regime prior to the pandemic that cut social services, invited privatization, and increased the vulnerability of citizens (Wilt, 2019). Now, the provincial government is using the pandemic, and their increased powers, to advance their austerity agenda (Edmond, 2020). In Manitoba, as in other provinces across Canada, the circumstances created by COVID19 are being exploited to advance neoliberal interests in education.

Neoliberal efforts to encourage privatization in/of education existed prior to the pandemic; however, the uncertainty of this moment is creating openings to further these endeavors. Under the guise of responding to the crisis, educational reforms are being implemented that will have an impact far beyond this moment. COVID19 has allowed private technology companies to “quietly push for long-held goals in the frantic political and economic environment created by the outbreak” (McCabe, 2020, para. 4). As Williamson (2020) outlines:

Powerful networks, consisting of big tech companies such as Google, Microsoft and Facebook, international organizations including the OECD and UNESCO, as well as a global education industry of edu-businesses, consultancies, investors and technology providers, are coming together to define how education systems should respond to the crisis. But their objectives do not just focus on the short term. These pandemic power networks are developing new long-term policy agendas for how education systems globally should be organized long after the emergency ends. (para. 2)

This is a crucial moment, and we must ask a critical question: in this rush to save education will we inadvertently/intentionally establish new policies, practices, and technological infrastructure that will be used to rationalize continued purchasing, and encourage more moves to online learning, at the expense of student learning and public education more broadly? We want to consider this as a moment to pause and think about the impact of increased reliance on EdTech, on both parts of public education: the public and the education. Without the benefit of research data derived from the current context, this speculative piece serves as a cautionary tale.

In what follows, we outline the ways in which neoliberalism has encouraged and mobilized corporate intervention in public education globally, and in Canada specifically, long before COVID19. We do this in order to provide an historical and ideological framing for the pandemic,

and to show that our criticality and suspicion about this current moment are grounded in decades of neoliberal interventions. Although the examples abound, we focus on EdTech, and the coincident push for increased online learning, to elucidate the persistent neoliberal agenda to undermine public education, and the public good.

Neoliberal Context

In the last few decades, education systems all over the world have been impacted by the rise of neoliberal ideology and practices of government

—Connell, 2013, p. 99

Neoliberalism relies on the market as the “organizing principle for all political, social, and economic decisions” (Giroux, 2005, p. 2). Beyond privileging the rule of the market, it advances cuts to social services, promotes deregulation, and encourages privatization (Martinez & Garcia, 1997). In turn, neoliberalism encourages individualism and erodes notions of the public good. This new common sense is “legitimated, disseminated, sometimes enforced and indeed sometimes ‘sold’, by a set of very powerful and very persuasive agents and organisations...and a plethora of market-leaning Think-Tanks” (Ball, 2016, p. 1047-1048). Since the 1980s, this “extreme form of capitalism...has waged a war against public education and all vestiges of the common good and social contract” (Giroux, 2018, para. 3). These attacks intensify and legitimize societal inequities (Brown, 2015).

Under neoliberalism, divestment from public education is regarded as an opportunity for profit (Farhadi, 2019). Decreased government funding results in a deteriorating public education system, which allows corporations to step in and become “saviours” of education, filling the gaps on everything from food programs, to shared costs in infrastructure, to curriculum--all for monetary gain. This not only transfers the responsibility of education funding to private companies it also invites their interests into the system--interests that do not necessarily serve the public good. The defunding of public education promotes privatization, profit generation, and marketization of students. Education is a key target of the neoliberal project for two reasons: the market size and the capacity to foster critical, engaged citizens (Ross & Gibson, 2006).

Neoliberalism imposes a business model on education that naturalizes individualism and competition through curriculum, grading, and testing. In turn, privatization becomes apparent common sense, and any promotion of collective public responsibility is labelled ideological (an excellent built in defense mechanism). Giroux (2010) warns that the prevailing pedagogy naturalizes competitiveness, individualism, and hedonism, and discourages ethical considerations; “within this pedagogy, compassion is a weakness, and moral responsibility is scorned because it places human needs over market considerations” (p.185). As Farhadi (2019) elucidates, it is difficult to raise questions of equity, fairness and justice, when educational policy discussions are trapped within the neoliberal framing of choice, consumerism, and efficiency. This neoliberal casing creates a feedback loop: (1) school culture, curriculum and assessment naturalize competition and individualism; (2) privatization of public services are then promoted and naturalized as the right of the free market; (3) public dollars go to corporations, so corporations gain capital and become more influential; (4) privatization is encouraged and rationalized in the corporate media, and critique is labelled ideological and self-serving; (5) corporations standardize school culture and curriculum that promotes neoliberal ideology. The neoliberal playbook was in full effect in Canada long before the pandemic.

Efforts to undermine public education in Canada have been gaining traction (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2006). The Fraser Institute, a public policy think tank, “is leading the charge in the war on public schools in Canada” (Ross & Gibson, 2006, p. 7) by employing ideological attacks that rely on standardized test data. These tests, often created by for-profit publishers, are not legitimate markers of student learning nor do they reflect what is valued in provincial curricula. Yet, the test results are legitimized in rhetoric and used to manufacture a crisis about the state of public schools. These crises are used to advance neoliberal interests, whether it be through increased corporate involvement, narrowing of curriculum, or undermining of teachers’ unions. Beyond ideological attacks, Canada’s public education spending also lags behind the average developing nation’s spending (Ross & Gibson, 2006). In 2001, in an effort to make public education “more efficient”, the British Columbia (BC) government “redesigned the fiscal landscape of the province by reducing corporate and income taxes and cutting or freezing spending in government departments” (Poole & Fallon, 2017, p. 7). BC’s School Amendment Act of 2002 (Bill 34) represents an important juncture in the history of school finance in Canada. For the first time, school districts were enabled, encouraged--and required by circumstance--to behave like incorporated business entities (Poole & Fallon, 2017). This helped normalize divestment from education, and encouraged the corporatization and privatization of public education across Canada.

Funding cuts, alongside neoliberal rationale, helped privatization creep into schools across Canada in many forms: advertising; partnerships and sponsorships (for example, exclusive contracts with Coke and Pepsi); incentive programs (Campbell’s labels for education); corporate-sponsored curriculum materials (Scholastic materials); sale of service (renting out rooms, sale of curriculum materials, or recruitment of fee paying international students); user fees (highest in BC); and fundraising (school trips and athletic programs; and donation request letters to local companies) (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2006). Through various means, schools across Canada raise \$200 million annually (Shaker & Froese-Germain, 2007). Increasingly, education is “defined as an industry, and educational institutions have been forced to conduct themselves more and more like profit-seeking firms” (Connell, 2013, p. 102). Out of necessity, there is an increased reliance on Public-Private Partnerships in Canadian schools; this neoliberal trend increases inequities and further normalizes the dependency on private funds (Yoon et. al., 2019). The consistent erosion of public investment in public education necessitates and validates privatization.

COVID19 did not create a new problem in public education; rather, it presented an occasion for corporations to further a long-standing goal: to break (into) and prosper from public education. In the current moment, where schools have sent students home and teachers have shifted to online platforms out of necessity, tech companies are salivating at--and profiting from—these expansive frontiers of marketing possibilities. The pandemic represents an opportunity for EdTech companies to slip past teachers’ unions and public resistance, in order to increase corporate involvement in public education (Cohen, 2020). In the following section we look at the historical attempts of EdTech to infiltrate public education in order to provide a backdrop to the opportunism we are warning of in the current context.

EdTech

The Holy Grail of education technology entrepreneurs is to be the Uber of education... to become the platform that disrupts traditional face-to-face education and replaces it with technology dominated learning.

—Kuehn, 2017, para. 2

The current EdTech landscape is made up of digital content, learning management systems (LMS), education applications (Apps), and universal platforms (Kuehn, 2017). LMS try to emulate the features of a classroom, including content, discussion, testing, and assessment, and are used in online, blended, and face-to-face classrooms (Kuehn, 2017). Moodle and Design2Learn are two examples of LMS. Educational applications are Apps that are created with an educational purpose or target. Many school boards also use universal platforms like Microsoft Teams and Google Classrooms. EdTech is valued at \$1 billion annually and represents one of Canada's fastest growing startup sectors (Farhadi, 2019). Canadian investors recognize there is money to be made from the digitalization of education (Alini, 2012).

EdTech as a Tool of Neoliberalism

Educational technology encourages the privatization ³ of public education as it influences design, management and delivery. That is, the functionality of platforms and applications shapes and constricts engagement with curriculum and students. Concomitantly, EdTech invites privatization *in* education, as the ideas, techniques and values of businesses are adopted (efficiency, accountability, and managerialism). As Ball (2016) explains, neoliberalism alters the way “we value ourselves and value others, how we think about what we do, and why we do it” (p. 1047). EdTech is an apparatus of this value conversion.

Much of the current technology offers analytic functions that track the number of times students have logged on, the duration, and the precise time they upload work (Stommel, 2020). The insidious managerialism, built directly into the technology, positions teaching as the regulation of students. In turn, professionalism is redefined by what can be measured and rewarded, rather than by reflection, principles and judgment (Ball, 2016). Students are often unaware of the access EdTech grants teachers to their data, accounts, and correspondence (Farhadi, 2019). This encourages a culture of distrust rather than fostering relationships between teachers and students (Stommel, 2020). EdTech erodes teacher professionalism by reconfiguring how teachers interact with students, by attempting to “teacher proof” learning (Apple 2000), and by subjecting teachers and students to an audit and surveillance culture (Selwyn, 2013).

Student/learning is similarly redefined. In constructing students as “users” EdTech developers impose neoliberal values on/to students (Ramiel, 2017). The values of efficiency, individualism and competition are encouraged as education is reduced to the completion of individual assignments. In this way, EdTech alters the purpose of education to learnification (Biesta, 2004). This shift encourages a highly individualized understanding of learning, and dismisses the social aspect of education. Instead, learning is understood as an economic transaction

³ For a distinction between privatization of, and privatization in education, see Kuehn, Mathison & Ross, 2018, p. 4.

in which: the student (learner) is the consumer; the teacher, mediated and managed through EdTech, is the provider; education is recast as a commodity that is consumed by the learner (Biesta, 2004; Ramiel, 2017).

Students are also consumed by EdTech corporations through the harvesting and sale of their data (Greene, 2020). As dataveillance increases, and the collection and analysis of student data becomes routine, student value is derived from the commodification of data assemblages (Lupton & Williamson, 2017). The data collected profits EdTech companies; however, it also alters student's understanding of educational worth, of societal values, and of themselves. Students start to perform to please the indicators (Selwyn, 2019). Corporations collect data about students that they then sell back to schools (among others) to dictate the educational path of students. Schools come to value students through these data sets, as they are used to predict learning progress and educational pathways (Lupton & Williamson, 2017). Corporate data replaces professional and ethical judgement, personal relationships, and student interest. Beyond the money that can be made from the public education system through the sale of technology, licensing, and student data, companies also seek to create customers for life, as students are more likely to continue to use technology they were introduced to in school (Kuehn, 2017). In all of these ways, EdTech devalues education and prioritizes profit, shifting the "meaning of education, from a public to a private good, from a service to a commodity" (Ball, 2016, p. 1049). EdTech constructs education as an economic endeavor rather than a humanistic one. As a result, decisions about education become issues of markets and managerialism rather than collective and educational worth.

FreshGrade is an educational app that exemplifies the neoliberal agenda. First, it responds to a supposed crisis in education--a lack of steady communication between parents and the school about student progress. Then, alongside hyperbolic rhetoric about the failure of teachers to consistently connect with parents and guardians in meaningful ways, the company proposes a solution to the "crisis"--purchasing FreshGrade. Not only is there a public cost associated with the use of this application, \$5/student/year (Kuehn, Mathison & Ross, 2018), there is also a public price paid for the increased technological surveillance in schools. By normalizing corporate surveillance, the erosion of privacy, creeping privatization, and commodification, students come to expect these neoliberal consequences (values). School becomes a place where students are constantly tracked and digitally captured, and this becomes the norm. FreshGrade is an application motivated by an overall lack of trust in teachers and students, and by the belief that we can achieve excellence (in teaching and learning) through increased auditing. However, documenting and sending curated messages home does not equate to more meaningful assessment, "the opposite is almost certainly the case; increasing evaluation and auditing are symptoms of mediocrity rather than its cure" (Powers, 1996, as cited in Smyth, 2012, p. 16-17). FreshGrade advances ideas about teachers, students, and education, and makes students into corporate commodities through the collection of student data. This is the result of entrepreneurs, the original creators of Club Penguin, driving the changes to communication and assessment in education.

Rather than speak to teachers about the resources that would work best for their students, EdTech companies often market to administrators who have little knowledge about the specific pedagogical needs of a classroom (Stommel, 2020). Not only does this place decision making in the hands of people who are not necessarily technologically adept, pedagogically inclined, or current on curricular content, it could open the door to administrators falling victim to corporate

wooing tactics or taking profitable kickbacks--as we have witnessed in the United States (Watters, 2019). Less cynically, some administrators may find the “simple solutions” sold by tech companies very appealing. Administrators are doing more with less, as funding for public education continues to decline, and these “silver bullet” solutions can be very tempting. Amidst the constancy of crisis rhetoric, motivated by those who want to undercut educators, negate the systemic consequences of defunding public education, and motivate corporate interventions, administrators are looking for solutions to the crisis of the day (eg. panic over low test scores, literacy rates, and job readiness). Again, all of this is decided without the input of professional educators who know the curriculum and their community--and who often do not accept the legitimacy or premise of these crises. Classrooms are graveyards to costly gadgets imposed on educators to answer problems they did not name; interactive white boards the most ridiculous, underused, and wasteful in recent history. Priorities, promotion and purchasing reveal that there is more faith in the creators of EdTech than there is in the professionalism of educators (Kuehn et al., 2018); financial investments reflect the belief that technology can raise standards, transform education, personalize learning, and “promote learner freedom from the tyranny of the teacher” (Gray, 2010, p. 71). Rather than drawing on the expertise of educators, their professionalism and effectiveness is called into question, and they are often blamed for each supposed crisis.

The crises and blame formula serves as both distraction and justification. The desire to monetize public education requires that the professionalism of teachers be placed in doubt, that their interests be questioned, and that their unwillingness to embrace technology be associated with their reluctance to modernize. The deprofessionalization (feminization) of teachers allows tech companies to undermine and vilify educators, despite their own obvious and huge financial interests (Protosaltis & Baum, 2019). As Santoro (2018) explains, “the feminization of teaching impacts the ability of teachers’ moral concerns to be heard as ethical claims, rather than simply self-interested forms of resistance” (p. 4). Consequently, salient criticality about the use of EdTech is dismissed as self-serving. The deprofessionalization, devaluing and dismissal of teachers is part of the ongoing neoliberal formula to silence critique and mobilize privatization (Moore & Janzen, 2020). If we are not enthusiasts of new reforms, we are positioned as “unprofessional or irrational or archaic” (Ball, 2016, p. 1050). In this moment, the pandemic is also being exploited to silence critique as “good teachers” are expected to “be a team player”, “make it work”, and “do it for the kids” in these “unprecedented circumstances”. Insidiously, the ethos and pathos of this moment is being mobilized to silence important concerns about the long-term impact of EdTech/privatization on students, learning, and public education. This is the epitome of disaster capitalism, using the pandemic as a veil and a shield.

EdTech and Online Learning

Since 2006, EdTech companies have challenged the relevance of brick and mortar schools (Little, 2020), and have increasingly motivated moves to online learning. These challenges have again followed the neoliberal formula of creating the crisis and the solution; in this case, rhetoric is used to make unfounded declarations about the irrelevance of face-to-face classrooms in the current economic and technological landscape (Boyd, 2016). Simultaneously, EdTech offers a convenient, “cost-effective” solution to modernize the education system through increased online learning. The promotion of online learning as “cost effective” rests on the premise that fiscal prudence should motivate educational policy--that value should be placed over values (Ball, 2006). Even if economic value is used as a marker, research demonstrates that investing in education

reaps long term economic and societal benefits; citizens are healthier, (which reduces healthcare costs) and gain better employment (which reduces the cost of social services and increases public money through taxation) (Kidder, 2019). Yet, the ubiquity of neoliberal “logic” privileges rhetoric over research, celebrates short term “savings”, and negates the long-term costs of defunding education. Moreover, the cost cutting seems specific to one group: professional educators.

Although online learning can intensify the work of educators, they are not compensated for their additional work and training (Ross, 2008). Prior to the pandemic, technology intensified teachers’ workloads, extending the boundaries of the workday/week and of the classroom (Alberta Teachers’ Association, 2012). Trapped within a mother-teacher logic (D’Amico, 2019) that naturalizes teaching as women’s work, boundless care is expected of teachers, without remuneration. As a further attack on professionalism, online courses are viewed as an opportunity to circumvent unions and contract out services (Kuehn et al., 2018). Courses are constructed for a flat fee and then administered by people who are not educators (Ross, 2008). This is part of a larger project to diminish the professionalism and ethical responsibility required in teaching, and reduce it to delivering content, regulating students, and evaluating assignments.

Regardless, the cost cutting label is misleading in both the literal and figurative sense. Online learning requires that school boards invest in devices, applications, platforms and learning management systems (public money going to private corporations). It also entails that educators (hopefully) create course materials, facilitate learning, assess student work, and enroll in continued professional development. Online learning also requires that technicians are hired to maintain systems and troubleshoot. Considering the drop out and fail rate for online learning, we should consider the money spent as a waste rather than cost effective. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), for example, were sold as the way of the future. Among many other problems, MOOCs had retention rates below 10% (Farhadi, 2019). This potentially compounds costs, as students who do not complete an online course will need to repeat the course or turn to in person courses. Even fully online colleges, that charge students more and pay instructors less, do not have significantly lower operational costs due to “the expense of curriculum development, administrative services, legal and fiscal operations, and other activities” (Protopsaltis & Baum, 2019, p. 23). Overall, “online education has failed to improve affordability, frequently costs more than in-person alternatives and does not produce a positive return on investment” (Fain, 2019, para. 7). In the case of publicly funded schools, this is particularly infuriating, as public dollars are benefiting private corporations rather than students.

Despite the crash and burn of online offerings (Little, 2020), the corporatized hype around online learning persists. E-learning has less to do with a revolutionary transformation of education than it does “with the expansion of global capital markets and the neoliberal restructuring of education” (Farhadi, 2019, p. 178). It is for these latter reasons that in 2019, the Ontario government announced that secondary students would be required to take a minimum of four e-learning credits. Although this was eventually reduced to two courses, with an opt out clause (Little, 2020), the premise of modernization, cost saving, and efficiency still motivated the move. While the Ontario government’s demand for online learning is one of the most recent and well-known cases (due to highly publicized disputes between Ontario teachers and the government about this very issue), there is a long history of corporations and investors trying to “revolutionize”

the system. The pandemic has provided another chance for EdTech companies to mobilize online learning, despite earlier failures, resistance from educators, and public backlash.

EdTech Opportunism

Now, in the midst of the carnage of this ongoing pandemic, and the fear and uncertainty about the future it has brought, these companies clearly see their moment to sweep out all that democratic engagement.

—Klein, 2020, para. 35

When Apple founder, Steve Jobs knew he was dying of cancer, Bill Gates had one last visit with his long-time business competitor. In that meeting, they both discussed education as an untapped frontier for their corporate futures (Isaacson, 2013). Historically, there has been resistance to Mac and Microsoft infiltrating the classrooms; however, COVID19 has opened the floodgates. In May, as death tolls from COVID19 continued to rise, the Governor of New York announced that former Google CEO, Eric Schmidt, would be “heading up a blue-ribbon commission to reimagine New York state’s post-Covid reality, with an emphasis on permanently integrating technology into every aspect of civic life” (Klein, 2020, para. 3). Schmidt, who in March 2020 wrote an op-ed that said, “We should also accelerate the trend toward remote learning, which is being tested today as never before. Online, there is no requirement of proximity, which allows students to get instruction from the best teachers, no matter what school district they reside in” (Schmidt, as cited in Klein, 2020, para. 31). This sunny spin ignores the failed history of online learning, and attempts to distract from the motivations of the tech companies and governments.

Before anyone starts to think this is an American issue, days after the New York announcement, The Ontario Ministry of Education publicized a partnership with Canadian company, Knowledgehook; Ontario will be using the company’s learning platform in all 72 school districts (Kirkwood, 2020). In April, amidst some misleading claims about the purchasing of iPads, Ontario also announced a partnership with Rogers Communications and Apple (Miller, 2020). We have also seen announcements from the BC Ministry of Education about securing licensing for the application Zoom (BC Government, 2020). Although several other provinces already had relationships with Brightspace (D2L), the company announced a collaboration with the BC Ministry of Education to make the learning platform available until July 1, 2020 (D2L, 2020b). Similarly, Desire to Learn (D2L) introduced the Quick Start Care Package to help schools in Alberta move online quickly (D2L, 2020a). In Manitoba, the province announced that they would be expanding access to InformNet, an online high school that uses the Department of Education’s online learning management system, Brightspace (Manitoba, 2020c). The partnership agreements and/or expansions vary, but the increased reliance on technology companies is consistent across Canada.

Speaking to any teacher across Canada at this moment you will hear words like Edmodo, Zoom, Brightspace (D2L), Google Classroom, Teach From Home Google, Raz Kids, Star Article, Flyleaf, Epic, SeeSaw, and Microsoft Teams. Everyone is looking for the best piece of technology to facilitate learning, and companies are ready to “help”. Not all provinces or school boards entered new agreements, or made new purchases, as many utilized previously purchased EdTech. For example, many school boards already required teachers to use Office 365, but few teachers used the full array of Apps (Class Notebook, OneDrive or Teams). COVID19 has made these

previous investments essential to the functioning of school. For EdTech corporations, and the school boards who made these purchases, this has been a long-held goal.

While remote learning is a necessity of this moment, our fear is that the current reliance on EdTech will be used to rationalize increased online learning in the future. Online learning⁴ mobilizes neoliberalism, delimits criticality, and erodes public education and the public good.

Online Learning

As K–12 schooling moves out of buildings and onto the internet, we know that profiteers and hucksters will promote a commodified vision of teaching and learning. Who needs real teachers when students can simply be planted in front of computers?

—Rethinking Schools, 2020, para. 7

As educators who have embraced selected technology in our classrooms, we recognize that there are certain pedagogical advantages. We are neither Luddites nor protectionists. Following Freire (2015), we recognize that technology can enhance our practice, and that our teaching should reflect the times. In our face-to-face classrooms, technology has allowed students to express themselves through various mediums, extended classroom discussions, enabled students to reach international audiences, and enhanced classroom community. Online pedagogy, however, goes beyond the integration of technology, it is reliant on it. In this way, education risks becoming a mere exercise of technology (Freire, 2015). As such, online pedagogy requires new relationships, knowledge, and methodologies (Freire, 2015). Pedagogical strategies and tools are necessarily different in an online environment. When students and teachers, rather than technology companies, propel the curricula and methods, there are potential benefits for particular students. Specifically, it can allow educators to create personalized curricula (Graham, 2019; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019; Reese, 2015). Online learning can also permit easy integration of multimodal instruction, enabling digital texts to be rewound and re-examined a multitude of times. This feature can be particularly helpful for students in subjects that are more challenging to them. For students who want to further inquire on a topic or deepen their understanding of a skill, online learning can promote independent learning (Clover, 2017; De Paepe, Zhu, & Depryck, 2017; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019; Reese 2015). Furthermore, using computers and becoming comfortable with digital software and hardware can promote overall ease with technology (Toufaily, Zalan, & Lee, 2018) and foster digital adeptness (De Paepe et al., 2017; Hizer, Schulz, & Bray, 2017).

Some pragmatic issues can also be addressed by online learning. In asynchronous online courses students can engage with the material at any time (Clover, 2017; De Paepe et al., 2017; Graham, 2019, Hizer et al., 2017; McGinn, 2019; Pourreau, 2015; Reese, 2015; Toufaily et al., 2018; Wang & Torrisi-Steele, 2015). In this way, online learning can increase accessibility (Clover, 2017; Craig, 2015; Hizer et al., 2017). For high achieving and/or self-motivated learners, online learning provides a useful and effective means to obtain course credits. Online courses can

⁴ To be clear, we are aware that there are online pedagogues who are fostering criticality, particularly about the very technology they use for teaching and learning; however, by and large, online learning reduces education to the delivery of content, students to commodities, and teachers to regulators.

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also take less time to complete (Puri, 2018); Farhadi (2019) found that some students were completing full credit high school courses in as little as nine hours.

And yet, these celebrations are undeniably critiques. Credentialing is not education. When students complete a course in nine hours, they have not learned more, they have reduced learning to the consumption of content, avoided deliberation and dialogue with a diverse group of people, and dismissed the transformative potential of education. While there are some critical digital pedagogues (Morris & Stommel, 2018) who are reinforcing the importance of community, humanity, accessibility, equity, inclusion, and criticality--particularly about the tools they use--most online learning practices allow corporations and platforms to dictate pedagogy. While the current moment may not reflect the best of online teaching and learning, issues with online learning are not a consequence of the current conditions. Online learning is designed to appeal to corporate interests: the efficient delivery of market driven content; the potential of creating well-trained future employees; and the possibility of lowering costs, and therefore taxes (Hursh, 2015). The focus on preparing workers, by privileging marketable skills, minimizes the ethical potential of education (Rankin, 2020). We remain worried that the increased investment in EdTech, and the consequential moves towards online courses, will narrow the curriculum, reduce education to the consumption of content, negate the importance of relationships in teaching and learning, flatten the artistry and professionalism of pedagogy, stifle necessary criticality, and reproduce inequity.

Narrows Curriculum and Encourages Consumption of Content

In using new technologies, educators often ignore the necessary changes in pedagogy, and instead employ them in older, traditional ways (Cuban, 2001; Wang & Torrisi Steele, 2015). Through the pandemic many teachers have resorted to uploading video recorded lectures supplemented by emailed assessments (Lederman, 2020). Others are sending digital versions of course materials designed for the face-to-face (F2F) classroom (Terada, 2020). Certainly, the lack of innovation is understandable under the circumstances. If you asked a dentist to clean your teeth, through a screen, without any of their regular equipment, it would be understandably extremely difficult (if not impossible). Yet, there are so many misconceptions about what teachers do, that the dentist analogy may seem a far-fetched parallel for some. However, transitioning F2F pedagogy to an online environment is about as easy and effective. Our worry is that the best of what we are witnessing through the pandemic, is the norm for online education.

The nightly news celebrates tech savvy teachers who have used costuming, acting, and editing skills to produce videos for their students. For students who have missed their teachers, this has likely been exciting. While the effort is certainly commendable, it is unclear how this encourages criticality, creativity, inquiry, and/or learning. Instead it risks falling into the category of edutainment. If this is newsworthy online pedagogy, what is happening the rest of the time? Both the functionality of technology, and the underlying ideological motivations, encourage easily reproducible and assessable curriculum and assignments. Most often online learning relies on standardized, linear, chronological content (Farhadi, 2019). This universalist approach to knowledge ignores the way that knowledge is socially and culturally constructed, contextual, and relational. Instead it imposes scripted knowledge, reinforces hegemony, privileges Western epistemologies, and reduces education to the consumption and relay of content. Criticality is not simply an inadvertent loss of online learning it is intentionally discouraged by design.

Delimits and Discourages Criticality

The purpose of education is to transform society (Freire, 1968/2018). There are systemic and institutional privileges and inequities that persist in our society, and education should promote systemic and structural change (Kelly, 2012). Any teaching that negates criticality upholds, normalizes, “neutralizes”, and privileges the status quo. If the intent of education is to question the world, to trigger, motivate, and spark curiosity, and to deconstruct the apparatuses that sustain hegemony, online learning in its current/common iteration promotes exactly the opposite (Boyd, 2016). By emphasizing efficiency and replicability, online learning relies on the repetition and regurgitation of information, and the mechanization and technicization of knowledge--all of which encourages students to neglect criticality and simply produce and reproduce. This naturalizes neoliberalism, and ensures there are fewer critically oriented citizens prepared to challenge the role of EdTech in education, or the long-term societal impacts of online learning. Neoliberalism targets education for this very reason, to discourage and politicize criticality (Ross & Gibson, 2006). Through transmissive pedagogy, particular knowledge is normalized alongside passivity. In addition, as online education risks increased isolation and individualism, it negates the necessity of relationships in teaching and learning.

Dehumanize and Disembody

Critical pedagogy (Freire, 1968/2018), requires dialogical and dialectical relationships amongst participants, including teachers, in the learning process. For Freire, learning happens in and through dialogue and reflection, a process by which individuals develop political understandings of the world around them. This, which Freire identifies as *conscientização*, necessarily goes beyond content delivery and video conferencing. In order for *conscientização* to take place, a profound interpersonal involvement amongst teachers and students must happen. For this, it is essential that instructors spend significant time with their students and become familiar with the culture, linguistic patterns, and lifestyle of the community, so teachers might understand the perspective of their students. It becomes difficult to imagine *conscientização* unfolding in an online learning environment, where teachers and students are physically apart, where expedience is prioritized, where they are “only connected by the electronic impulses of a computer network” (Boyd, 2016, p. 167). As online learning encourages competency or outcomes-based education, the teacher’s role moves from building relationships with and among students, to using predictive analytics to anticipate student behaviour patterns from their user data (Farhadi, 2019). This reduces students to their login times and assignment completion. The focus on completion of tasks fosters competition and instils individualism. In turn, this ignores the relational, human element of education.

In order to challenge systemic and institutional inequities, students need to be placed in relation to their peers. Students need meaningful interactions with people in their classroom community, not just “access” to materials (Protopsaltis & Baum, 2019). Relationships with classmates help to humanize issues of inequity, to foster empathy, and to encourage collective responsibility. As Connell (1993) reminds, “learning is a full-blooded, human social process” (p. 63). Learning is somatic, and the physical distance of online learning excludes the role of the body in learning. By focusing on individual scholarship, neoliberalism reorients teaching and learning

away from aspects of social, emotional or moral development (Ball, 2016, p. 1054). Absent criticality and empathy, online learning exacerbates and further entrenches inequities.

Increase Inequity

The social, cultural, and economic apparatuses that sustain online learning are inherently neoliberal, privatized, expensive, and discriminatory. Undoubtedly, the sudden move of classes to online platforms due to COVID19 amplifies and perpetuates the already existing inequities experienced by students from low income families, racial and ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, and those that for any reason cannot be supervised by an adult at home. The inequities (re)produced in schools are “replicated with precision online” (Du Bose & Gorski, 2020, para. 11).

Online education is neither ahistorical or neutral (Farhadi, 2019). Through “discriminatory design” biases are built into technological infrastructure (Benjamin, 2019). Technology does not transcend race, nor does the learning that is mediated through it; Black students are disproportionately stigmatized, misdirected, pathologized, and disciplined online (Farhadi, 2019). Further, as we have seen from recent Zoom-bombings, racialized students are more often the victims of attacks during online discussions. The technological infrastructure perpetuates inequities, as whiteness is the universal default. Moreover, the pedagogy that follows negates necessary criticality about the way the tools we rely on privilege and oppress.

The move to online learning assumes all students a) have equal access to the Internet; b) have current technology (apps, devices and adequate wifi/broadband); c) have technological aptitude; and d) possess digital literacies. Some school boards have made celebratory, and confusing, announcements about getting devices to all students. Others have made insulting suggestions about accessing the Internet in school parking lots. At the best of times, students facing poverty cannot afford the technology necessary for online courses, and when they do, the technology is often shared amongst family members, making students’ screen time very limited (Farhadi, 2019). As such, online learning exacerbates “gaps in educational attainment across socioeconomic groups” (Protopsaltis & Baum, 2019, p. 2) which (re)produces class inequities. Students are not served by the system, and their opportunities are limited in society as a result of these systemic failings.

There are salient issues beyond connectivity: “students with more extensive exposure to technology, and with strong time management and self-directed learning skills are more likely than others to adapt to online learning” (Protopsaltis & Baum, 2019, p. 15). Online learning becomes even more problematic and exclusive when it comes to students with exceptionalities. Students cannot freely engage in conversation with teachers, support workers, or classmates through online learning platforms that have not been designed specifically to support their needs (Bacchus, 2020). This is because online platforms do not adjust for individual student’s learning differences, and disparities between students are exacerbated as a result (Du Bose & Gorski, 2020). Learners, for a variety of reasons, underperform in fully-online environments (Protopsaltis & Baum, 2019). Moreover, forty percent of students who enroll in online courses drop out (Farhadi, 2019). These initial failures can contribute to further decline in future courses or drop out of school altogether (Protopsaltis & Baum, 2019, p. 15).

For many students, the social connections and sense of community that the school setting enables is very important because they establish strong relationships with teachers, support workers, and they make connections with classmates, who become friends, sometimes for life.

This is especially true for students whose home is not a safe place to be. There is no technological solution to the problem of learning in a home environment that is overcrowded and/or abusive (Klein, 2020). For low income students, school buildings are more than a space for learning. Schools represent shelter, nutrition, health care, emotional support, and security. There is far more at stake for marginalized students when we reduce education to the delivery of courses to an online environment.

Online learning standardizes knowledge and achievement, inculcates individualism and competition, delimits criticality and empathy, and exacerbates and entrenches inequities. Absent criticality, the reign of the market persists and notions of the public good further erode.

Conclusion

As these bureaucratic technological systems become more ubiquitous, educators increasingly accept them as inevitable instead of furiously raising our collective eyebrows when institutions invest more and more in machines (and algorithms) and less and less in teachers (and the work of teaching).

—Stommel, 2020

Writing from within the crisis, we have yet to total the receipts and collect the data. While our projections are speculative, they are grounded in historic examples of disaster capitalism that have helped to impose neoliberalism for more than forty years (Klein, 2017). They are informed by previous neoliberal interventions in public education. They emanate from the increased investment in EdTech, and corresponding moves towards online learning, prior to the pandemic. Our speculations follow Klein's (2020) accounting of pandemic disaster capitalism in the United States, what she refers to as a "Screen New Deal" that aims to engrain technology into every element of civic life. This is not only a cautionary tale about those who seek to profit off of disaster, it is a warning about the long-term consequences of the investments and decisions we make amidst the chaos brought on by COVID19.

The hurried embrace of e-infrastructure through the COVID19 pandemic negates the professionalism of teachers, the varied needs of students, and the overall purpose of public education. Further, the turn to corporations to "answer the problems of education" through the pandemic, opens the door to further privatization. That is, governments and school boards could use the investments in technology made during the crisis as evidence/rationale for future investment. As Walcott (2020) warns, this swift transition to online platforms might mean a change to education from which there will be no return. Now is the time to stop, absorb the research on online learning and educational technology, and heed the warnings about letting the robots into the schoolhouse. In this context, we, educators, must question: the impacts of dedicating public dollars to private technology companies; the ways in which online learning mobilizes neoliberalism and contributes to inequities; and the logic/ideology that compels these moves. It is time to furiously raise our collective eyebrows.

Despite the constant efforts to deprofessionalize teachers, and reject their experience and opinions about what is best for students, "[n]ow more than ever, we must forcefully demonstrate

why we matter so powerfully to the society we have helped to make by refusing to pretend that what we do is so easily transferable” (Walcott, 2020, para. 8). When COVID19 appeared the important pedagogical distinction between online and face-to-face teaching and learning was dismantled almost instantaneously (Walcott, 2020). It is a misguided assumption that technology propels the social and cultural aspects of learning (Black, 2002). Instead, the key is teacher led pedagogical choices. Of import is (1) the intentional choices educators make and implement in curricula and classroom design; (2) the use of thoughtfully chosen technology to extend learning; and (3) the recognition of each student and unique community in the design of one’s pedagogy. The default configuration of a classroom, or a piece of technology, should not dictate one’s pedagogy (Stommel, 2013). When online learning is deemed a necessity of circumstance, we need strong curriculum design and pedagogical approaches. Online pedagogy, constructed intentionally by a professional educated in the field, should “encourage active engagement, critical thinking, collaboration, interaction, making, doing, or discussing” (Stommel, 2013, para. 3). Online teaching requires developing and honing skills, and fostering a completely dissimilar approach to that of face-to-face curriculum development, implementation and teaching. This requires increased professionalism based on principles and judgement (Ball, 2016) not universalized, corporate, default curriculum.

Now is the time that our public education system needs more public investment, “not philanthropic experimentation; more democratic governance, not disenfranchisement; more guidance from the profession, the community, and researchers, not from those looking to privatize and profiteer” (Kumashiro, 2020, para. 2). Public schools are essential in challenging inequity, promoting critically engaged citizens, and providing the space for public debate: “If we are to achieve the democratic ideal of equity, there must be a commons, and it must be accessible for all to participate effectively. Public education is an important part of that commons” (Kuehn, 2003, p. 4).

In North America, public education has been our public gem (Chomsky, 2017). The move to unilaterally accept online learning in the age of COVID19 sets the stage for satisfying the neoliberal agenda to transform public education. This alters the focus from promoting a public good to that of making money (Kuehn, 2017). We worry about the ways this will naturalize neoliberalism and reinforce individualism and competition over collaboration and community support (Kuehn, 2017). Strong democracies require an educated citizenry: “You cannot expect anything from uneducated citizens except unstable democracy” (Mayor, as cited in Giroux & Filippakou, 2020, p. 6). We want to fight a future/further plutocracy, in which society is controlled by the corporate elite (Chomsky, 2017).

We envision a post-COVID19 era of hope. Rather than viewing students as consumers to be profited on, we want to foster learners who are critical, ethical members of society: “Our vision should be that every student receives the very best that our country has to offer as a fundamental right and a public good; not be forced to compete in a marketplace where some have and some have not, and where some win and many others lose” (Kumashiro, 2020, para. 13). A bolder future is envisioned wherein students learn by engaging in empathy, critical skill development, social interaction, and thoughtful discourse. In the words of Arundhati Roy (2020):

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers

and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (para. 42-43)

This requires that we use the pandemic as an opportunity to re-invest in public education, to recognize the opportunity this moment provides to “reimagine” education without the corporate lens.

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