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The university in a world of digital technologies: Tensions and challenges

Dang Nguyen

School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, University of Melbourne, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the challenges and tensions in the relationship between the university as a social institution and the world of digital technologies in which it finds itself, from the perspective of an early-career academic in her late 20s. It argues that problems abound in the university's tendency to adopt non-educational digital technologies for educational purposes in the name of student engagement, and that this approach should be avoided. It also argues that, faced with an uncertain future of job automation and gig economy, universities should move away from the 'work-ready' graduate model. Instead, it should empower its students with the capacity to flexibly reprogram their skillsets for the changing nature of work, and play an active role in envisioning new (non)work realities by engaging students in the transformation of their education.

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1. Introduction

This paper discusses the challenges and tensions in the relationship between the university as a social institution and the world of digital technologies in which it finds itself, from the perspective of an early-career academic in her late 20s. The paper first discusses the changing role of the university instructor with regards to social media use for teaching activities, arguing that the utilisation of non-educational digital technologies for educational purposes is more problematic than beneficial. It then discusses the role of universities in an uncertain future of the gig economy and job automation, and the crucial role students of higher education will play in transforming their own education in preparation for this future.

2. A professor walks into a class

In July 2017, a LinkedIn post by an associate professor at Deakin University went moderately viral. The post featured a photo of an empty classroom, accompanied by a long caption that explained how the associate professor walked into his first class of the semester with an audience of zero:

"SHOULD I USE THE OLE SIZE 16s? I don't know about you but my generation always showed up for lectures and seminars, particularly at the start of semester. Here is my first class for 2nd semester which was supposed to have started 15 mins ago.

After being pumped up to give a great class, I am deflated that they couldn't bother their arse to show up. The subject I am teaching is Estate Planning - a mixture of law, superannuation, tax and financial planning - and would be one of the hardest they will encounter in their whole course.

Students don't realise that their lecturers could be their best advocates for getting a job.

What would you do if you were in my shoes?"

(Adapted from Raftery 2017)

The post was picked up by several online news outlets including Sydney Morning Herald, news.com.au, and Mashable (Cummins, 2017, Lieu, 2017, Young, 2017). Of the hundreds of comments that the post itself received from LinkedIn users, some stood out. LinkedIn users claiming to be students who deliberately did not turn up for the class made three provocative points. The first was that the associate professor, as an education service provider, should not expect his customers to only behave in a way he deems appropriate. The second point stressed the real value of the modern education experience lies in the flexibility to gain work experience while doing a degree - something which may only be achieved by working in lieu of attending lectures. And third pointed to the fact that the availability and accessibility of online content means that contact time is no longer vital to learning.

While the incident itself might be trivial and forgotten before the next viral story, it highlights some of the most salient tensions and challenges in the relationship between the modern uni-

E-mail address: dang.nguyen@student.unimelb.edu.au

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versity and the digital ecosystem in which it finds itself. Some of these challenges predate digital technologies. The commercialisation of higher education, for example, and the need to reform the university as a social institution, have carried themselves into the digital age and manifest new tensions. Other challenges, such as discussions around digital accessibility of course materials and the consequent declining role of the university professor are more technologically driven. The LinkedIn incident itself was also technologically driven: the the associate professor used a social media platform to broadcast and seek feedback on a situation happening in his workplace. This further underscores the integrated role of digital technologies in higher education beyond classroom settings.

The original promises of digital technologies were radical and optimistic. From the democratisation of knowledge with Wikipedia (König, 2013), to lowering obstacles to education access with MOOCs (Liyanagunawardena et al., 2013), technology determinists see a future where technological fixes to socio-political problems are not only possible, but inevitable. Larry Sanger, co-founder of Wikipedia, famously quipped in an article that “professionals are no longer needed for the bare purpose of the mass distribution of information and the shaping of opinion.” (2007). Jimmy Wales, another co-founder of Wikipedia, asked us to “imagine a world in which every single human being can freely share in the sum of all knowledge,” and used this plea as Wikipedia’s vision statement (Sutcliffe, 2016). While the anarchists speak of the demise of the university as an institutional pillar, others speak of the possibility to open up the university, mitigate inequality, and transform the learning experience. MOOCs are seen as means through which the university can become more globally inclusive, with the potential to enhance quality of life in developing countries (Patru and Balaji, 2016). Digital education, or online distance learning, has the potential to bridge geographical, social, and economic gaps for a more globally competitive workforce (Hiltz and Turoff, 2005). E-learning and the possibilities of constructing virtual worlds as learning environments might forever revolutionise higher education (Ruth, 2010).

The reality of digital and social technology’s integration into higher education, however, has been much more mundane. On an everyday basis, the university and its faculty deal with events and episodes of conflict that are illustrative of slowly but radically shifting power dynamics between the university as a social brand and the social base it purports to serve. Who should the professor be, if no longer the “keeper of knowledge”? Who are university students? What do they want from their education, if skills can be self-taught and work experience valued over contact hours? How should the university respond to, and stay abreast of, evolving social realities that are constantly being reshaped and redefined by digital technologies?

3. Racing on the machine¹: learning with technologies

While the use of learning management systems (LMS) as basic technology resources is the norm for higher education in the English-speaking world, these technologies tend to be perceived as content- and activity-centric, as opposed to student-centric (Chatti et al., 2007, Mott, 2010). It is of little surprise, then, that when given the opportunity, a sizeable number of university instructors choose to conduct various teaching activities on popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter with an aim to “enhance learning outcomes” (Wakefield, 2012, VanDoorn and Eklund, 2013, Chawinga, 2017). What makes social media most attractive as a site of teaching, according to these instructors, is the fact

that students already spend a considerable amount of their time on these platforms (Wakefield, 2012, VanDoorn and Eklund, 2013). Technological affordances such as synchronicity and instantaneity of communication are also often cited as what makes social networking sites user-centric; the capacity for user communities to be built on these platforms are seen as network-centric and can help foster a sense of belonging for distance learners (VanDoorn and Eklund, 2013). However, it is unclear how these technological affordances in themselves qualify social networking sites as effective sites for teaching, as they can be faithfully built into LMS to facilitate more engaged learning.

What could be the harm in the professor “branching out” to where student attention is supposedly already engaged in order to facilitate learning? If no longer “keepers of knowledge”, can the professor at least be the “courier”? The problems with hijacking a proprietary technological space that was not built for educational purposes are manifold, but I will outline four main reasons. Firstly, social media platforms such as Facebook employ data and privacy policies that are commercially driven, and are often opaque. While it might be the case that most students are already sharing their personal data (whether fully informed about these services’ terms of use or otherwise), it is arguably unethical for instructors to require students to supply more data pertinent to their online identities that would eventually feed into the commercially driven practices of these companies.

Secondly, it is important to understand the geographical stickiness of online services that are global by design. Social networking services are required to comply with local laws in the different countries where they operate, and it is of their interest to build harmonious relationships with local governments. Facebook, for example, established a communication channel with the Vietnamese government to receive direct content blocking requests in April 2017 (VnExpress, 2017), and subsequently removed 159 anti-government accounts seven months later (Vo, 2017). With academic freedom being at the heart of what the university stands for, utilisation of digital technologies should not be driven by convenience, but rather by principle and thoughtful deliberation.

Thirdly, social media are not neutral technologies that can be unproblematically appropriated for educational purposes. Social media are better understood as a techno-social practice woven into the fabric of modern society. The “collapse of contexts” (Boyd, 2002, 2008; Marwick and Boyd, 2011) is inevitable, and can be more problematic than beneficial. Context collapse on social media happens when social contexts are meshed as a result of site-specific architectural designs or agentic user practices. This can be intentional – context collusion) – or unintentional – context collision (Davis and Jurgenson, 2014). When a collapse of contexts occurs, social actors navigate the shifting boundaries between private and public, professional and personal, in order to maintain contextual integrity (Nissenbaum, 2010). In the instance of university classrooms, both the professor and the student perform their own identities and personal negotiations in different social media contexts (David and Jurgenson, 2014). These contexts are pertinent to specific social relationships, situational definitions, temporal moments, and distinct locales (David and Jurgenson, 2014). Even when the professor actively initiates context *collusion* and invites students to socialise as a means to deliver knowledge and facilitate discussion (for example, by become friends on Facebook), there is no guarantee that context *collision* will not occur. This is largely because context collision is particularly common in authority-subordinate relations (David and Jurgenson, 2014), which characterises the professor–student relationship.

Personal missteps as well as mishandling of user data by social media companies can also cause context collision. Even though strategies can be devised to mitigate potential conse-

¹ Hughes 2017.

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