

Online Learning: is Critical Thinking a Part of the Discourse?

The debate over online learning is currently highlighted in the media by MOOCs (Massive Open Online Classes), programs that provide essentially free online college courses, often with students paying only a testing fee at the completion of the class. These MOOCs are being touted as the new model for education and the way in which to democratize education by bringing the costs of an undergraduate degree down to a price that everyone can afford. This is happening at a time when state budgets are tight and public educational institutions, like Eastern Washington University or Spokane Falls Community College, are having their budgets cut, tuition raised, and increased student fees, in order to meet budget shortfalls. During these budgetary discussions, administrators are actively looking for ways to increase enrollments and cut costs, and online classes are being utilized as a technological solution to these strategic problems. In this context, many instructors are beginning to teach online classes, developing online curricula, and trusting they can engage students as much in online as in the classroom settings. They, instructors, are involved, either because of the benefits of teaching flexibility and trust the new pedagogy embedded in technology, or because administrators pushing for increased enrollment capabilities and lower costs per student.

The Neoliberalism Discourse

Our research into existing online education terminology has revealed that new meanings are being attributed to the many terms and concepts in use in the current discourse

over online learning. Increasingly terms like; privatized education, democratization of education, individualized instruction, curriculum, productivity analysis, cost-effectiveness, and outcome based education, are being ascribed to define online learning. These terms and concepts, from among many, are imbedded in this discourse currently promoting the benefits of online education. In this paper we will reference this discourse as the Neoliberalism discourse in education (Springer).

In this discourse, both teachers and administrators, as well as the business, educational, and political communities promoting online technology, seek to redefine the traditional meaning of education. Together they articulate online learning by signifying the embedded values related to concepts such as privatizing, democratizing, individualizing, productivity, and cost-effectiveness. Presumably, these concepts are all designed to serve the student-consumer in their search for higher education as a private good. The neoliberal discourse attempts to build a pedagogy by conflating capitalism to online learning.

The Traditional Classroom

The traditional and most recognized method of thinking in regards to the transfer of knowledge (teaching), and there are recognized variations of this, Paavola (2004) calls this the acquisition metaphor. Acquisition teaching is concerned with the transfer of knowledge from the instructor to the student, the mind is a type of container of knowledge and learning is the process that fills the container. This knowledge is realized through the process of applying and using this knowledge in new situations (Paavola, Lipponen, and Hakkarainen 557). The Instructor lectures, involves a textbook, promotes in class dialogue and then the student is tested to see what has been retained. Pitts research showed that the instructors in Spokane are

encouraged to develop their own curriculum and some instructors believe that teachers should only use curriculum that has already shown success in the traditional classroom (Pitts). This approach to learning is similar to what Chih-Hsiung Tu described when he wrote, “Fundamentally, students are engaged in reading online materials, participating in online discussion and conducting assignments and projects which are then submitted online. This design involves learners in three tasks, obtaining information (reading/researching course contents), communication (discussing course content) and demonstrating learning outcome (presenting assignments and projects)” (190). Perkins and Salomon write “Consequently, the ends of education are not achieved unless transfer occurs. Transfer is all the more important in that it cannot be taken for granted. Abundant evidence shows that very often the hoped-for transfer from learning experiences does not occur. Thus, the prospects and conditions of transfer are crucial educational issues” (3).

Critical Thinking

Traditional teaching methods, and similarly much of the online learning curriculum, only involves learners in three tasks, obtaining information, communication and demonstrating learning outcome (Chih-Hsiung Tu 190), while critical and complex thinking is at the foundation of effectively teaching any subject (Elder 3; Tsui 201; Paul 31). Where a traditional student will believe that they have learned and understood a subject, a critical thinker will recognize that their thinking is probably flawed, and they will have developed the ability to question their assumptions, Paul writes, “If we want to think well, we must regularly analyze, assess, and reconstruct it.” (28). Traditional and online educational pedagogies often fail to produce students with a foundation that allows them to critically understand that they may not know

what they think they do. These are the traditional learning methods that inhabit many of higher education's traditional classrooms, as well as online learning classrooms, and fail to provide the critical thinking leaders that today's businesses are looking for (Hart Research Associates).

Conclusion

Our research has exposed that the current debate over online learning is not about the advantage of online technology's ability to more effectively communicate critical and complex thinking skills, the underlying guiding force behind all professional development (Elder), but rather, how higher education can utilize online learning to teach, just as well as the traditional classroom. By implementing a neoliberalism capitalist business model; lower operating costs, and increased student enrollment, higher education will become an increasingly more profitable endeavor for University as well as private for-profit education suppliers. For the student, today's online debate is not about technologies' ability, through online classes, to increase their critical and complex thinking skills, and thus leadership skills, but how online classes will allow students to learn what they want, with the flexibility they want, at a price they can afford (Lester). Today's higher learning discourse has shifted toward a system of academic competition and student consumption and away from the system of peer cooperation and the academics of teaching critical and complex thinking.

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