

DEMOCRATIZING EDUCATION: PEDAGOGICAL ACTIVISM AND TECHNOLOGICAL FUTURES

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Abstract

The current and ongoing urgencies for pedagogical invention in both philosophy and practice demand teaching and learning designs and applications that have consequence in terms of civic engagement. The achievement of democratic civic understandings, values, and practices depends on the recognition by educators that they are in fact, charged with the critical and ennobling task of developing through content and action the present and future civic capacities of their students; and such capacities are antidotal to the troubling ascendancy of populism, political autocracies and thuggeries around the globe. In an era irrefutably afflicted with the profusion of disinformation, the erosion of public trust, and the destabilization of truth, education for democratic participation is both intervenor and instigator for the broad project of citizenship and social change. In this sense, pedagogies are necessarily activist in their commitment to social engagement and change. The recognition of the exigencies of democratic education is more than a matter of curricula content that engages critically with the definitions and principles of deliberative democracy; rather, such recognition should result in pedagogical approaches and practices that model democratic participation especially in terms of learning environments and an infinitely more expansive view of the classroom. Key and orienting in the project of democratizing education are the determinants and elaborations of technology, and in particular AI in the educational context. While there is considerable handwringing around potential compromises to academic integrity and a rapid and unrestrained increase in academic dishonesty without efforts to neutralize the foundations and capacities of AI-generated papers, this paper explores affordances of current and emerging technologies in terms of precise practices toward democratic education, from pedagogical innovation, creative approaches to course design, new evaluation methods and criteria, expansive and experiential learning spaces, and more.

Keywords: *Democratic education, AI, technological advance.*

1. Introduction

The arguments presented here are motivated by two urgent and interconnected issues. First, as education is the oxygen of democracy and ultimately the means toward a vigorous and just civic culture and society, its cultivation and progress are no less than an antidote to authoritarianism; that is, democratic pedagogies are a counter to the rise of authoritarian regimes, and the ongoing and deleterious spread of disinformation, the erosion of public trust, and the destabilization of truth. Second, the values and classroom practices of democratic education are in fact, critical in the decisive advance of educational technology. With compelling concerns over the automation of education (and comprehensive societal automation in broader terms), and with technologies such as OpenAI's ChatGPT contesting and disrupting educational norms and practices, how do educators respond to reimagine, adapt, and reinvent teaching and learning practices? Do educators focus on the neutralization of the technology to mitigate the fears over AI-enabled academic dishonesty (to date, a fixation of academic responses), or do they begin to rethink pedagogical practice to reconceptualize course design, assessment measures and methods, reinvigorate and expand experiential and community-based learning, understand learning spaces as well beyond the confines of the classroom? Educators might invoke the practices of democratic education as key and consequential response to and anticipation of ongoing technological provocations of AI in education, and throughout society.

The university is above all, a site of citizenship, and democratic education is the means by which this purpose of citizenship is articulated and asserted. In perilous times when the foundations of democracy are eroded or under siege, when political discourse is debased, when ideologically driven denials of science challenge reason, the role of education as the custodian of democratic values is written in high relief. Indeed,

the education project is to cultivate student citizens who are independent and critical thinkers and eminently capable to grasping, questioning challenging and acting upon the sociocultural, political, and economic conditions and issues of their time; that is, students who understand and realize their agency, and who see themselves as protagonists in their own lives. In this way, the educational institution is necessarily charged with the custodianship and advance of civic literacy and serves as an exemplar of democratic education. This foundational purpose of the contemporary university figures decisively in the surge of technological change and the current accelerated expansion of AI in the educational context. As will be discussed, the very principles and practices of democratic education are a means by which open access AI can be productively harnessed and applied in education and pedagogical strategies.

2. A note on the philosophy of education

Discrete, experimental empirical method and data is certainly prominent in studies in education, but of course, there are numerous other approaches in the discipline that have yielded significant insights and understandings of education, and that have been enormously consequential and in fact, discipline-transforming. Educational philosophy and the politics of education are expansive critical inquiries that have had profound impacts on educational fields, and particularly so in critical analyses of education and technology. It is never enough to simply investigate how technology works because how technology works is deeply embedded in broader political dimensions of education in society; and the philosophy of education offers precisely a critique of the role and politics of education in society. There is no single methodological authority in academic inquiry in education, no single method that has an exclusive franchise on education scholarship, no immutable standard to which all studies in education must comply. We require a wide-ranging and multidisciplinary discourse to grasp and forge educational futures, and particularly in terms of the magnitude and the velocity of technological change. Studies in education overall, should be expansive and unbiased, and as much about ideas and philosophy as about empirical data method and analysis. Clearly some of the most prescient and influential work in the innovation and advancement of education have been in the areas of philosophy, applied philosophy and politics of education, and such works have been provocative, epochal, and discipline-transforming. This is not a critique of empiricism but rather is meant as an inoculation against constrained views of education inquiry that privilege only empirical method and foreclose on some of the most substantive and consequential thought on education and pedagogy across centuries.

3. Democratic education and experiential learning

Educational philosopher and reformer John Dewey understood that education and democracy were co-determinate. As he noted, “Democracy has to be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife.” (Boydston, 1980)

Democratic education at its core, is a project of education that strives toward a robust account of citizenship as the foundational educational purpose and prepares students as citizens with tools for political and social engagement and participation. Simply stated, democratic education gives students the imagination and the agency to instigate and shape social change in positive and socially just ways. Henry Giroux’s reflections on critical pedagogy and democratic education underscore this issue: “Education, in the final analysis, is really about the production of agency.” (França, 2019). Giroux is emphatic that all education is an “introduction to the future”— an instruction for students to imagine and to struggle for the future they want—and that education is “at the centre of any discourse about democracy”. Education then, is the site where students learn of their capacities to act upon, influence, and enhance public discourse, to see their learning as leading to meaningful and consequential civic engagement and social change. “Consequential” means that educational values, pedagogical design and practice, teaching and learning environments, and institutional policies and priorities need to be driven by the goals of democratic education and the achievement of citizenship.

The notion that education is a political process with real world impact and influence owes substantially to Paulo Freire’s theories of critical pedagogy; in particular, Freire’s expansive view of pedagogy that identified education as a civic and moral project driven by the urgencies of politics and citizenship (Freire, 1970). For Freire, there was no ambiguity in educational purpose, and no possible “neutrality” in the educational process. He argued that education functions either as an instrument of conformity or an instrument of freedom; and as an instrument of freedom, education reinforces the capacity of students as citizens to act with creative agency toward social change. An informed and active public is the direct and powerful progeny of education. The contention here writ large is that if the rise of authoritarianism is a failure of education, education also holds the ameliorative key — knowledge production must be concerned with and itself structured by democratic values and practices.

The notion of an unbounded classroom is a retheorization of pedagogy and how it must not only accommodate, but moreover facilitate and advance learning that is relevant, “real world” as students learn to act upon their world with resolve and imagination. Democratic education builds and sustains a sense of civic engagement, and the strongest inclination to civic action. Educators must forge classrooms that are never physical or intellectual enclosures, but rather spaces that engage and inspire while they also unsettle, provoke, and challenge complacency. An oft-cited dictum from John Dewey, is deceptively simply, but complex and provocative in its method. He urged an approach to pedagogy that is “as unscholastic as possible”, that is activated and directed by “experience” or “empirical situations” from outside the school and that arise in everyday life. The methods of educators, argued Dewey, must “give pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing of such a nature as to demand thinking, or the intentional noting of connections; learning naturally results.” (Dewey, 2008) Dewey advocated a philosophy of progressive education that privileges experience, that conceptualizes content as a process rather than as immutable and absolute, that evolves subject matter from experience, and that develops from the social embedment of that experience. With over a century of ongoing interpretation, application, development and revision, experiential learning remains a current and future-facing educational philosophy and practice that situates pedagogies and learning in a dialogue between formal and applied learning.

4. The future is upon us

Assessments of the future need to start with accounts of the past. Twenty-four hundred years ago, Plato (channelling Socrates) in *Phaedrus*, denounced technology in education. His concern was the erosion, if not the demise of the dialogic foundations of teaching and learning through the mechanization of education through the technology of writing. (Plato, 2005) Writing was critiqued precisely because it was static and immutable, and therefore carried an authority that silenced students—the weight and dominance of the written word forecloses on dialogue and the power of memory in this view. Indeed, this is an early theory of technological determinism in education in which technological development and design drive, and more so, fix or “determine” avenues of individual use, choice, and understanding.

Throughout the educational history of the digital age, technologies have been disruptive, and especially pedagogical norms and practices. Instructors in the university lecture hall and seminar classroom have often felt engaged in a losing competition for the attentions of students who were more inclined to attend to the distractions of their devices than the lesson content before them. These were students for whom the authoritarian model of unidirectional lecture delivery and the transactional relationship with assessment became less relevant and certainly less productive in terms of the quality of and knowledge gained in their educational experiences. Professors were often inclined to issue technology prohibitions in classrooms, a deeply out-of-touch response to the comprehensive social and cultural transformations instigated and sustained by technological advance. Beginning in the late 1990s to the present day, educational reform was seen as a matter of moving toward virtualized education in its various forms (a trend reinforced during the pandemic, of course), and many academics and institutions pursued an almost evangelical zeal for the affordances of educational technologies, a view that regarded online education as an ameliorative strategy to address receding budgets and oversubscribed courses as well as increasing managerial models and demands for accountability and cost-cutting.

Typically, technological advance outpaces pedagogical change, which brings us to open access AI in educational context. The accelerated progress of Open AI’s ChatGPT has introduced much anxiety among educators, curriculum developers, academic administrators, and governments setting education policy around AI advances, applications, and both educational and societal implications. Such anxiety is not new, and indeed, the ascendancy and imagined supremacy of artificial intelligence has been resonant in the popular imagination. AI is met with both fear and excitement, panic and optimism, and new and emerging AI-powered chatbots in educational contexts demonstrate both responses. Stephen Marche for example, argues that the transformation of academia and its centuries-old conventions in the wake of AI is profound and irrefutable. He notes that the undergraduate essay, “the center of humanistic pedagogy for generations” is fundamentally disrupted with the introduction of ChatGPT, and “the college essay is dead”. In another critical vein, Wong and Kindarji point to substantial concerns with large language models and other AI platforms having the capacity to produce, disseminate, and legitimate disinformation. (Wong and Kindarji, 2023) There are a profusion of adversarial strategies by educators to prohibit, block, neutralize AI technology and a substantial concern to manage the imagined negative impacts of AI—academic dishonesty and unrestrained automated cheating. At the same time, counterviewpoints call such adversarial strategies (which also urge the development of detection software and the use of watermarks for AI-generated essays) “an endless game of whack-a-mole”. (Roose, 2023)

5. Conclusion

Values and practices that have long been foundational in critical pedagogy/democratic education offer creative and productive pedagogical strategies as AI continues to test and expand our learning environments and assumptions about teaching and learning. For both John Dewey (Dewey, 1916) and Paulo Freire (1970), and generations of subsequent progressive educators working toward the objectives of democratic education, experiential learning is foundational to the realization of students with agency. The core idea here is that educational philosophy and actual pedagogical practices (curriculum design, content co-creation, experiential-based assignments and assessments, and more) not only guide students in their relationship to knowledge and learning, but also equip students with capacities to address and challenge social and political power. As noted earlier, education's mission is democratic advance. Irrefutably, experiential and critical pedagogy are given renewed urgency in dynamic and expansive digital media and emergent AI environments; and our educational approaches must be continually invented and re-invented to account for the democratizing potentials of those media environments. Our pedagogical rigour, imagination, and practices depend in no small measure on our ability to read the shifts and acceleration in emerging media, technologies, and communication, in the volatilities of technological environments, and our readiness to devise pedagogies and spaces that ultimately promote the development of literacies in learning—media literacy, civic literacy, ethical literacy, digital literacy, and data/information literacy—and all in the interests of enabling student agency, autonomy and rigorous and creative critical thinking.

There are numerous concepts/measures to borrow from critical pedagogy to apply to current and emerging AI technologies, including:

- 1)The ongoing elaboration and expansion of experiential learning. The concept of the classroom as more than a physical space. Knowledge in the abstract becomes knowledge in action and practice.
- 2)Participatory teaching and learning models and strategies. Project and problem-solving-based approaches.
- 3)Critical engagement with and assessments of AI itself; that is, using Chat GPT as instruction and critique.
- 4)The unbounded classroom and the nurturing of informed citizenship. There is not more powerful educational promise and outcome than learning that speaks to real world public issues and that demonstrates to students that their studies have consequences in the public sphere.

As throughout the history of educational technology, and especially digital technology, the emergence of ChatGPT defines a critical moment in educational opportunities. In this moment, we would do well to eschew adversarial measures in relation to AI and channel the anxious urges to neutralize the technology and instead reinvigorate approaches in pedagogy that are activist, that reject authoritarian and transactional models of education, that enables students to see urgent and critical societal issues at stake in their education and are given a voice and an invitation to raise that voice.

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