THE ADVANCEMENT OF STUDENT EMPOWERMENT THROUGH E-LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: SOME LARGER CONCERNS

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Experiments in e-learning for higher education started taking off in the nineteen-nineties, with increasing local and global dissemination of the Internet and other electronic technologies, and such initiatives have been proliferating ever since. Many of the earlier cross-institutional and extra-institutional e-learning initiatives followed from a long line of distance education dissemination methods, by mailing books and videotapes, as well as through written correspondence. The rationale behind these electronic learning initiatives, as with their predecessors, was almost always to enable and empower otherwise disadvantaged groups through new media, so that they get to partake in the academic learning experience and obtain new certificates or diplomas. In Europe for instance, the nineties saw the materialisation of a plethora of European Union sponsored e-learning programmes targeting a student body that would have otherwise been excluded from the traditional academic environment. One example is the "Gendering Cyberspace" module (http://www.let.uu.nl/womens_studies/gendering_cyberspace/) which I was involved in while residing at a university in the Netherlands, which gave gender studies students across Europe's various academic and professional learning institutions the opportunity to engage online with top academics and peers in the field. At the same time, this module would also facilitate cross-cultural dialogue (Hoofd, De Jong & Van Eijl, 2001), enabling former students who had already left the university, or were otherwise unable to come to a main campus due to financial or physical constraints, to connect with fellow students throughout Europe through online learning. This programme, initiated by the Union and designed to bolster lifelong learning and virtual mobility within its borders through e-learning, was a resounding success, and student feedback on the module was unequivocally positive.

I could cite many more examples of successful e-learning initiatives from around the globe. But despite such successes in fostering e-learning, I would nonetheless suggest that to effectively assess e-learning imperatives and initiatives on their acclaimed merits of student empowerment, we have to place them in the wider local and global socio-economic context from which they emerged and continue to play an increasingly vital role. This is because ideas of student empowerment—and indeed empowerment itself—never take root in a political and institutional vacuum. In fact, empowerment always needs some form of 'power' to make its enabling rhetoric and practice possible, and such 'power' in turn suggests the emergence of new forms of oppression or disenfranchisement, whether inside or outside the academic institutional space in which it is performed. Two pertinent questions then arise when we examine the intersection of recent and current socio-economic forces with new mediated forms of learning for higher education:

- Firstly, in what kinds of new problematic social structures and discourses—institutional, national and global—may these new forms of learning, as well as their ubiquitous propagation, be implicated?

- Secondly, how does the technique and aesthetic of such new mediated forms of learning contribute to or exacerbate these novel structures of inclusion and exclusion?

In other words, we must address the ways in which these new pedagogies and their technologies engender possible new forms of disempowerment by facilitating very specific modes of upward mobility (both locally and globally) while delegitimising others. Such an enquiry into the pedagogical and ideological rationale behind e-learning must therefore start from the view that new media, like computers and the Internet, are never simply 'neutral tools' that transparently connect students with teachers or mediate learning objectives and outcomes. As with the advent of earlier book and printing technologies, the concurrent rise in Europe's colonising endeavours and a new managerial-administrative class, media can profoundly transform and are produced by the cultural and ideological context in which they, as well as universities in general, operate.

This conception of media technologies as *not* neutral but inherently ideological immediately suggests that they are a multi-faceted and ambiguous force in the constitution of any learning platform and its pedagogical aims, regardless of the module's specific content and the assignments that are disseminated through these media. In fact, e-learning content itself may in many ways point towards the non-neutrality of the larger socio-economic landscape, in which the medium operates by virtue of the relationship between aesthetics and the context in which this aesthetic is enunciated. The problematic common sense discourse which educators and administrators uphold within higher education, that claims that media are neutral conduits of learning, is therefore itself already symptomatic of a cultural context in which the idea of transparent mediation functions to obscure forms of oppression and disenfranchisement. This common sense discourse, as with the very notion of the university itself, is after all historically related to Eurocentric and masculinist ideas of the subject and his potential to autonomously and intentionally transmit as well as control meaning and knowledge through any medium of communication. Instead, I hold to the view that the medium of learning co-constitutes knowledge and engenders certain subject-positions that are consecutively required by the larger economic and social imperatives that universities, and by extension their academic staff, serve. This is especially so in the context of Singapore and Asia. As such, one may then start to wonder how the advancement of e-learning in local higher education institutions represents an intricate aspect of the post-colonial context in which Singapore's education system functions.

In other words, if the tools and ideology of e-learning are built on a set of assumptions that have historically tended to favour a Western and male elite, what does this mean for local student empowerment and disempowerment along the lines of gender, ethnicity and class within and outside the Singaporean classroom? Also, how may the teacher's responsibility towards his or her students, i.e. to ensure that they become proficient at learning and communicating through new media tools as demanded by the academic institution to ensure the students' future empowerment and employability, lead to a host of tensions within the pedagogical scene between her own in-class authority and the relinquishing of such authority due to the students' capacity to do self-guided online learning? What are the potentials and pitfalls of the displacement of pedagogical authority and responsibility into the e-learning medium?

At this intersection, I would like to suggest that the current socio-economic context functions as an extension and intensification through new media technologies of former masculinist and Eurocentric ideas which I in my work call 'speed-elitism' (Hoofd, 2009). Speed-elitism is the current cultural form behind neo-liberal globalisation and encompasses a transformed variety of European humanist ideas of emancipation and empowerment that express themselves in the constant validation of notions of and techniques for acceleration, connection, voicing, liberation, competition and overcoming (cultural and national) boundaries. What is more, under speed-elitism the material structures that sustain a highly unequal form of neoliberal globalisation—its technologies of communication and transportation—have become the general realm for the production, consumption and circulation of signs, while posing as a 'neutral space' for empowerment and emancipation. This means that, as techno-critics John Armitage and Phil Graham also suggest, the forms of thought themselves are increasingly bound up with capitalist circulation, making the idea of real empowerment for all a mere utopian fantasy which is always slipping away beyond the horizon of technological development (Armitage & Graham, 2001).

One major example of how thought becomes part of the circulation of capital are the so-called 'creative industries' for which many contemporary universities in Asia's global cities provide graduates who are adept at 'creative thinking.' Such graduates are often heavily trained through e-learning tools, from simply using online databases to more sophisticated high-tech courses. This also explains why the advocating of new media in the academic classroom is often simply in and of itself perceived as a 'good thing' which will 'enhance' learning, as new media themselves problematically come to stand in for humanist ideas of democracy and emancipation. But this 'virtual emancipation' for the happy few is then intimately bound up with an accelerated subjugation of the not-so-happy majority, as its prerogative is the sustenance and advancement of neoliberal globalisation and its new economic speed-elites. This means that e-learning, through its inherent validation of active, vocal, masculine, connected and cosmopolitan personhood, is implicated in the reproduction and generation of new hierarchies between students inside as well as outside the university classroom, even though its explicit rhetoric is often about the elimination of these very divisions and disconnections.

Some good examples of this paradoxical logic of differential student empowerment (and connection) through oppression (and the dissimulation of disconnection) by way of e-learning are the new learning tools called 'educational games'. Educators and teachers logically explore using educational games in the classroom because most of today's young learners often have ample experience with electronic gaming. Also, the argument is often put forward that if studying can be presented as play, students may be more willing to subject themselves to the 'un-pleasantries' of learning. Work as play (or the material confusion of production and play through new media) is nonetheless also one of the hallmarks of the aforementioned contemporary creative economy and its quest for knowledge workers, where the consumption of electronic media has become thoroughly enmeshed with creative production and circulation. Educational games not only seek to present a learning environment that is in many ways an aesthetic and technical microcosm of a larger current socio-economical context, learning and thinking themselves have become a direct extension of the perpetual need for capitalist circulation and innovation, which is itself in turn implicated in forms of highly unequal globalisation and distribution. Electronic games therefore relate to this uneven form of globalisation on two levels: in terms of their technique of instantaneity and acceleration, as well as on the level of their inherently militaristic aesthetics or content (Kline, Dyer-Whiteford & de Peuter, 2003). Learning through educational games must then lead to what I would call a 'double objectification' by way of the bilateral speedy dissimulations of oppression that it engenders, *especially* when it claims to empower the student and seek larger social justice.

Let me illustrate this claim with the example of an (at first glance) sympathetic American educational game called *Real Lives*. According to its online manual, the pedagogical aim of *Real Lives* is for students to "learn how people really live in other countries" (Educational Simulations, 2010). The makers of the game argue that *Real Lives* is an "empathy-building world" which will grant students an "appreciation of their own culture and the cultures of other peoples"—a clear indicator of the speed-elitist validation of (virtual) mobility and cross-cultural dialogue. The game starts by assigning to each player a randomly selected character of a certain country, class and gender. Since the ascription of the game character is based on actual statistical possibilities in terms of place of birth and economic status, the likelihood is high that the character gets born poor in countries like India, Mexico, or in other densely populated places. During the game, the player can take virtual actions like deciding to put her or his character in a school or have her staying at home to help her parents. The player can also determine which hobbies the game character will take up, what job she should take, and so forth. The game time takes one-year leaps at which the student-player can see the impact of external events like disease or floods, and his or her own actions on the character and her family. The game software also shows a map of the character's birth region and its statistics, like its population density, gross annual income, currency, health standards and such.

The character would also possess traits like happiness, athleticism, musicality and health. While the player's actions definitely influence the character and her family's health and economic status, the potentially interesting part of the game lies in the fact that it contains events and situations that are beyond the player's control. Such a game structure potentially endows the student with a sense that wider meritocratic or competitive discourses may be flawed.

It is nonetheless obvious that the attributions in *Real Lives*, while based on statistical facts, may be problematic as they may easily lead students to a simplistic view of a country and its inhabitants. While India, for instance, certainly has many poor people, and while the girls in its poorer areas are frequently not allowed or able to go to school, to have the white Western student come across such representations of 'India' time and again can lead to the reproduction of stereotypes and a failure to grasp the complexities of Indian society. Moreover, 'other' parts of the world are continually framed through lenses that appeal to a Western mindset, for instance by suggesting romantic love interests when the game character reaches adolescence. This then is the first level of objectification that educational games inhabit. But even more serious than such stereotypical representation is the *formal* mode of objectification and its distancing effects that the game generates. This second objectification resides in how the interface—the 'flight simulator'-like visual layout on the screen which displays an overview of the categories and character attributes, the major actions and events in the character's life which can be activated at the stroke of a key—grants the player a false sense of control, as students engage with a machine programmed in such a way that it *appears* to let them identify with and act out his or her empathy vis-à-vis a 'real' child in need. This discursive confusion of reality and simulation is problematic because while students are engrossed in playing this game, the actual children in need disappear from the student-player's field of vision. Real children in need become a large but distant and vague group of 'others' who are effectively beyond the student's and teacher's reach of immediate responsibility. As such, time spent engaging in virtual empathy eclipses the real oppressions from the student's view and experience. In addition, *Real Lives* eclipses the intricate social and economical relationship between the material production and consumption of such virtual play and the continuous exploitation of people on the brink of social, economical and environmental disenfranchisement. While relatively affluent young students may indulge in turning other peoples' distress into an enjoyable and instructive game, such indulgence is precisely based on a speed-elitist neoliberal structure that exploits the environment, especially that of the poor in countries like India and Mexico, and allows for the outsourcing and feminisation of ever cheaper third-world labour for the computer assembly industry. Long-term attitudinal changes in the student notwithstanding, *Real Lives'* disconnecting properties as a technology of acceleration can therefore displace the effect of the teachers', makers' and students' good intentions and empathy into an instantaneous technocratic and symbolic violence. We can see here that the game content is indeed symptomatic of the larger global structures of disenfranchisement, and that the speed-elitist quest for social justice always claims empowerment in the future while engendering disempowerment right now.

Although one could counter that such e-learning is only entangled with such negative effects on a macro or global scale, I would nonetheless argue that similar forms of objectification and disenfranchisement also occur within the university classroom as part of e-learning's justification for residing in speed-elitist discourses and techniques. Four major pieces of evidence of such stratification can be found among the university student body itself, namely

- issues of ubiquitous teaching and learning,
- new techniques for surveillance,
- real-time and spatial disconnection, and
- the displacement of teacher authority and student responsibility into new media technologies.

While e-learning tools are often heralded for facilitating asynchronous communication between students and teacher, it is precisely the flexibility that this mode of communication affords that increasingly transforms all 'playful' time into productive time (or 'work') through the over-generation of speech and expression, one of the foremost markers of speed-elitism. As educators, we not only need to attend to in-class teaching and the occasional knock on our doors, but also to online forums and numerous emails. For students, there is an increasing compulsion to actively participate offline (orally) and online (through writing and inserting imagery), which can in many cases lead to more stress and less time spent quietly thinking through a certain problem. Moreover, this emphasis on active participation historically tends to favour a Western (especially American) and masculine subject where its practitioners are more socialised towards speaking up and debating for its own sake, therefore leading to a reproduction of gendered and ethnic hierarchies between students. Furthermore, the propensity of e-learning systems to facilitate the instantaneous quantification of student data by archiving the number of postings, amount of time students are logged into the system, the exact times assignments are submitted, and the number of uploads, can lead to an evaluative surveillance culture that tends to value quantity over quality—a symptom of the managerial discourse most of today's universities adopt, in which 'excellence,' as the late cultural critic Bill Readings reminds us, has become equivalent to the over-production of knowledge as information (Readings, 1996). In a country like Singapore, e-learning becomes the site of the quiet transfer of managerial and speed-elitist discourses and skills that implicates the new graduate workforce in a highly stratified and meritocratic post-colonial knowledge economy.

Finally, one could wonder whether the partial relinquishing of teacher responsibility in terms of interaction and assessment into new media technologies, apart from the aforementioned issue of surveillance, is in itself a pedagogically sound move. This is especially so in classrooms concerned with fostering equality, where physical nearness allows the interpretation of various bodily cues like silence, facial

expressions such as smiles or frowns, shifts in body posture or nervous twitching. Such signs can be usefully taken by the teacher as indications that students are thinking or experiencing discomfort, or may be providing novel openings for discussion, and such cues are often unevenly distributed among the different genders and ethnicities. In other words, the displacement of teacher responsibility into e-learning tools cuts off openings and sites of tension which are often fundamental to effective learning and real engagement for students with their peers. It is for this reason that post-colonial feminist Gayatri Spivak warns that the Internet "can become exclusive, an instrument of a certain narcissism, a simulacrum of reaching the other, which is exactly a withdrawal of responsibility" that is in turn closely implicated in "the stratification of the world" (Spivak & Lovink, 1997). So in spite of the argument that e-learning has the added advantage of students supposedly 'having more power and freedom over their learning process', thereby facilitating 'bottom-up learning', the notion of putting the student at the centre of such action and articulation is eerily akin to the illusion of empowerment that the new interactive technologies facilitate under contemporary technocratic globalisation. In light of this, it may come as no surprise that Paolo Freire's idea of a 'pedagogy of the oppressed,' which argues for bottom-up critical learning as a way to combat inequalities, found such an eager audience in many techno-oriented North-American universities in the last decades, since the rhetoric of 'individual freedom and empowerment through new technologies' runs throughout American as well as speed-elitist teaching and research agendas (Freire, 1971). Self-directed scholarship through e-learning, however promising at first sight, may very well result in an irresponsible repetition of technical, institutional and larger socio-economic power structures by academic teachers and university managers. The 'liberation' from physical classroom engagement is hence foremost demanded by the socio-economic context, an instance of what Spivak calls the "compulsion disguised as an invitation" so typical of the global neoliberal economy (Spivak & Zournazi, 2003).

In conclusion, this article certainly does not seek to be exhaustive, but tries to spark further debate and encourage sensitivity when we consider the goals, consequences and mythology of e-learning. As responsible educators, we should not blindly accept utopian claims of student empowerment through e-learning, but should also look at the ways such mediated empowerment may be implicated in various institutional, local and global socio-economic structures of oppression and disenfranchisement. This entails a thorough investigation of the pitfalls of e-learning in terms of the techniques and aesthetics of the new media employed for such learning, whether such tools are additional or central to the module. In many ways, the push for e-learning is an ambiguous force that is implicated in the global dissemination of a largely Eurocentric and masculine speed-elitism, which may lead to an exacerbation rather than alleviation of intra- and extra-institutional inequalities, despite (or rather perhaps, because of) its democratic and liberation-oriented rhetoric. This is not to say that e-learning is misguided, but that the teacher's well-intended implementation of e-learning for student empowerment also engenders various unintended forms of material and symbolic violence. Paradoxically then, teacher's institutional responsibility, to cultivate in his or her students a contemporary global and cosmopolitan outlook also inhabits the displacement and disabling of his or her authority and responsibility by failing, for instance, to be attentive to signs that are not electronically communicable. In fact, as the *Real Lives* example has shown, the 'double objectification' that new media facilitate appears as student empowerment because it allows a dissimulation of new forms of oppression through the myth of 'neutral connectivity'. As academic educators and administrators deeply concerned with student empowerment, we have just as much a duty to stay attuned to e-learning's pitfalls as much we need to have a better understanding of its potentials on various levels.

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