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Diversity and Democracy

Technology, Education, Democracy: Elements of an Emerging Paradigm

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What are the implications of new technologies for higher education's democratic mission?

It is a dizzyingly good question. Readers of *Diversity & Democracy* know well the complex issues entailed in the academy's commitment to education for democratic citizenship. What civic capacities do we want our students to attain? What practices best support engaged learning? How should academic institutions pursue their own community and civic responsibilities, in teaching and research, internal governance and external relationships? Technological change cuts across all these questions, holding contradictory implications, at once promising and challenging, for both academic and democratic practice. How do we map these implications?

I suggest that we start by thinking historically, by considering why this question has been posed just *now*. Everyone knows that we are living through a time of heightened crisis in higher education: the culmination of twenty years of change in which the economic model of college education and public faith in its value have eroded. What is less well known (or too often forgotten) is that this has also been a time of heightened creativity within the academy, the culmination of twenty years of development of high-impact practices and novel models of educational delivery. I have taken to calling our current situation, with its mix of change, crisis, and creativity, a "Copernican moment"; for it seems to me not unlike the moment of confusion and pause in which the great Polish astronomer observed the breakdown of the older Ptolemaic system without yet being able to discern the emerging, heliocentric paradigm (Scobey 2012, 45–6).

New technologies are of course at the heart of this story: new platforms for teaching, advising, and course delivery; new pedagogies that use digital tools to flip classrooms or create online learning communities; the growing use of data analytics to shape student behavior and monitor progress. Such technological change has been, if anything, *over*stressed as the sole driver of "disruptive innovation" in the academy (Christensen et al. 2011, 2–3). By contrast, I would argue, current debates have tended to *under*estimate the role of civic engagement as a response to educational crisis and an agent of change. Yet both factors are at play, and at stake, in the Copernican moment, and they are deeply intertwined.

The Crisis: A Cook's Tour

Public commentary on the crisis in higher education has largely focused on three themes. First, it is stressed, the academy's

business model is broken; unsustainable tuition hikes and unsupportable debt levels have pushed students to seek low-cost or more convenient alternatives to traditional place-based higher education, such as credential-stacking and online degree programs. Concomitantly, there has been a stark decline in degree completion (most of all, in public and for-profit institutions most accessible to less affluent students). And finally, students who *do* attain their degrees face uncertain economic prospects and a job market for which, it is argued, college has poorly prepared them.

There is truth to all three critiques, especially the first two. (The notion that liberal education prepares undergraduates poorly for the current economy has been persuasively challenged by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and others; see, for example, Humphreys and Kelly 2014.) Cost and completion are corrosive problems—but they only represent part of the turmoil of the Copernican moment. Indeed, in focusing exclusively on them, we actually *lowball* the challenges facing higher education. For what has eroded is not simply our business model, but also an educational model—a set of assumptions about students and college going—that Americans have taken for granted for decades.

Today only a quarter of US undergraduates fit the traditional image of the recent high school graduate attending a four-year campus on a full-time basis (Greater Expectations National Panel 2002, 2). (That is the same proportion—astonishingly—as undergraduates who are *parents*.) Four in ten undergraduates attend community colleges; over one-third are age twenty-five or older; almost half are enrolled part-time; and nearly one-third work full-time (Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success 2011). Students with some mix of these characteristics —the "new majority" of undergraduates—are not "going away" to college. They fit school into complex lives filled with work, family, and community; they often delay or reduce their studies when the pressures of life, tuition, and debt prove too great. A large majority of those who *do* graduate (whether nontraditional or traditional students) garner credits from multiple institutions (Greater Expectations National Panel 2002, 2), and a majority of their teachers are non-tenure-track faculty (AFT Higher Education 2009). For many commentators, this "unbundling" of educational experiences is the wave of the future, an entrepreneurial response to the cost crisis that surely evidences the tactical resilience of students making the best of a bad situation. Yet just as surely, these changes tend to undermine the continuity and sense of community so central to great, engaged learning.

And there is another, more basic crisis beneath the fiscal and demographic challenges: a crisis of legitimacy. For, even in its most market-sensitive forms, higher education remains a public good. We may differ about the nature of that good, about whether universities should be in the business of making leaders or training workers, fostering innovation or furthering tradition. Yet no matter the mission, higher education depends on a social compact that justifies its claims to resources and autonomy by the collective benefit it provides. Over the past twenty years, from the culture wars of the 1990s to current skepticism about the worth of a bachelor's degree, that social compact has frayed. The most ominous symptom is the pervasive disengagement of students themselves, evidenced in credit shopping and stopping out, in rising depression rates (Swaner 2005) and declining time spent on coursework (Arum and Roksa

2011).

It is this crisis of legitimacy—a loss of confidence in the public value of higher education, not merely in its value proposition—that makes our current challenges different from those of a disrupted consumer market. No doubt the academy has much to learn from the successes (and failures) of entrepreneurial innovators like Steve Jobs and Jeff Bezos. Yet however nimbly colleges deploy new learning-management systems or capture new enrollment markets, it will not matter if the public's faith in our enterprise and students' engagement in learning are not also renewed.

Focusing solely on high costs and low completion, then, tends to oversimplify the bad news of the Copernican moment. It also misses the good news. For with the turmoil has come a period of robust innovation, as educators have responded to the challenges of cost, completion, access, student disengagement, and public disenchantment. Arizona State University and Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), among other institutions, have pioneered low-cost degree programs that meld competency-based assessment, online learning, and aggressive advising to accelerate degree completion. Among more traditional academics, there has been a remarkable efflorescence of curricular and pedagogical innovation: first-year and capstone experiences, undergraduate research programs and study abroad, interdisciplinary fields like neuroscience and liberal-professional hybrids like community health. Such initiatives compose the lion's share of "high-impact practices" that have proven most effective in fostering student engagement (Kuh 2008).

The growth of the civic engagement movement is one of the most consequential outcomes of this era of innovation. The movement had its symbolic debut with the 2012 publication of *A Crucible Moment*, the national call for democratic engagement commissioned by the US Department of Education (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement). Yet this report culminated a quarter century of experimentation and organizing (much of it documented in the report itself). Some thirty thousand faculty now incorporate community-based work into their formal teaching each year, and hundreds of colleges and universities have offices, centers, and programs that infuse community service, civic engagement, or public scholarship across their curricula, their cocurricula, and their research agendas (Campus Compact 2010). This has been a quiet revolution in educational practice.

All these innovations challenge the oversimplified picture of an academy mired in traditionalism and denial. To be sure, they are not of one piece. There are as yet few places where innovators in the areas of cost and completion, such as SNHU's College for America, work in tandem with innovators in high-engagement practices, like the Imagining America consortium. Yet taken together, the array of experimental institutions and generative practices composes a kind of scatter diagram of change, like the anomalous points of light that Copernicus observed in the night sky. Out of such innovations, a new paradigm of undergraduate education—affordable as well as exploratory, practical as well as reflective, personalized as well as collaborative—just might emerge.

MOOCs and the Contradictions of Technological Change

And did I neglect to say that technological change is at the heart of this tangle of turmoil and possibility? I have deferred mention of MOOCs and e-portfolios and flipped classrooms for a reason. For once technology is mentioned, it tends to captivate discussions of the future of higher education like a shiny object before a cat. No doubt new technologies are powerful agencies of disruption and reform in the current moment. Yet, as I have tried to illustrate, that moment has many causes and multiple paths forward, and the role of new technologies in it seems to me similarly contradictory and up for grabs. Will new technologies enhance (or obstruct or simply reframe) efforts to lower cost and debt, to improve student persistence and academic success, to deepen liberal learning, to clarify and support students' work aspirations, to prepare them for democratic citizenship?

The answer can only be "all of the above." Various stakeholders are mobilizing diverse platforms and practices in the service of disparate visions of the future. In such a heteroscape, there is no such thing as a technological game changer. There is no single game to change; the very goals of change are contested; and different tools inflect those goals in uneven, contradictory ways. When the goal in question is civic engagement, the implications of technological change seem to me even more equivocal.

Consider, for instance, the shiniest object in the current conversation: the Massive Open Online Course, or MOOC. Its advocates passionately assert the transformative potential of free (or cheap), mega-scaled, online courses in breaking open class barriers attached to cost, access, and geography. Although the dominant MOOC providers pursue different strategies, they share a fundamental goal: to democratize access to the curriculum by dislodging it from the monopoly control of tuition-charging, degree-granting institutions (Shirky 2012).

MOOC pioneers are the first to admit that results are mixed so far. Their booming enrollments are tempered by dismal completion rates, as illustrated by early studies (see, for example, Jordan 2013). (I am one of the army of noncompleters, having enrolled and browsed in two very disappointing humanities MOOCs on Coursera and a more engaging Introduction to Statistics on Udacity.) It would be unfair to overread these results; early service-learning courses were surely just as uneven. And MOOC providers have been admirably committed to the investigation, discussion, and improvement of their platforms. Five years from now, they may have gone far to solve the problems—low completion, weak discussion threads, uneven production values—that currently hobble them.

Yet even if these growing pains are resolved—especially so—the MOOC experiment has disquieting implications for a publicly engaged academy. It relies on economic and educational hierarchies at odds with its democratizing aspirations. It is dominated by a small number of omnibus providers, using a deft marketing strategy that associates low cost with the brand capital of star professors from elite universities. These providers seek not simply to enroll individuals, but to position nonelite institutions as MOOC consumers whose onsite faculty deliver what is in effect an off-the-shelf general education curriculum created by high-end master teachers. This market strategy reinforces status hierarchies that have little to do with assuring educational quality. Indeed, the widespread adoption of MOOCS

by fiscally strapped institutions would hollow out a core asset of American higher education: the broad diffusion of vibrant teaching and curricular creativity across all sectors.

Ironically, this class divide between MOOC producers and consumers, intact and unbundled institutions, also reinforces the most hierarchical traditions of academic pedagogy. It enshrines the lecture, with its performative transmission of standardized content, as the rising genre of popular education. It is as if the MOOCs' very real innovations in online delivery, multimedia content, and cost structure required (by some weird law of compensatory change) that we forget everything else the past twenty years have taught us about active and collaborative learning.

This online model, in short, offers a disturbingly partial response to the crises and creativity of the Copernican moment. As a *technological* practice, MOOCs privilege one aspect of the digital revolution (the capacity to deliver information in any medium to any location at low cost) but marginalize others (the capacity to foster iterative collaboration). As an *educational* intervention, they lower costs and raise access, but at the expense of student completion and high-impact learning. As a *civic* intervention, they foreground a model of educational democracy that provides student-consumers with customized instructional experience and personal advancement—but nothing that teaches student-citizens the skills and values of public work.

Both/And

I am mindful that this account may seem dystopian or simply static. We may find that new providers will "jailbreak" the experiment, challenging Udacity, edX, and Coursera with more pedagogically daring offerings. It may be that MOOCs will serve well as multimedia textbooks for hybrid or flipped classrooms, or that they will play the valuable role of offering unaffiliated learners exploratory gateways to new areas of study. Online learning is nothing if not a moving target.

But that is just the point: we are in a moment in which the direction of technological change and its implications for educational change remain unfinished. The articles in this issue offer a remarkable scan of that moment. They point to a myriad of initiatives in which faculty and institutions are deploying new tools to advance student access, student completion, student community, and engaged learning—and equally important, to connect these goals together. Some of the best experiments use online technologies not to "unbundle" the college experience, but precisely to "re-bundle" it, strengthening the affiliations of underserved and nontraditional learners with learning communities. Similarly, the growth of "flipped classroom" pedagogy repurposes online content as preparatory material in the service of collaborative, place-based classes, not as an alternative to them. A new wave of "Civic Engagement 2.0" practices employs digital storytelling, gaming, video, wikis, and social media to deepen student engagement in public problem solving and public culture making.

Such efforts are striking for an approach to technological and educational innovation that is complex and integrated. They draw on *multiple* capacities of digital technology (cheap information, multimedia frameworks, translocal connectivity, interactivity, collaborative platforms) to address *multiple* aspects of the educational crisis (cost, access, completion,

engagement, democratic community). They tacitly resist the notion of a zero-sum game, central to much current commentary on the "great disruption," between lowering cost and accelerating student completion on the one hand, and enhancing engaged learning, student community, and civic agency on the other. To take but one example: College Unbound offers a low-cost baccalaureate to low-income students in Providence and New Orleans, drawing on e-portfolios, competency assessment, and individually mentored study plans to meld online, classroom, peer-to-peer, workplace, and community-based learning (College Unbound 2011).

Such programs offer a glimmer of a new, "post-Copernican" paradigm that might holistically connect digital learning communities, campus communities, and students' own work, civic, and family lives. How do we build on such glimmers of integrative change, navigating the contradictory possibilities of the current moment and the zero-sum thinking of much current debate? How, for instance, might we leverage the extraordinary informational power of the Internet without lapsing into the mass-consumer model of education that bedevils the MOOCs? How do we offer new majority students opportunities for engaged learning that fit their complex and pressured lives? How can we use the data analytics in e-advising and learning-management systems to empower our students—without subjecting them as objects of behavioral "nudging," scripted pathways, and accelerated throughput? In sum, how do we use technology to navigate the crosscutting challenges of the Copernican moment—fiscal and demographic, economic and civic—without losing sight of the core belief that the goal of education is to emancipate our students?

On the surface, these seem like questions that call for technological answers. But they are actually questions about the meaning of education as a public good—questions about democracy. How do we honor our commitments to both the democracy of open access to which online learning aspires and the democracy of participatory problem solving to which the civic engagement movement aspires? Do we believe that education for democracy requires students to become "stewards of place" (American Association of State Colleges and Universities 2002), actively immersed in face-to-face communities? Or, conversely, do we believe that digital communities offer the experience of freeing students from the hierarchies and inequalities that structure such face-to-face communities? When we monitor students with digital advising platforms, at what point does our Deweyan care for their flourishing become a Foucauldian act of surveillance?

Even the most specific of these technological issues, then, engages the largest questions of democratic theory and democratic values. And we will not be able to navigate the travails of the current moment, to figure out just what kinds of software to order and which new pedagogies to try, until we have answered them. The crucial question is not, then, the one with which I started: what are the implications of new technologies for the democratic mission of higher education? It is rather just the opposite: what are the implications of our democratic commitments for knowing how best to use the myriad, contending possibilities of new technologies?

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