



## “Education is Dead”: A Requiem, of Sorts

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### **Introduction**

Recently, the university at which I am a full-time faculty member was approached by another university in Georgia that was hoping to develop a partnership to offer new programs in an under-served area of the state. After numerous meetings, and Skype sessions, we met with our potential partners at one of the proposed sites for the new programming. After discussing several of our plans, a member of the faculty of the university with which we were to partner, turned to our Dean and said that while they were interested in offering new programs, they were not really considering adding any education programs because, “everyone knows education is dead.” While this comment was a reflection on the fact that numbers for college students enrolling in teacher education programs are in slight decline, the statement is nonetheless problematic. Yet, what is equally problematic for me is that I’m not sure I disagree with this sentiment, albeit for different reasons.

After briefly advancing again my perhaps futile concerns about the consequences of the convergence of education and technology on Deweyn notions of public education, I will explore in this paper how a reliance on communication technologies, and the technorationality this has wrought, contributes to what I refer to as the education spectacle today. Drawing on the works of Jacques Ranciere, Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard, and Gert Biesta, I hope to illuminate how the spectacle of education, with its reliance on communication technologies, has come to define what is widely accepted as reality for education today and how these technologies are used to promulgate the notion that education is dead.

### **Education and Technology**

While this paper may seem to be a polemic against technology or the use of communication technologies in education; it isn’t. The idea of teaching online classes was a novel idea perhaps ten or fifteen years ago, but one only need look at what is happening around the country to see what changes internet technologies are bringing to higher education, particularly with the recent onset of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) (Pappano, 2012). Recently, my university held an open forum on our campus in conjunction with several administrators from Georgia Tech to discuss a possible partnership in creating and delivering three MOOCs. Georgia Tech is one of twelve recent recipients of three million dollars in total grants from the Gates Foundation given to several universities around the country who are each to create and pilot three MOOC courses in partnership with the for-profit startup company, Coursera (Kolowich, 2013).

What Georgia Tech is doing is similar to a recent partnership between San Jose State University and Udacity, a silicon valley-based technology company started by three roboticists who believed their university courses could be offered more cheaply and effectively in an online

format (Wadhwa, 2013). Essentially, all of these budding partnerships, between mostly public universities and for-profit technology companies, will consolidate mass numbers of lower-division college courses into online courses offered for one to two hundred dollars and housed in one single campus. If a University can attract 10,000 students with a course that cost them \$50,000 to build, and the 10,000 students pay the college \$100 for the credential, the University makes \$950,000. If the same class is offered more than once, the revenue increases exponentially. In what looks like a win-win situation, the college takes in millions while the student pays one or two hundred dollars for a course that would have cost perhaps ten times more in a traditional format. What is increasingly attractive to overburdened and busy student populations is that students can complete the courses without ever leaving home.

### Education, Technology, and Spectacle

With these thoughts on the ongoing encroachment of technology in education in mind, I want to turn now to a discussion of both our reliance on technology, and how technology supports and maintains what I call the education spectacle. Recall, for a moment, that technology is not a new idea. For several thousand years, technology was understood as those things that helped human beings complete tasks. One could look as far back as Plato, for whom *techne* was the work of artists; it was a tool that could be used to unite events and objects for the sake of human growth and benefit. *Techne* was discourse; it was the art of communicating toward understanding. Using this early notion of the word technology, one would be hard pressed to argue against anything that improved an individual's or society's ability to communicate and understand one another.

A discussion today of technology and its impact on modern life may seem anachronistic. Technology, in its various electronic forms, is not going away anytime soon—if ever. Technology, especially communication technology, has altered nearly every aspect of human life today. However, the rapid change wrought in the last twenty years did not come without warning. One example can be found in Neil Postman's (1993), *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, where Postman argues that the twentieth century saw societies become willingly wedded to electronic technologies. Technologies that Postman warned would eventually subvert most aspects of our lived experiences. He offers:

Technopoly is a state of culture. It is also a state of mind. It consists in the deification of technology, which means that the culture seeks its authorization in technology, finds its satisfactions in technology, and takes its orders from technology. (p. 71)

Over time, this technology functions as ideology; it is taken for granted, and we prod along barely conscious of its ubiquitous place in our communications and understandings. This technology greatly increases human access to information; yet, that same technology also requires human beings to be subject to the mechanisms that control and disseminate that information. Increasingly, particularly throughout the last half of the twentieth century, information technologies—initially television and later internet technology—began to mediate our relationship with information and each other. The proliferation of mediated interactions gave rise to entire communication industries that created and sustained mediated environments where imagery and spectacle triumphed over truth and logic.

There is a rich literature regarding imagery and spectacle written over the last 100 years as communication technologies became increasingly ubiquitous features of modern life. One

could find a relatively recent foundation in John Dewey's notion of a spectator theory of knowledge, where Dewey draws distinctions between active knowers and passive spectators. In *Quest for Certainty* Dewey (1929/1960) states, "If we see that knowing is not the act of an outside spectator but of a participator inside the natural and social scene, then the true object of knowledge resides in the consequences of direct action"(p. 22). Recall that for Dewey, knowing involves participation; it is an active process that requires individuals be engaged in interactions that lead to growth and change. Knowing is not done to or for someone; knowing occurs through our ongoing interactions with other beings and the natural world. Moreover, knowing does not occur passively, as it so often does in essentialist, data-driven, techno-rational schooling. Knowing is an active process that involves interconnectedness and leads to ongoing growth and change. In a Deweyan sense, spectators are not active knowers; they can only be passive receivers of another's claims to knowledge and truth. The fact in question is understood externally, setting up the problem of the "view from nowhere," which suggests that any holder of knowledge must be decontextualized—something Dewey (1938/1997) repudiates. Internally mediated knowledge is closer to Dewey's ultimate goal of warranted assertibility and it requires context, association, and interconnectedness.

More recently, in *Society of the Spectacle* Guy Debord (1967/1983) furthers Hegelian and Marxist notions of alienation in arguing that alienation does not occur only between human beings and their labor in a capitalist economy. Instead, Debord argues that advanced capitalist societies ultimately come to depend on the economy alone for survival, and, in turn, that economy relies on society to be primarily consumers of spectacle. In this sense, human beings ultimately become alienated from real experiences and from each other. Debord notes, "In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved into a representation" (p. 15). The spectacle, then, is not simply a series of images; rather, the spectacle represents human relationships mediated by images. In the end, real experiences, real relationships, become less valuable than the accumulation of spectacle.

Debord's (1967/1983) argument is echoed in Baudrillard's (1995) four stages of sign-copy simulation in which he traces human society's movement from understanding images and copies as reflections of truth in stage one, to stage four where pure simulation has no relation to reality at all. In stage four, cultural products no longer have to even pretend to be real as most of the public is reduced to consumers of the artificial and what Baudrillard calls the "hyperreal." In stage four, which coincides, historically, with our current age of late capitalism, signs merely represent other signs and any sense of reality becomes a reflection of another disconnected sign. The distinction between reality and representation vanishes; and, "reality becomes a meaningless concept" (p.19). The appearance of the image provides validation for the consumer that what is seen is good and therefore worthy of consumption. It is here where the capitalist economy thrives, in the consumption of the spectacle. Increasingly, the spectacle is maintained, reinforced, and promulgated via communication technologies, both acting as ideology in our modern ideas about information, culture, and each other.

Returning for a moment to Debord (1967/1983), consider his argument regarding the modern consumer: "The real consumer becomes a consumer of illusions. The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life...it aims at nothing more than itself" (p. 11). These spectacles become what Debord calls "pseudo-needs;" our relationships become "pseudo-experiences," things that can be had, bartered, or in some way consumed. If one holds with Debord and Baudrillard, that our advanced capitalist society is depend-

ent upon consumers of pseudo-needs and pseudo-experiences, it would make sense that many of our social, political, and cultural interactions become spectacles. It would not be surprising, then, that education, too, is part of the spectacle.

Having provided some historical context as to how I'm using the terms spectators, spectacles, and simulation, I want to turn now to the idea of education as spectacle. Vinson and Ross (2010) offer the following regarding the 21st century education spectacle: "Education must be understood according to a setting in which spectacle and surveillance come together, a state of affairs in which discipline is established and maintained as individuals and groups are monitored simultaneously by both larger and smaller entities" (p. 10). To this end, education today is dominated by a convergence of technologies of control with Debord's spectacle. This convergence might best be understood in the following example: bureaucrats rely on various forms of surveillance to monitor student and teacher performance and behavior via testing, while the public consumes the spectacle of school efficacy via published accountability reports, published test scores, and published rates of teacher effectiveness. In time, the way society thinks about education, and the public discourse regarding education, becomes inundated by consumption of the education spectacle, with little or no critical inquiry into the complexities of *actual* school life or questions such as "what is the purpose of education?" Over time, the public's ideas of education, often created by the education spectacle, lead to education being understood as broken, which allows for the creation of solutions that often only reinforce the problem.

The creation of the education spectacle allows politicians, for-profit education companies, and much of the public to embrace the belief that schools are failing (education is dead?) as the only legitimate narrative. When lack of school efficacy becomes perceived as a problem within the education spectacle, the spectacle then only proceeds to reinforce the problem. This point is highlighted by Murray Edelman's (1988) thesis in *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, where he asserts that the construction of social or political problems often has a far-reaching effect in that it helps perpetuate or intensify the conditions that are defined as the problem. Over time, the public stops inquiring as to what the real problem *is*, stops working for actually solutions, and instead looks for answers from politicians and/or purported experts who may have helped construct the problem in the first place.

### **Education as Spectacle in Race to the Top Schooling**

Current federal education policy has continued to centralize and standardize control over what students are expected to know, what teachers must teach and how students must demonstrate learning, while also maintaining standardized, commodified ends for public education. The ongoing focus on standards, accountability, and outputs, represents what Gert Biesta (2012) has called the "learnification of education" (p. 10). Within this framework the *process* of education is stressed over the *purpose* of education. This learnification, which I argue is increasingly dependent on communication technologies, and propped up by the education spectacle, advances an agenda that says education is functional; that education *should* produce specific, measurable results. When those expected results are not met, the idea can be put forth that education is failing, that it is sick. Or, perhaps even worse, that education is dead.

There are too many examples of how this functionalist education is realized in schools. Take, for example, the Race to The Top (RTT) initiatives that perform as current education reform in this country. RTT offers grants for states that make the most progress in such areas as tracking and recording student and teacher performance, improving teacher quality (measured by

published test results), improving failing schools (again measured by publishable test data), and embracing the idea of nationalized standards. The RTT grants are awarded for schools that can prove such things as meeting benchmarks, demonstrating continuous improvement, and defining the difference between effective and ineffective teachers. These terms have been used continuously, and in such a way, as to forward the education spectacle. Over time, this terminology, often misunderstood by the public, and perhaps purposefully misused by the proponents of the education spectacle, convey a lack of efficacy in those schools that cannot produce the results that the spectacle demands. In turn, a manufactured public outrage over failing schools (education is dead) exerts more pressure on education policymakers to enact more accountability, more standardization, and more control. This desire to control, however, is no accident; it is the result of what happens when, as Biesta (2012) argues,

A particular discourse becomes hegemonic—that is, when a particular discourse begins to monopolize thinking and talking. It's not so much that the discourse has the power to change everything, but rather that people begin to adjust their ways of doing and talking to such ideas. (p. 12)

What is the result, then, of this discourse dominating over time? The result *is*: uniformity. Uniformity in the ways in which people think about and react to basic questions like: “what is the purpose of education?” and “what should teachers teach?”

Perhaps even more problematic is that these ideas about education become repeated exponentially over a period of time. Discourse around what the purpose of education *could or should be* changes. Over time, education changes, unable to resist the pressures from the spectacle that it ultimately helps perpetuate. Teachers change, or, more specifically, they are *forced* to change. Look, for example, at the movements toward pay for performance, merit pay, data that ties teacher efficacy to student test scores, and in my state we are soon implementing *Teacher Keys* which will track—via communication technologies—many of the curricular and instructional decisions a teacher makes in a given day. These policies and practices reinforce the prevailing notion of what education *is or should be*, and with reinforcement from the education spectacle, these policies are soon understood as being rational, logical, and points of common sense. Well, of course we want all schools to continuously improve, of course we want effective teachers, and of course we don't want to leave any students behind.

To recall the earlier discussion in this paper regarding technology, a similar spectacle can be created around the somewhat nebulous idea of technology as *the* means by which to resurrect education. It appears that it matters not from where this technology originates, who owns it, who administers it, just so long as it makes education more efficient, more accountable, and increasingly, more profitable. Udacity, the company mentioned earlier that is partnering with San Jose State University, asserts that they are revolutionizing higher education by offering college students access to college classes at lower costs and with a guarantee of higher quality. The idea of higher quality at lower cost is forwarded as a given; as if someone can, (or should?) expect both high quality and low cost from a college class. Further, the idea of technology improving education by allowing education to somehow achieve more for less assumes that education *should be* forced to produce results within a rational, deterministic economic model. Recall here Postman (1993) lamenting twenty years ago that we were embracing the speed and efficiency technology brought to all aspects of life without any inquiry into whether bigger and faster was always a good thing. Is quicker, bigger, more efficient always better? Sherry Turkle (2012) echoes these

important questions in her critique of how technology brings us together while also driving us apart. Turkle argues: "Technology reshapes the landscapes of our emotional lives, but is it offering us the lives we want to lead? What do we have, now that we have what we say we want—now that we have what technology makes easy?" (p. 17). As technology allows us to do more, see more, learn more, the more reliant we become upon it without inquiry into how technology is changing our relationships with each other and the vast amount of information we encounter each day.

One need not look too deeply today to see and hear technology on the lips of education reformers as a cure-all for what ails public education today. The idea that technology should or needs to be part of reforming education seems to dominate popular discourse in education and political circles today. However, one must ask questions such as, who will administer these new technologies that purport to efficiently and effectively educate the masses? Whom will this education technology serve? To whom will it answer? Quite often, the popular answer to these questions is that technology allows students and teachers to access an inordinate amount of interesting information; technology allows them to work more efficiently, more quickly. As Postman (1993) warned in the last years of the twentieth century:

In Technopoly, we improve the education of our youth by improving what are called "learning technologies." At the moment, it is considered necessary to introduce computers to the classroom, as it once was thought necessary to bring closed-circuit television and film to the classroom. To answer the question "Why should we do this?" the answer is: "To make learning more efficient and interesting." (p. 171)

Furthermore, if we are going to link education with technology, making the two ideas almost inseparable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, then one must raise questions regarding access to technology if equity in education is to be of any concern. As Harvard Law Professor Susan Crawford (2012) argues in *Captive Audience: The Telecom Industry and Monopoly Power in the New Gilded Age*, the United States still lags behind other developed countries such as Japan and Australia in providing affordable, high-speed internet access. More problematic, perhaps, is the ongoing conglomeration and collusion between the nation's internet providers (Comcast, Verizon, and NBC) providing consumers fewer choices when it comes to finding affordable, reliable, high-speed access (Crawford, 2013). If technology is to be seen as *the* key to a "good" 21<sup>st</sup> century education; and yet, large segments of the U.S. population do not have access to the technology needed to equitably participate in that education, then one must raise ongoing questions as to who or what actually profits from this technologically-advanced 21<sup>st</sup> century education.

There has been a long standing argument for education as a site for critical inquiry, participatory learning, and democracy. However, one does not need to look far today to realize that we live in an increasingly scrutinized society and what goes on in education, and in our schools, is perhaps just a reflection of society, writ large. With the proliferation of internet and broadband technologies, social media, and the ubiquity of video technology, we are all, in fact, watching each other on a regular basis. Consequently, the desire to see, and be seen, has grown exponentially, in the past ten years alone. In many ways, we have embraced technology and spectacle and turned it on ourselves in a way that Debord (1967/1983) and Baudriallard (1995) seemed to warn that we would. According to Turkle (2011) this is evidenced in our connected lives where we are alone, yet together, albeit voyeuristically. She writes, "Our networked life allows us to hide from

each other, even as we are watching each other” (p.1). We are, perhaps, all performers. At the least, we are all seers and we are all seen, almost incessantly today.

So where do we go from here? What can teachers, scholars, and members of any given community do as they navigate an increasingly mediated educational spectacle? The more the education spectacle positions education as a closed *process*, with delineated steps and measurable goals, the easier it is for teachers, parents, students, and scholars to succumb to the lure of the gadgetry and purported efficiency provided by the use of computer and internet technology in education. Nevertheless, many will be enthralled with the idea that an Ipad makes it easier to complete a MOOC and meet expected learning outcomes while sitting on a couch at home or while on an Iphone at the beach. It is telling to note that the early research on MOOC usage has shown that students are accessing MOOCs not primarily on computers or laptops, but on smartphones and tablets (Pappano, 2012). Apparently, we can all now complete Psychology 101 while stuck in traffic, or in line at the supermarket.

What is lacking in many conversations about education today is a discussion of purpose. What is the purpose of education? What is a good education? Why is a good education important? Is education the key to a good life, and what does that even mean? Is a consumerist-careerist notion of education, where completing the most efficient, quickest, and cheapest education possible so as to land a job in the global economy, really all that’s left to education today? Those questions aside, this paper is not an argument against technology in education in sum; I’m not blaming the death of education on technology alone. I am not a Luddite; I’ve taught classes in a hybrid-online format and I realize there is potential for technology to in some ways democratize education like no other phenomenon before. Technology also allows students access to information and ideas they would not have been exposed to in school twenty-five years ago. Yet, I can’t but help to question what this democratization of education via technology might look like within the constraints of the age of spectacle in which we live. If, as Debord (1967/1983) would have us believe, that “what was once directly lived has become mere representation” (p. 10), there exist ongoing challenges for education to unite communities, and to assist students in developing a critical consciousness that leads to asking questions about the issues, injustices, and needs facing all people.

What then, is actually required, to have hope of maintaining a public education for the public good? Is critical awareness of communication technologies and their spectacular power enough? If so, how do we develop that awareness? Does an education that develops critical consciousness actually benefit from the use of communication technology? To assume, as our pseudo-world of spectacle posits, that technology improves education almost without reproach, is misguided, at best. Yet, technology as *the* means to receiving a *good* education seems to be the mantra emanating from the lips of most educators, political leaders, and pundits today. The spectacle of Debord’s pseudo-world brings with it implications for critical citizenship today, but at the same time, the technology it relies on offers us the possibility of discovery through inquiry. K-12 teachers, university professors, philosophers and scholars alike must continue to question the role of technology in their own lives, in their teaching and scholarship, and the degree to which the spectacular world today continually mediates understanding and inquiry.

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