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Death of the Lecture(r)?

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Death of the Lecture(r)—Rhetoric or the End?

An uneasy relationship is playing out in education between humans and technology. Asking if education is determined by technology or constructed by society for societal needs is a classic question in the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS) (Johnson and Wetmore 2009). Moreover, technology as a neutral tool to be manipulated and controlled for human ends gives rise to a humanistic power, ignoring networks of human and non-human and the political implications of uncritical technology adoption (Monberg 2005; Dahlberg 2017).

Two particular reductive positions are playing out in education discourse; the first is killing off the lecture while another is killing off the lecturer. This is an applied postdigital and posthuman issue as to how technologies are introduced and designed into learning environments which are sociomaterial/technical networks and assemblages (Gourlay 2021).

Such reductive positions in the unbundled university may see specific groups in a bloody turf war battling for survival and dominance. The unbundled university in its widest sense is a collection of organisations (both public and private) and professional specialists all taking responsibility for their ‘bundle’ (Macfarlane 2011; Gehrke and Kezar 2015). When re-bundled, the university is enacted. Rather than collaboration between networks of academics, technologists, students and technological artefacts, there is a discourse of conflict and even more sinister, death.

Both the lecture and the lecturer are under attack. Death seems like a very final outcome for something we think of as not being as useful as it once was. Moving on to do something else, re-inventing oneself with incorporation of new technological affordances or enjoying a restful holiday feels a lot more benevolent than killing off. Snappy headlines pervade such as ‘The Death of the Lecture’ (Dutceac Segesten 2012; Ian 2020) and asking ‘Is the lecture dead?’ (Peberdy 2019). Similar discourse on the death throws of the educator exist with ‘Will AI replace university lecturers?’

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Not if we make it clear why humans matter' (Haw 2019). 'The death of the lecture' is a catchy headline for media articles and conference presentations, often reducing discourse and debate to mere soundbite (Slayden and Whillock 1999). Postpandemic opportunities are being seized, and discursive battle lines drawn as the future university is played out in blogs, social media, marketing copy and conferences. A complex network of actors in the unbundled university are tooling and typing up for battle.

Rather than bringing together a variety of perspectives, learning and teaching environments are being siloed and partitioned in the unbundled university (Morris et al. 2020). The academic teacher–researcher role is potentially being unbundled into many constituent parts (Craig 2015; McCowan 2017). Such divides and positions can be seen with an ever more complex network of the human and non-human. Williamson (2021) defines this as 'Meta-EdTech' in that the introduction of new technologies in education is expanding into many different spaces and industries:

It designates a huge variety of actors (human and nonhuman), organizations (public, private or multisector), material and technical forms (hardware, software, supporting documents), modes of practice (of teachers, designers, promoters), and framing discourses, as well as being a highly varied field of research, development and critical inquiry. (Williamson 2021: 1)

Specialists in both digital technologies and pedagogy make up this network of specialists in a university assemblage (White et al. 2020). These siloes can become reductive and buried deep in echo chambers, resulting in discourses of binary deaths—the lecture or the lecturer.

Death of the Lecture

At the heart of the discourse on the death of the lecture is a contested position on teaching and learning practice and strikes at the heart of the idea of a university. The lecture is portrayed as an anachronistic practice of a bygone age as teacher-centred knowledge transmission from teacher to student (human to human). This is classified as a 'learning type' of acquisition (Laurillard 2012; Young and Perović 2016) in contrast to the suggested more student active engagements of collaboration, discussion, investigation, practice and production. Such models are often described as a move to student-centred and active learning. Such discourse portrays the lecture as only ever being a knowledge holder transmitting to those without knowledge. Labelling the lecture as knowledge acquisition to be rationed and reduced in favour of more 'active' skills of collaboration, discussion, investigation, practice and production again positions the lecture as exclusive of such engagement. Critics of this position cite increased focus on higher education as training for paid employment and economic ends (Matthews and Kotzee 2019; Ralston 2020; Jandrić 2021).

This discourse renders the lecture and other so-called passive learning (i.e. reading) as a monolithic one-dimensional task to fill empty heads with knowledge to be

banked and accumulated (Freire 1996). The paradox here is that digital technologies in essence are data packets of transmission from one place to another and are supposedly the non-human disruptors of such knowledge transmission and new ways of learning. Video did not kill the radio star and the spoken word podcast, based on the radio show is alive, well and thriving (Brooks 2020). The Masterclass online learning platform with video (lecture?) based courses from Gordon Ramsey, Martin Scorsese and Helen Mirren (Masterclass 2021) is valued at \$2.75 billion (Holon IQ 2021), just one example of the contradiction of BigTech discourse.

This development and retrieval of what has gone before but with new technologies is conceptualised by Marshall McLuhan's Tetrad (McLuhan and McLuhan 1999; Jandrić 2017) consisting of four stages—amplification, obsolescence, retrieval and flip. New EdTech taken from media and technology amplify the use of digital technologies and render the lecture as no longer needed. This leads to obsolescence and digital media pushes out the lecture, much like how audio took over from print. However, the retrieval stage looks to what has been lost with the lecture—the performance and presentation on a specific subject. This retrieval moves into the development and design of new technologies which sees the lecture as re-purposed and re-invigorated just as radio flipped to TV and TV to the Internet—elements were retrieved from what came before. The podcast and the public lecture keep the lecture alive and kicking in a new medium and form.

Death of the Lecturer

In a literal sense, students' shock was reported in that a dead professor was 'teaching' an online course in that the professor's video lectures were presented to students (Basken 2021). This shows a wider conceptualisation of teaching as a wholly humanistic exercise in which a 'live' (synchronous) teacher and student is required to enact a teaching and learning experience. The evolving communication practices in wider society first see this as an obsolescence in the words of McLuhan; however, the lecture and lecturer are retrieved and return in a new guise—a digital artefact. Conceptualisation of the introduction of the non-human into such an assemblage can draw upon movements such as transhumanism, new materialism, object-oriented ontology, speculative realism, actor-network theory and assemblage theory (Mustola 2019; Gourlay 2020). Mustola reports on anthropocentric perspectives in education which sees the human having to conquer and control the non-human. Such an anthropocentric view is taking by Hassan:

By this it is meant that by embracing digital technology so rapidly and allowing it to permeate the university so comprehensively, we have unleashed a technological force – digitalization – that is radically at odds with what it is to be human. (Hassan 2018: 372)

The 'teaching dead professor' then is in fact a digital artefact—a recording of a time and space but the artefact is still very much alive—a postdigital afterlife continuing to have influence. Such influence may be passive interpretation (Savin-Baden 2019)

of the artefact or artificial intelligence and active algorithms change the relationship of this passive interpretation to a more active agent (Knox 2014; Savin-Baden and Burden 2019). For example, a recommendation to watch a ‘dead’ professor’s lecture on YouTube or similar university platform based on previous viewing data renders it active in a sociomaterial assemblage.

In policy and linguistic discourse, the teacher or lecturer is removed when phrases such as ‘technology-enhanced learning’ act and push the teacher and the student aside as technology enhances and improves learning autonomously (Hayes 2019). Biesta’s learnification (Biesta 2019) rails against the expert teacher removed from being ‘sage on the stage’ to ‘guide on the side’ or ‘peer at the rear’. EdTech culture adopted from Silicon Valley discursively reconfigures the teacher as a coach while technology does much of the heavy lifting (Ideland 2021).

Roland Barthes (2001) proclaimed the ‘death of the author’ to show how texts are written and released into the world for interpretation by a wide range of readers. We can extend this thinking to the book, the journal article, the video, the podcast (all possibly written by or recordings of dead lecturers) in a way of understanding a detachment of the lecturer and the lecture with the involvement of non-human technologies.

Harmonious and Convivial Humans and Non-humans

Latour (2009) described ‘the missing masses’ in social theory as the non-human artefacts which influence and have agency over the human as an assemblage of figurative humans and non-human figurative signs. A figurative human gives a live lecture while a digital artefact of a recorded lecture is a non-human figurative sign.

What appears in the place of the two ghosts – society and technology – is not simply a hybrid object, a little bit of efficiency and a little bit of sociologizing, but a *sui generis* object: the collective thing, the trajectory of the front line between programs and anti-programs. It is too full of humans to look like the technology of old, but it is too full of nonhumans to look like the social theory of the past. (Latour 2009: 175)

Programs and anti-programs here are actions of the human and the non-human as a *sui generis* whole object of lectures, videos of lectures, podcasts, lecturers, students and various digital technologies embedded not only in the university but in society. All of these make up a networked postdigital assemblage of humans without any blood on the hands of the human or non-human and no final death sentence for the lecture or lecturer.

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