

Chapter 3

Online Teaching as Virtual Work in the New (Political) Economy

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ABSTRACT

Online teaching and learning has been adopted throughout higher education with minimal critical attention to the challenges it poses to traditional definitions of academic labor. This chapter explores four areas where the nature of academic labor becomes contestable through the introduction of online instruction: (1) the boundaries demarcating work from personal time; (2) the relative invisibility of online labor; (3) the documentation, recognition, and rewards attendant to online instruction; and (4) the illusory empowerment of online students as consumers. The theory and practice of what constitutes “legitimate” labor in higher education require substantial reconsideration to incorporate the online dimension.

INTRODUCTION

Online teaching occupies a contested site for the definition, performance, recognition, and reward of labor in higher education. Contestability in this context refers to public documents, policies, and practices that promote or embrace online teaching and learning (OTL) while also inviting questions about the role of online teaching as academic labor. Online teaching is conditioned by the context in

which it is implemented. Several features of the contemporary context warrant discussion.

The first feature is an enduring concern for the interaction between corporate-oriented and public-oriented communication and organizing. A series of scholars have examined, using a colonization model, the impact of managerial rhetoric and practice on the public sphere, or on public goods, such as education (Giroux & Myrsiades, 2001). The key issue in these works is colonization of the lifeworld by the system (Deetz, 1992, 1995; Habermas, 1987), of the public sphere by the corporation (Sproule, 1988,

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1989, 1990), or of a value logos by an instrumental logos (Sayer, 1999; Tompkins, 2005).

Stanley Deetz offers a particularly eloquent account of this concern. For Deetz (1992, 1995), organization leaders and members, particularly those in corporate organizations, suffer from managerialism, or an ideology that lays out what managers should believe, say, and do, and the legitimate role of managers in organizations and society. Defined by managerialism, managers make decisions based on narrow meanings of the world, such as control and efficiency. As well, managerialism conditions non-managers to accept the authority of managers and their decisions based on control and efficiency. Today, managerialism likely influences much university decision making (Giroux & Myrsiades, 2001), shaping the meaning and implementation of online teaching.

The second feature is the broader cultural, political, and economic context. Key aspects of this context in the US include economic disinvestment in public institutions and structures, political cynicism, an embrace of the market as a solution to destabilized cultural authority (Grossberg, 2005), and increasing economic inequality (Munger, 2002). Public policy informed by neo-liberalism has sought to turn labor into a fixed cost and a principal site for locating economic risk, while increasing rewards for finance capital and industries (Grossberg, 2005). Finally, capitalist commodities and value routinely stem from the direct exploitation of cultural knowledge and human connection (Lazzarato, 1996; Thrift, 2006).

Developments such as these broadly affect university operations. In the specific case of online teaching, these developments help position online teaching as, simultaneously, a way to improve human capital, widen access to higher education (to improve human capital), and contain costs in times of inadequate public funding. Thus, although OTL may be shaped in progressive ways, the current context exerts considerable influence, pushing online teaching in directions that systematically

devalue or marginalize academic labor performed by teachers and students.

BACKGROUND

Before proceeding, the terminology of OTL requires clarification. In this chapter, references to online teaching and learning denote fully computer-mediated courses and programs rather than online components that supplement traditional classroom teaching. We would argue, however, that the labor-related issues discussed herein become incrementally more salient as more instructional work migrates toward computer-mediated communication and away from face-to-face interpersonal interactions.

One of the most comprehensive national surveys of faculty who teach online courses asked respondents to rank the importance of factors that will most likely determine the success of online instruction (Kim & Bonk, 2006). The results revealed a clear mismatch between faculty's educational preparation and the skills faculty themselves associated with successful online teaching. The top four factors, in order of importance, were: monetary support, pedagogical competency, technical competency, and improvements in online technologies (Kim & Bonk, 2006). A major challenge these and other online instructors face is how some of these factors might remain unrecognized or under-acknowledged within the definitions of labor that higher education institutions deem "legitimate" academic work.

Regarding labor issues associated with OTL, extant research concentrates on comparing the relative workload of online versus on-ground teaching (Shedletsky & Aitken, 2001). By contrast, we posit that online education introduces *qualitative* differences in the nature of academic work, differences that often escape institutionalized practices of managing and monitoring labor in higher education. The central issue becomes less a matter of sheer workload than one of under-

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