Chapter 14
Facebook as Public Pedagogy:
A Critical Examination of Learning, Community, and Consumption

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the emergence of online digital media, specifically Facebook, as a space of resistance and submission to consumerist ideologies. Online digital media function as a form of public pedagogy, serving as a platform for implicit lessons in cultural norms and roles that reinforce hegemonic social structures operating in the physical world. In this chapter, we raise issues and questions regarding the determinacy of online digital media: is Facebook a pedagogical tool for reinforcing corporate interests or does it have the potential to be a space of resistance and democratic discourse? The study of the public pedagogy of online digital media calls for a reconceptualization of learning as a collaborative, social process in which adult learners assume predetermined social roles as well as have the potential to create new knowledge forms within virtual communities.

INTRODUCTION

The introduction and mass consumption of technological media and online networks has interrupted long-held conceptions of learning and knowledge. In today's globally networked world, knowledge is continuously produced in interactions across online global networks (Castells, 1996; Farrell, 2004; Gee et al., 1996). Online networks are spaces where learning and knowledge production rely on social

engagement (Stiles, 2000). In the social process of learning, "we make and use knowledge together, with other people" (Farrell, 2004, p. 481). Scholarship on online networked knowledge production suggests that technological media has the potential to both resist hegemonic practices and surrender to corporate motives (Farrell, 2004; Giroux, 2004).

Many of today's adult learners, especially those emerging from Generations X and Y, experience learning within formal educational spaces as de-contextualized, irrelevant, and generally focused on hierarchical relationships between teacher and

students. This is not to say adult learners are not learning, however; they are, but not in traditional ways or traditional places. Adult learners are spending more time engaged in various forms of informal and self-directed learning outside of formal classroom settings, and are increasingly interacting with the vast media-facilitated "public pedagogy" (Giroux, 2000) of popular culture (Tisdell, 2008).

Educators interested in the dynamics of public pedagogy have investigated cultural spaces and practices such as "television, movies, video games, music, Internet, instant messaging, iPods, shopping malls, theme parks, etc" (Kincheloe, 2007, p. 31) as forms of public pedagogy. Researchers within the field of adult education, more specifically, have researched various sites of popular culture and everyday life as spaces and activities that educate adults in informal and incidental ways. Adult education researchers have focused on fiction novels (Jubas 2007); non-fiction products such as radio, newspapers, magazines, and television histories (Armstrong & Coles, 2008; Sandlin, 2005a; 2005b); fashion (Stalker, 2004); video games and virtual communities on the internet (Grace, 2004; Hayes, 2006; Hollenbeck, 2005; Thompson, 2007); and movies, television programs, and cartoons (Armstrong, 2005a, 2005b).

Because many of these sites of public pedagogy are embedded in a rapidly expanding consumer culture, adult educators have also recently become interested in examining the adult learning involved in consumption and its resistance (Jarvis, 2008; Jubas, 2008; Ritchey, 2008; Sandlin, 2008; Usher, 2008; Usher, Bryant, and Johnston, 1997). We posit that adult educators need to continue to focus attention on issues of consumerism and its resistance, given the increasing role consumption plays in structuring every aspect of our lives (Bocock, 1993). One public pedagogical space that is embedded in consumer culture and where adult learners pursuing higher education are increasingly spending their time, consists

of online networks and social networking sites. One in particular, Facebook, is especially popular (Bugeja, 2006; Eberhardt, 2007; Higher Education Research Institute 2008; Towner & Van Horn, 2007; Wesch, 2007).

Educators examining public pedagogy have focused on how these spaces reproduce hegemony and instill dominant cultural values in individuals. Giroux (1999) states such cultural spaces have become primary educational forces in "regulating the meanings, values, and tastes that set the norms that offer up and legitimate particular subject positions—what it means to claim an identity as a male, female, white, black, citizen, noncitizen" (pp. 2-3). We posit that, along with learning about issues of identity and subject positionality, learners engaging in spaces of public pedagogy, and particularly in online social networking sites such as Facebook, also engage with various conceptions of what it means to be a "learner," a "community member," a "consumer," and a "citizen."

In this chapter we raise issues and address broad questions about learning, community, and commodification in Facebook. Specifically, we ask: What does learning look like in an unbounded, unbundled, open source space that is concurrently also a space of commodification and consumption? How do online social networks like Facebook create communities of learners as users navigate and negotiate the terrain between commodification and freedom? And, how does participation in this educative space shape learners' notions of community? The complex interplay of power, resistance, knowledge forms, and identity, along with an emerging reconceptualization of community make sites like Facebook ideal spaces for analyzing adult learning in digitally networked spaces of public pedagogy. We begin by exploring learning in Facebook from the lens of learning as a social process. Then, we attempt to make sense of the ways in which Facebook users are reconceptualizing "community" through digital, social learning experiences. Finally, we discuss the ways in which Facebook is a space of commodifica-

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