Foreword

Deconstructing the Education-Industrial Complex in the Digital Age requires us to think seriously about the technologies we use to make sense of our educational institutions, our students, and even ourselves. Thinking in what the authors call the “digital age” means to me that we must consider not only how new conduits of knowledge alter relations in education, but also how the new technologies are constitutive of knowledge. Let me go further: We can no longer know without these technologies.

Manuel Castells argued that informational technologies are reshaping the material bases of society because they have led to a new communication system that uses a universal digital language, which integrates globally the production and distribution of the words, sounds, images of our culture, while also customizing them to the particular concerns of individuals. This communication system converts all inputs—no matter the kind—into information, and it processes that information at increasing speed, with increasing power, at decreasing cost, in ubiquitous retrieval and distribution networks, which grow exponentially and create new forms and channels of communication, shaping life and being shaped by life at the same time (Castells, 1996).

Of course, the creation of new technologies has always allowed societies to understand themselves in different ways. What seems to be the case today, however, according to Castells, is that productivity lies primarily in the technology of knowledge generation, information processing, and symbol communication. What we are facing now is a virtuous circle of interaction between the knowledge sources of technology and the application of technology to improve knowledge generation and information processing. The new information technologies, I would add, convert knowledge into information, which then feeds back on the technologies to generate more technologies for the creation, storage, and distribution of information.

If all I just said is even remotely possible, how are we to think of knowledge? What of power? According to Daniel Bell (1976), “knowledge” conventionally has been thought of as sets of organized statements of facts or ideas presenting reasoned judgments transmitted via some communication medium in some systematic form; “information” simply constituted data that have been organized and communicated in some way. Knowledge always needed information but was not itself information. But we do not need to worry about this distinction anymore, for knowledge today seems inseparable from its mode of communication. Jean-François Lyotard (1984) seemed correct when he argued that knowledge is being transformed into “quantities of information,” which then transforms relations between and among myriad institutions and individuals, all of which are being converted into “data.” If Michel Foucault (1980) was also correct that knowledge and power can only be thought of as in relation to each other, then our understanding of power today requires that we attend in a very explicit way to the transformation of knowledge in the “digital age,” for power cannot be understood without understanding its relation to knowledge.
As we read *Deconstructing the Education-Industrial Complex in the Digital Age*, let us ask ourselves: How are we to think of the relation between knowledge and power in the “digital age?” I think the new technologies require that we convert institutions, individuals, education, teaching, learning, diversity, the state, the world—everything and anything—into information that we will now call “data.” Thus, we might say, counter-intuitively, not that knowledge entails using data but that knowledge = data. The privileged data today is that which made all phenomena numerical, calculable, and reproducible. From this, we can develop new statistical laws that will justify new modes of social administration. That is, social phenomena are now objectified, so that the inner workings of people, of institutions, of anything, could be known as data and used for change. The social world—perhaps the “physical” one too—has been converted into “data” that could be ordered systematically and taxonomically within a functional system that is administrable.

The overriding themes of *Deconstructing the Education-Industrial Complex in the Digital Age* enable us to understand new forms of power, but also how we can make use of technologies to create new forms of justice. But that is not the main point of such a book for me. I would ask readers to think of how the new technologies shaping our lives in education become important stakes in political struggles, for the “digital age” is characterized by specific social organizations in which information generation, processing, and transmission become the fundamental sources of productivity and power. I think we need to see in the proliferation of these new technologies, or new uses for existing ones, new claims to, and struggles for, political power.

I hope readers are intrigued enough to consider new technologies in education as more than simply conduits for the uses of information couched as knowledge. New technologies might be central to all kinds of political imperatives in advanced liberal societies, for such societies may not be able to generate new meaning—or even to have real meaning—outside of these technologies, which produce information we call knowledge, which then is turned back on them to spark conversions of new things into information. If this is so, we might attend to our creation and proliferation of these technologies, to our attempts to restrict their creation or their contents, to our attempts to control their uses, to our defenses and critiques of them, to all this as much more than battles over particular uses of technologies. These are political struggles in a larger battle over legitimacy and power in the “digital age.” For to gain control over these technologies—and I mean much more than a physical control, but also a control over the discourses about them—might be, in a sense, to gain power today.

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REFERENCES


