

Democracy at a Distance?: The Political Realities of Distance Learning

Scott Dexter
Dept. of Computer & Information Science
Brooklyn College
Brooklyn, NY 11210
(718) 951-3125
sdexter@sci.brooklyn.cuny.edu

George Theoharis
The University of Wisconsin
1152 Educational Sciences
1025 West Johnson
Madison, WI 53706
(608) 267-4221
gttheoha@students.wisc.edu

Introduction

The promise of distance learning has inspired a broad re-evaluation of pedagogical possibilities, as educators search for new ways to create access and educational excellence for an ever-wider population of students. Already myriads of distance learning initiatives are gaining prominence in the missions and methods of long-standing educational institutions, with institutions as diverse as Penn State, the University of Minnesota, UCLA, Lansing Community College, and Gulf Coast University becoming major players in the distance learning marketplace.¹ But while the potential of distance learning is undeniable, the ways in which it is realized are strongly influenced by the political and educational forces that surround it. In the current political climate, which finds public educators on the defensive, educational technology is hyped for its pedagogical promise but deployed for its potential to appease the corporate interests clamoring for measurable results, more "efficient" methods, and an increasingly technologized and vocationalized workforce. As it is currently being implemented, distance learning often relies on skill-and-drill methods, maintains the uneven playing field (preserving rather than shattering the relationship between pedagogy and class), erodes classroom dialogue, de-intellectualizes pedagogy and ultimately devalues educational labor. Indeed, although distance learning is often described as an equalizing agent, it is instead becoming a vehicle for further removing education from the public sphere.

As the widespread deployment of distance learning is still in its infancy, this is a moment in which we as educators may intervene to ensure that distance learning is deployed in educationally sound and democratic ways. But an effective intervention requires careful study: in this paper, we will analyze the distance learning initiatives at two public institutions — Wisconsin Public Schools and the City University of New York — which are under strong political pressure to relinquish aspects of their missions to the private sector (e.g. through the implementation of vouchers and the excising of remedial curricula, respectively). We will discuss the development and various implementations of these initiatives, demonstrate connections with these privatizing influences, critically examine the effects of surrounding political and educational forces, and, finally, suggest means by which distance learning may be reshaped and re-imagined as part of a pedagogy of inclusion and equal access.

Distance Learning in Context

Despite the wave of excitement that has surrounded distance learning in the academy over the past several years, it has been a staple of the corporate training system – what Dan Schiller calls the "shadow system" – for over 30 years. In 1967, Southern Methodist University began offering instructional TV service to industry in the Dallas-Fort Worth region, including firms such as Texas Instruments and General Dynamics. Stanford, the University of Southern California, the University of Maryland, and a variety of other institutions followed suit, servicing industry in their areas. By the late 80's, university-corporate coalitions were routinely broadcasting master's degree programs to students in corporations, research centers, and government agencies. These programs were funded by the corporations themselves; in 1998, however, one such program, National Technological University, created a for-profit unit in the hopes of reaching a wider market.²

This level of investment in both in-house and, increasing, public initiatives represents the beginnings of the commercialization of what had previously been a local, tax-funded public service — from the corporate perspective, the creation of a huge new market. Moreover, this new positioning afforded corporations new kinds of access to public funds — by the mid-90's, corporations were receiving \$30 billion of the \$340 billion US annual expenditure on education. Of course, these developments bring with them not only increased corporate participation in education but also an increasing corporatization of the values that have historically defined our public education system. As the market gains a secure foothold in education, and competition and the profit motive begin to affect both public opinion and policy decisions, nuanced subjective evaluations of educational effectiveness are replaced by "scientific" objectively measurable "performance outcomes", faculty control of curriculum and pedagogy is replaced by centralized control (which nonetheless rejects its own accountability), and accountability to the community is replaced by faceless standards of cost effectiveness.

According to a report issued by the National Center for Education Statistics which analyzes patterns of distance education deployment in higher education, the primary forces which have driven higher education towards adoption of distance education are "convergence of communication and computing technologies, the changing demographics of students pursuing postsecondary education, and the need to reduce the cost of education."³ The report cites a similar 1995 study that also finds that institutions are highly motivated by both attracting new students and reducing per-student costs. Yet, the report notes, there is very little data to support the notion that distance education is cheaper, and, indeed, there is some anecdotal evidence to suggest that this is not the case. As Gladieux and Swail note,⁴ new technology is generally both expensive and short-lived. The potential economic benefits of technology-based instruction, then, will accrue only to those institutions that either have a substantial pre-existing infrastructure or are willing to deploy this technology to replace classroom instruction rather than enhance it.

Of course, cost is not the only factor analyzed in determining the value of an educational initiative; equivalent or even increased costs might be acceptable if the pedagogy of distance learning lives up to expectations. But research on the effectiveness of distance learning is scant, at best. And although this research suggests in broad terms that distance learning and traditional forms are roughly equal in effectiveness, the body of work has been roundly criticized for postulating unjustified causal relationships and for inadequately addressing the complexity of interactions between students and technology.⁵

But the absence of data has not dampened efforts to encourage universities to embrace distance learning while simultaneously adopting an administrative framework grounded in scientific management and productivity enhancement. In an influential Educom report, Massy & Zemsky⁶ warn that if traditional institutions of higher education "do not exploit the new technologies, other nontraditional providers of education will be quick to do so." Indeed, the proclaimed necessity of technology-based education is entwined with both the growing call for outcomes-based accountability and the continuing tracking of higher education students along class lines.

"In higher education, public criticism and calls by state agencies for increased institutional accountability have a strong cost component, an implied question about value-for-money. A small core of traditional learners, those who can afford it and those whose abilities are rewarded with scholarships, will continue to seek out the traditional handicraft-oriented education that has been the hallmark of our system. The public has begun to question, however, whether this model is extendible to the whole of higher education. Already the criticism of higher education's rising costs suggests that society finds this educational model too expensive for massified higher education. Competition for the learner who does not desire such expensive, labor-intensive education already has increased."

By positing higher education as an unheeding, unresponsive monopoly, with students and "the public" as consumers in its thrall, Massy & Zemsky are able to identify distance learning with the virtues of the free market — choice, flexibility, and the exercise of personal responsibility. With students recast as savvy consumers in a dynamic new market full of distance learning opportunities, universities and faculty will have to "unbundle their offerings and prices:" students will insist on the right to purchase as much or as little advising, instruction, mentoring, and certification as they want. And with the labor recouped by this "just in time" delivery of educational services, universities will be able to achieve significant new efficiencies by downsizing the excess faculty.

The City University of New York

For generations, the City University of New York has been a crucial educational opportunity for working class, poor, and immigrant citizens of New York City. Its founding mission as the College of the "whole people" culminated in the 1970 policy of open admissions, whereby anyone with a high school diploma or GED could attend CUNY, engage in any necessary remedial studies, and eventually earn a college degree.⁷ While the best means to provide all citizens access to excellent education has always been subject to passionate debate, and shrinking public funds have caused some to frame the discussion in terms of access *versus* excellence, recent political maneuverings at the city and state level threaten to bring an abrupt end to the entire debate.

In May 1998, Mayor Giuliani established a Task Force on the City University of New York, directing it to examine open admissions and remedial education at CUNY, possibilities for arranging for third parties to provide remediation to (prospective) CUNY students, and implementation of other "appropriate" reform measures. Chairing the Task Force was Benno Schmidt, who is also Chairman of the Edison Project, and has since become Vice-Chancellor of CUNY. The recommendations of the Task Force, delivered in June 1999, were not especially surprising.⁸ The Task Force called for

- 'objective' admissions standards for all colleges, including a national standardized text such as the SAT;

- performance standards for graduation from all degree programs;
- implementing a pilot program for outsourcing "remediation services" in order to stimulate competitions and generate performance data;
- funding remediation with "education and training vouchers" valid at a wide range of "providers;"
- performance assessment and merit-based resource allocation for all institutions and programs; and
- reconstitution as a "university system" with "mission differentiation" among constituent campuses.

In the wake of the Task Force Report, the University administration rapidly imposed sweeping reforms. Most notably, remedial services have been eliminated from all 4-year colleges, pushed, for the moment, to the 2-year colleges, while organizations such as Sylvan Learning Centers and Stanley Kaplan have applied for state accreditation, proposing remedial courses for a pre-college clientele. According to administration reports, this policy will cause the student body of the 4-year colleges to be reduced by 45%, including over 70% of the students of color.

At the same time, in apparent contrast to the principles of "mission differentiation" which the Task Force argues is crucial to CUNY's successful reconstitution, the Board of Trustees has significantly relaxed the conditions determining whether students may transfer from a community college to a senior college. For example, any student with a 2-year degree from a community college will be deemed to have completed Brooklyn College's Core Curriculum, which is nominally required of all graduates. Similarly, courses with similar titles will transfer whole cloth regardless of the actual course curricula. Thus, rather than addressing structural impediments to providing excellent education to all students, the CUNY administration is instead remaking the university into an enormous training engine that is intended to become a highly efficient producer of workers groomed to feed the metro area's increasing appetite for information workers.

Distance Learning at CUNY

In June 1995, the CUNY Board of Trustees charged the University Library and Educational Technology Task Force to "make recommendations to the Chancellor on a University-wide plan for expanding the role and accelerating the use of educational technology in support of teaching, learning and research" at CUNY. The Task Force's 1997 findings⁹ echoed those of the NCES study, claiming that distance learning programs "have enormous potential for enhancing CUNY colleges' ability to fulfill their missions as well as for developing revenue from new populations." The report acknowledges that while there is no evidence that distance learning is as effective as traditional teaching models, the University "cannot afford to wait" to begin investing in the necessary infrastructure — an investment which, to justify, will of course require the dedication of further resources, regardless of whatever new evidence becomes available in the interim. While the report is ambivalent about the actual feasibility of developing significant revenue from distance learning courses, it does note that doing so will require decreasing the amount of faculty/student contact (that is, increasing the number of students per faculty and/or decreasing the number of faculty).

Although the report makes clear the importance of distance learning for CUNY and its constituent colleges, at the moment, there is no CUNY-wide distance learning initiative — nor, according to the report, does any CUNY college have any sort of distance learning master plan. This is attributable

in part to ongoing faculty protest of distance learning, through faculty union publications, disciplinary email lists, the University Faculty Senate, and the collective bargaining process, which has imposed a moratorium on CUNY's distance-learning efforts until a joint faculty-administration committee makes recommendations on best practices. Despite this, CUNY colleges have seen a number of grant-funded (and hence unaffected by the moratorium) distance learning projects of increasing scope.

At the time of the report, most CUNY colleges had a scattering of distance learning or otherwise technology-enhanced course offerings. A few campuses offered one or two "offsite" courses using computer and fax communication; many other campuses offered a small variety of courses which were enhanced by "Open Learning technologies" such as email, listserv, and Web-based information.

At Brooklyn College, distance learning efforts are being carried out through a number of grant-funded projects, two of which we will focus on here. The first, funded by the National Science Foundation, centers around software called WebToTeach. Developed in Brooklyn College's Computer and Information Science department, this software provides a fully Web-based interface to a sophisticated system for automated checking of programming exercises. The system's design is motivated by the observation that the pedagogy of computer science is related in many ways to that of both foreign languages and mathematics. Failing in this analogy, though, is the technique of providing a large number of problems that focus on one small facet of the discipline: this is an important (but certainly not exclusive) part of teaching both languages and mathematics, but is rarely seen in computer science. The reason for this is not difficult to discern: even in simple programming exercises, the multiplicity of both correct and incorrect answers presents a huge logistical obstacle to even the most cursory grading of large numbers of exercises. While nuanced feedback can only be provided by manual grading, WebToTeach makes it possible for instructors to assign large numbers of small programming exercises; the students in turn can receive instantaneous feedback indicating whether or not their solution is correct and, if not, some guidance on how the problem might be corrected.

The goals of this project are primarily evangelical: to develop libraries of exercises, to recruit instructors to use WebToTeach at a variety of institutions nationwide, to collect statistical data on the effectiveness of WebToTeach-enhanced courses, and ultimately to commercialize the software.

On a larger scale, FIPSE is funding a three-year college-wide experiment in "partially virtual" pedagogy. Taking advantage of Brooklyn's Core Curriculum, a collection of 14 courses that are required of every graduate, the project attempts to measure the pedagogical effectiveness of replacing one "traditional" class meeting with some form of Web-based "virtual" experience. Over a three-year period, instructors are first developing a virtual module appropriate for their area of the Core, then, where scheduling permits, deploying this module as an "enrichment" to the traditional course (without canceling classes), and finally teaching the course in partially virtual mode for three semesters. To determine how the partially virtual approach compares with the traditional syllabus, each partially virtual section is paired with a traditionally taught section (with, nominally, the same curriculum). Students in both sections are pre- and post-surveyed regarding their attitudes towards computers and computer-assisted learning, and their final grades will be recorded.

Instructors are free to develop their virtual module in any fashion they wish, although the goal is to design them to exploit those properties of the Web which seem to hold promise for innovative pedagogy. Particular importance is placed on devising non-linear organizations of material, largely by breaking material up into "bite-sized pieces" which might then be linked in novel arrangements. In addition, many courses are designed to exploit "asynchronous communication" — i.e. the possibility for class discussions to be carried out with students and instructor separated by space and time.

A number of these courses (in e.g. Classics and History) achieve partially virtual status by simply replacing a class meeting with mandatory participation in a Web-mediated discussion group. This is a type of distance learning that has been widely cited as a true innovation, as it allows a rare form of equity in participation — shy students are as likely to participate as gregarious ones; students may spend as little or as much time thinking as they wish before they comment; students and faculty alike have ample time to digest others' contributions before offering a response. The particular approach used in these classes, moreover, appears to offer a different sort of value: because students are strongly encouraged to offer evidence from the text being discussed to support the points they make in their online contributions, they conclude the class with a much more sophisticated understanding of the text.

Other courses use Web-based discussion in combination with other techniques. In Literature, students must complete an on-line lesson (e.g. exploring a hypertext example of poem analysis, then performing their own analysis of a similar poem), then post responses to the lesson to an on-line discussion. In Sociology, students must collect data from on-line resources (e.g. media analysis using on-line national newspapers) then post their results, which become part of a class-wide database from which students write final reports (which are also shared with the class). One version of the Geology course is organized similarly, with students developing research methods via on-line discussion, then posting their results to the discussion group.

Another Geology section is organized in part around a Web-based exploration of navigation using maps and compasses, where students complete Web-based quizzes at various points throughout the sequence of lessons. Similarly, the Philosophy course features a virtual module in which a wide variety of arguments and counterarguments for and against the existence of God are hyperlinked in an arrangement that demonstrates the philosophical relationships among them.

The Mathematics and Computer Science course employs a number of "virtual modules" addressing topics such as the history of computer and the Internet, the fundamentals of creating a web page, representing numbers using different base systems, and an introduction to programming Java applets. It is this last topic which requires the most sophisticated infrastructure for "virtual deployment," and it is here that this effort interlocks with the WebToTeach project. Learning to program is a significant challenge, even for students (such as computer science majors) who are highly motivated to do so. In this course, our goal is to expose non-majors to some of the challenges and processes unique to computer science, especially the particular flavor of algorithmic problem-solving and the obsessive attention to detail which are required. Teaching programming virtually to non-majors is a bold move, as it removes some of the face-to-face support that many students rely on as they begin. The hypothesis of this project, though, is that WebToTeach's architecture will aid in exposing the initially daunting structure of an applet as an agglomeration of relatively simple ideas, each of which can be exercised and explored on their own before being placed into the conceptual structure of the applet. Furthermore, WebToTeach may make it easier

for the instructor to monitor student progress on these exercises and intervene more quickly and accurately when problems do arise.

Analysis

With good intentions, the FIPSE project is trying to help fill the gap identified in the CUNY Educational Technology Task Force report — that is, that there is little firm evidence of the effectiveness of distance learning. (Indeed, it is worth noting that both Principle Investigators of this project were involved in producing that report.) But what will the results of this experiment mean? If the partially virtual Classics proves more "effective" (i.e. that average grades are higher) than the traditional class, will that be because on-line discussion works better? or because it involved significantly more writing and close reading? or because it is a novel approach? If the Geology virtual map module proves to be as effective as the traditional map module, which experience will stay with the students more profoundly? Or as Cliff Stoll says, "Which teaches more: watching a video about the heat of crystallization or dissolving potassium nitrate in water and touching the side of the beaker?"¹⁰

Part of the attraction of these efforts — for both faculty and students — is the growing importance of technology across the many facets of "modern society". Making a successful career increasingly requires comfort with and mastery of technology, we're told. Certainly, any degree-granting institution would be remiss if it did not ensure that its students indeed have ample opportunity to acquire this mastery of technology. Does this mandate giving technology an increasingly important role in the teaching process itself? What does it mean to conflate the notions of *teaching computer skills* and *using computers to teach*?

The web provides access to infinite information. Again, it is certain that our graduates must be equipped to access and interpret information from this radically new source. But what does it mean to use the Web in our teaching? When are we teaching our students how to use an information resource, and when are we using the Web to distance ourselves from our students? As we determine the role distance learning should take, we must be sure that the seductive aspects of the new technology are not made to stand in for its true functions.

As Phipps and Merisotis conclude in their survey of research distance learning, "there is some danger that the innovations made possible through distance education are advancing more rapidly than our understanding of its practical uses."¹¹ Indeed, rethinking our relationship with information demands a concomitant re-evaluation of our pedagogy. And this may be the true contribution of distance learning. Although there is little evidence about distance learning's effectiveness, it is clear that most initiatives are spawning new discussion about pedagogical techniques and frontlining issues such as active learning, collaboration, and the diversity of learning styles.

Wisconsin Public Schools

Distance learning in K-12 school systems has a relatively short history. In its earliest form, K-12 students engaged in projects wherein video or written information was mailed either between groups of students or between students and university/research "scientists". As technology provided

greater access, groups of students were bussed to local universities, where the auditorium was linked to other student groups and then to either political leaders or scientists. These projects involved limited two-way communication, but most of the students' experiences were little more than a glorified news report. The recent distance learning initiative in Wisconsin's public schools comes out of a state and national landscape where "technology in the schools" has received both tremendous lip service and hundreds of millions of dollars over the past ten years. Political leaders on both sides of the aisle have championed funding to provide computer and other technologies to K-12 public schools.

Understanding the effects of this push for technology requires a more complex analysis of the State's allocation of resources. In Wisconsin, the state has an equalization funding formula that attempts to balance out school districts' abilities to provide an equitable education by the state providing weighted funds, where more money is given to districts with less property value. However, public school funding as well as particular school district budgets are still largely determined by local property tax. School districts in wealthier communities, for the most part, spend thousands more dollars per student per year than schools in urban and poorer districts. During the 1997-1998 school year, Wisconsin's wealthiest school districts spent \$12,000-13,000 per student, while urban districts spent 8 to 9 thousand dollars, and the poorest districts spent only \$6,000-6,500 per student.¹² With this huge discrepancy of funds, it is obvious that certain schools have far greater resources to spend on all things — including technology — than many others do.

Indeed, the wealthiest districts have had computers and computer labs with relatively state of the art machines running in their schools for at least fifteen years, while into the mid-1990s some urban schools' computer labs were run on donated and outdated computers, most commonly the Apple IIe. The federal government has allocated hundreds of millions of dollars to help poorer schools afford technology. Initially, these funds were distributed through Title I, which provides federal funding for schools that have high percentages of students who live below the poverty line. Title I money paid for a enormous range of services in schools that serve students living in poverty, and it provided additional money for technology. There have been additional funds available from the federal government in the past few years to connect "every" school to the Internet. President Clinton has spoken numerous times about the importance of this access for all students: in his most recent State of the Union address he declared that 95% of all schools had at least one computer connected to the Internet.

Despite these (limited) efforts to provide public schools equal access to computer technology, there remains a great disparity. In 1998, when 89% of schools were connected to the Internet, about 40 percent of classrooms in schools with the highest concentration of poor students had Internet access, compared to more than 60 percent of classrooms in schools with the lowest concentration of poor students.¹³ This disparity is evident not only in the number of computers and the number of computers connected to the Internet, but in public school districts' ability to update and replace its technology. Wealthy districts are far more able to pay for new equipment than their poorer counterparts.¹⁴ With computer half-lives being short, those "state of the art" computers that federal money bought for low-income schools in 1995 are now on the verge of being as outdated as the Apple IIs they replaced.

The recent move for greater public school access to the Internet and the Wisconsin initiative for public school distance learning must be seen in this context. Unless we understand the great

differences in funding and access to modern technology, distance learning will only be a tool of further class stratification, rather than the great equalizer it is hoped to be.

Increased corporate participation and values are not only seen in institution of higher education. These privatization influences are taking a larger and larger place in K-12 education across the country and in WI.¹⁵ Corporate influences have entered all avenues of the education system. School districts rely increasingly on private industry for vending services, food services, custodial services, and remedial services, as well as for oversight of significant administrative operations, such as Title I programs, entire schools, and even large school systems. Values of efficiency and production are increasingly woven into the fabric of K-12 public education.

Privatization and the corporate values that come with it are not an accident. These widespread initiatives and program are being developed often times in the face of educators. In Wisconsin, Governor Tommy Thompson leads this effort towards privatization by attacking the abilities of public schools and public school teachers, in particular, to properly educate its students. He has been an out-spoken critic of teachers and their performance in teaching the basics skills of reading and math. This move to privatization is often wrapped in a language that says that teachers and educators are not capable of handling the problems and challenges presented in public schools today. This is a dangerous and fallacious attack on two accounts. First, teaching is presently and historically a female dominated profession.¹⁶ A continual attack on teacher abilities quickly becomes a gendered devaluing of women. Second, it implies there is an educational crisis with both reading and math. This is simply untrue, as reading and math scores have not declined over the past 30 years;¹⁷ the only ongoing disparity is not in basic skills but in the gap between the rich and poor. By manufacturing a false crisis, which is then blamed on individual (female) teachers, the state and corporate interests are able to portray public school teachers as incompetent, opening a space for the de-skilling of teaching and the privatization of the public school system. As this space is maintained and enlarged the public school system is then weakened, verifying the original claim and transforming an unfounded criticism into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Distance Learning Initiatives in Wisconsin

As is evident from this brief history, distance learning in public schools in Wisconsin has come about as part of the larger push for technology in the schools. Understanding specific school practices will provide a greater understanding of the realities and uses of computer technology as well as those resulting from the distance learning initiatives.

Pedagogical forays that involve students in creative and sophisticated use of computers, the Internet, and interactive audio/visual technology are becoming more readily used. Elementary and secondary students complete a wide variety of projects where they integrate multiple types of knowledge and skills as they work across numerous disciplines (from graphic and creative arts, music, economics, geography, etc.). But in addition to these educationally sound uses, far too often advanced technology is used to promote skill-and-drill practices and “teacher-proof” curricula. It is often used as “baby-sitting” equipment that keeps children busy and quiet. Further, in elementary schools, it is becoming more common to see whole reading and language arts programs built around computer use. The students who are struggling to read and write are given entertaining but drill and practice programs and exercises. This remedial programming turns computers into fancy worksheets.¹⁸

These struggling students are expected to become literate through this drilling of basic skills. There is minimal evidence, at best, that drill and practice reading and language arts instruction produces functionally literate children.^{19 20 21} And, this does not account for the necessary political and critical literacy skills needed to fully participate in today's society.²²

Other classroom and school-wide technological reading programs use pre-packaged software where children reading books or virtual books and then are engaged in post reading activities and tests all on the computer. The computer keeps track of progress and assesses when the child is ready to move to the next level. Numerous companies produce similar programs, but this type of software creates a classroom where reading is the responsibility of a machine and the teacher is a manager of computer time and a receiver of computer reports. These programs are built upon the philosophy that knowledge is an accumulation of little facts and skills and that it can be transmitted and deposited into children. All too often, the use of technology in public schools, becomes a way to provide basic remediated skill curriculum that takes interaction away from students and teachers. These uses support the notion that teacher knowledge of curriculum and instruction is something that machines can and should replicate.

Distance learning initiatives in Wisconsin have taken shape under the TEACH Initiative. TEACH was an item added the state budget and championed by the governor Tommy Thompson in 1997 for the 1998-1999 budgets. The TEACH Initiative, while solely for educational purposes, was placed outside of the state's regular education budget. This kept the TEACH funds outside of district discretion and separate from the regular democratic funding and allocating procedures that school districts in Wisconsin historically use.

Under TEACH,²³ funds were made available for school districts to receive a DS3 or T1 line at greatly reduced prices. The focus has been to create full-motion interactive learning studios. To date 52% of districts have one of these studios. In addition to greatly reduced pricing on these studios, the state is offering loans for district and inter-district wiring. These interactive studios in combination with the new wiring created the need for the development of small networks around that state. These networks allow school districts to work together and connect their studios. Districts are also connecting to local technical colleges and other post-secondary institutions.

Across the state of WI, 30 distance education networks have been developed. Roughly 75% of these involve K-12 public schools, while the rest involve other educational institution and community organizations.²⁴ Future projects will involve expanding out-of-network possibilities and resources.²⁵

In the typical model of K-12 distance learning, a single high school within a network offers classes in which all students in the network can enroll. The networked schools collaborate upon which courses they can and will offer together. Many of these districts could not afford to offer these courses alone, but with combined resources there are possibilities of offering a wider array of courses. These classes are scheduled and meet like regular high school classes, though students are connected to each other and the teacher by interactive video and audio. The vast majority of high school distance education courses (upwards of 80%) offered throughout the state are calculus, other Advanced Placement courses, or foreign languages. Both presently and historically, students from middle and upper-middle income families predominantly populate these courses. Thus, when we consider sources of funds for these programs in juxtaposition with the students who most

commonly use them, it becomes clear that distance learning in Wisconsin public schools is a state supported program catering to already advantaged children and families.^{26 27}

While this is by far the most common method and content of distance learning in the public schools of Wisconsin, there are a variety of other uses and curricula. There are the rare examples of non-traditional courses being offered through this inter-district partnership, like Women's History or Native American Studies. There are also Youth Options program run in a variety of districts that are linked to the local technical college. Elementary schools are using these facilities on occasion for special projects. School districts are also starting to use these interactive learning studios for staff development. The networks allow many districts to connect with colleges and institutions of higher education to facilitate on-going teacher learning. And districts have also begun to open their interactive networks for community education purposes, where evening and weekend programming takes place.

The all too often (unsound) use of technology for drill and skill methods taking the teaching away from the actual teacher, the use of interactive audio/video studios to support the educational desires of the economically advantaged families, and a smattering of diverse educational programming make up much of the landscape around distance learning in Wisconsin public schools. A more conservative educational agenda helped drive and shape these realities. This direction left unchecked will maintain not narrow class discrepancies. Increased access to knowledge, skills, and opportunity will not be realized in a democratic and equitable manner.

Analysis

A close look at the realities of distance learning in the public schools in Wisconsin provides insight into larger conservative educational trends. In understanding the TEACH Initiative as it unfolds in Wisconsin the championed ideals of access and increased opportunity are being left unfulfilled. There are three main points to this analysis.

The first major issues that must be raised as distance learning is considered in context, is the relationship this initiative has with the push towards privatization of schools. At a glance, the wider offering of courses that the distance learning studios allow appears to increase the access students have to knowledge. In reality, the vast majority of the courses are catered towards students that are already successful and who are from wealthy families. Providing greater access to these students only creates larger divisions between advantaged students and their peers.

The funding of the TEACH Initiative must be looked at in relation to those students and families that are being best served by this program. Since the funding for distance learning is coming from outside the regular education budget for public schools, the normal democratic methods of budgeting and allocating is circumvented. Blocks of money are provided to districts to serve the needs and interests of advantaged families. There are direct parallels between this funding and whose interests it serves with providing tax credits to families that send their children to private schools. These parallels are step towards a voucher system of education, where privatization and the values of the market dictate children's education. The values and system of privatization based on vouchers has proven not to serve all children equally, and indeed hurt the children that need the most help.²⁸

The second issue that needs addressing in light of the distance learning in Wisconsin public schools is one of unsound pedagogy and the de-skilling of teachers. Students are expected to develop strong academic skills and be full members of society even though they are having less interaction with teachers and their peers. The methods used with the increased use of technology in classrooms and in the distance learning classes rely upon a particular understanding of knowledge and learning. This understanding promotes the “banking” philosophy of teaching where learning is only a transmission of “facts and skills.” The teachers job is to give the student these “facts and skills,” that the students then need to adsorb and store.²⁹

This notion ignores the complexities of the learning process for the students and disregards the realities of the students’ lives. A “banking” pedagogy assumes that the teacher is little more than a machine that spews out information for students to take. This understanding helps build the attack that teachers are more or less unnecessary and are really nothing more than glorified baby-sitters. Teachers are then seen as replaceable, and their skills in pedagogy and expertise in instructional strategies disregarded.

The third issue that must be raised in regards to distance learning in Wisconsin, is one of a (declining) commitment to community. If we believe that we are participating in a "new capital" economy that is driven not by materials and products but by information and innovation, then we see that those who are successful and prosperous in this system have the ability to network and travel (both literally and electronically) all over the globe. Distance learning falls right into this new capital understand in of the world. We see that the new capital affluent do not necessary affiliate with the communities that they live in, but with people like themselves around the country and globe. Without this affiliation with their local communities their support for the public school system fades and their willingness to pay for and engage in building a strong public school system disappears.

As school districts are providing distance learning courses for the affluent and elite children, they in turn spend less time with heterogeneous peers and more time in distant connections with other affluent/elite students like themselves. This reinforces these students’ allegiance with others like themselves.³⁰ It promotes a self-centered and "my needs first" mentality of communities and schools. This growing selfishness is a true barrier to improving the education for the most needy children.³¹

Toward a Pedagogy of Inclusion

In an era when education is experiencing ever greater corporate pressure to demonstrate its fiduciary responsibility by meeting scientifically measurable standards, there is little reason to expect that distance learning will be generally used to resist this pressure. Indeed, supporting Massy and Zemsky's predictions, NCES found that 83% of the institutions offering distance education in 1997-98 were public institutions — and 57% of these institutions enrolled over 3,000 students. Clearly distance learning is not finding a vigorous market in those students who are able to afford small class sizes and frequent interaction with faculty.

But the line between public and private is blurring as public institutions, vulnerable to political control of their pedagogical practices, are forced to give increasing weight to cost- and profit-centered factors. Without public consent, and indeed often in sharp opposition to the demands of the public and educators, distance learning programs are fertilized with funds allocated outside the usual realms of public oversight. As community is increasingly defined in virtual terms rather than in local ones, the application of technology is controlled by those who have access to it, with grim implications for those with less opportunity.

Without doubt, this new pedagogy must be held to strict standards of performance and cost — but these standards must be determined by those whom the pedagogy is meant to serve. Does it provide excellent education for a diversity of students? Does it increase or limit the community's access to information, knowledge, and learning? To what extent does it value interaction and collaboration between and among faculty and students?

The hope and promise of distance learning is its potential use as a tool of equal access and democracy. With it, we can imagine a wealth of creative and critical pedagogies that use technology to the fullest but simultaneously ground learning on interpersonal interaction and community. And experience suggests that this form of teaching is not just possible but indeed critical. Sir John Daniel, vice chancellor of the Open University, has observed,

Much of the commercial hype and hope about distance learning is based on a very unidirectional conception of instruction, where teaching is merely presentation and learning is merely absorption. [Our] experience with two million students over 25 years suggests that such an impoverished notion of distance education will fail...³²

Preventing this failure demands an analysis of distance learning not as a cost-cutting tool or as a vocational training system but as a full pedagogical system accountable to our students, their desire for intellectual exchange, and their communities.

¹ L. Gladieux and W. S. Swail. *The Virtual University and Educational Opportunity: Issues of Equity and Access for the Next Generation*. Policy Perspectives. Washington, DC: The College Board, 1999. <http://www.collegeboard.org/policy/html/virtual.html>.

² Dan Schiller. *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1999.

³ Laurie Lewis, Kyle Snow, Elizabeth Farris, and Douglas Levin. *Distance Education at Postsecondary Education Institutions: 1997-98*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1999.

⁴ Gladieux and Swail.

⁵ R. Phipps and J. Merisotis. *What's the Difference? A Review of Contemporary Research on the Effectiveness of Distance Learning in Higher Education*. Washington, DC: The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1999. <http://www.ihep.com/difference.pdf>.

⁶ William F. Massy and Robert Zemsky, "Using Information Technology to Enhance Academic Productivity," Washington, D.C.: Interuniversity Communication Council, Inc., © Educomreg, 1995.

-
- ⁷ Nancy Romer. "The CUNY Struggle: Class & Race in Public Higher Education," *New Politics* 7(2), Winter 1999.
- ⁸ Benno Schmidt et al. "The City University of New York: An Institution Adrift," *Report of the Mayor's Task Force on the City University of New York*. June 7, 1999.
- ⁹ The City of University New York University Library and Educational Technology Task Force, *Final Report*, October 1997.
- ¹⁰ Clifford Stoll. "Invest in Humanware," *New York Times*. May 19, 1996. Reprinted in *Computers and Society*, Paul A. Winters, editor. San Diego, California: Greenhaven Press, 1997.
- ¹¹ Phipps and Merisotis.
- ¹² *School District Data Summary, Cost per Member*. State of Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 1998.
- ¹³ Gladieux and Swail.
- ¹⁴ M. Apple. "Conservative Agendas and Progressive Possibilities," *Education and Urban Society* 23(3), pp. 279—291.
- ¹⁵ M. Apple. *Official Knowledge*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ Jeff McQuillan. *The Literacy Crisis: False Claims, Real Solutions*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Reed Elsevier, Inc., 1998.
- ¹⁸ Apple, 2000.
- ¹⁹ M. Pressley. *Reading Instruction the Works*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1998.
- ²⁰ Jeff McQuillan. *The Literacy Crisis: False Claims, Real Solutions*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Reed Elsevier, Inc., 1998.
- ²¹ J. Gee. Lecture on Socio-Cultural Aspects of Literacy. The University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1999.
- ²² M. Apple. *Official Knowledge*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- ²³ Stephen Sander. Interview. State of Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Instruction Media & Technology, 2000.
- ²⁴ Wisconsin Area Distance Education Network (WADEN). Web site, updated January 2000.
- ²⁵ Stephen Sander. Interview. State of Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Instruction Media & Technology, 2000.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ Wisconsin Area Distance Education Network (WADEN). Web site, updated January 2000.
- ²⁸ *Selling Out Our Schools*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Rethinking Schools, 1997.
- ²⁹ H. Kleibard. Lecture on History of Curriculum Planning and Philosophy. The University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1997.

³⁰ J. Gee. Lecture on Socio-Cultural Aspects of Literacy. The University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1999.

³¹ Alfie Kohn. "Only for My Kid: How Privileged Parents Undermine School Reform," *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 1998, pp. 569—577.

³² *AAHE Bulletin*, May 1998. Washington, DC: American Association for Higher Education.