

What is Happening in Digital Education? The Class and The War on Learning

Sonia Livingstone and Julian Sefton-Green, **The Class: Living and Learning in the Digital Age**, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2016, 368 pp., \$71.78 (hardcover).

Elizabeth Losh, **The War on Learning: Gaining Ground in the Digital University**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016, 320 pp., \$26.14 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

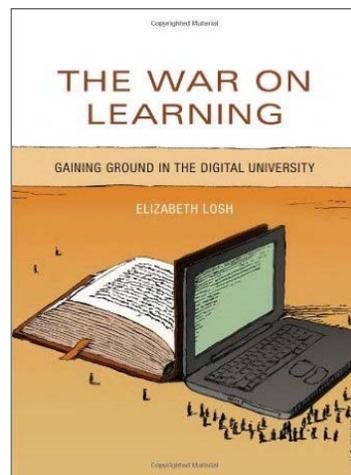
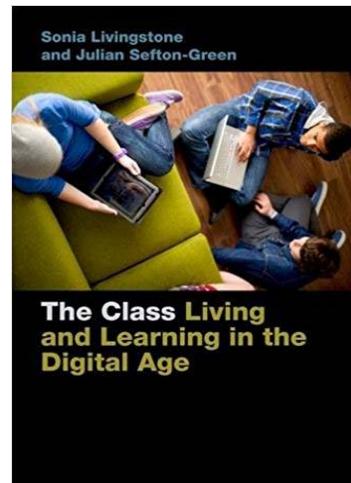
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In the digital-age world, many people, including teachers, educators, parents, and policy makers, are desperately looking for a manual to guide them to understand young people's education, social relations, and online and offline lives. Meanwhile, the increase of online courses, educational software, and interactive teaching interfaces is sending us a signal: the way pedagogy used to operate is changing. Is it something that is here to stay or just a passing fad? We are puzzled because we do not have a definite answer. Fortunately, the journey to look for answers opens up new directions and possibilities for us to examine the relationship between education, media and technology, and our digital lives.

As part of a series supported by the MacArthur Foundation and the Digital Media and Learning Research Hub, **The Class: Living and Learning in the Digital Age** explores the growing presence of digital technologies in all aspects of social, cultural, and political life: how young people's day-to-day lives are mediated through digital technologies, how their social identities and social relations are shaped online and offline, and how spaces such as school and home are created and re-created by interpersonal interaction and technology.

Different from the ethnographic approach adopted by Sonia Livingstone and Julian Sefton-Green, Elizabeth Losh's book **The War on Learning: Gaining Ground in the Digital University** examines current efforts made on college campuses in the United States to "reform" higher education by looking at how online videos, educational video games, term-paper databases, and course management systems are used to solve problems in teaching and learning.



The two books discussed in this review talk about connection and disconnection, respectively. Connection has unconsciously become a core value of our society. We see digital devices, convenience, and the overcoming of barriers to better communication as forms of connection. At the same time, we consider disconnection to be a kind of "off-ness," where we have inconvenient or even lack of access to better communication. Livingstone and Sefton-Green challenge this idea about how technologies change the way people get connected by examining the social networks, shaping of identities, and school and home spaces of their participants to demonstrate that being connected may be an individual choice in spite of the use of digital technologies. Losh, however, focuses on disconnection at school; she explains that in the title of her book, the word *war* assumes that digital media deeply divide students and teachers which turn a once covert war between 'us' and 'them' into an open battle between 'our' technologies and 'their' technologies (Ramsdell, 2014).

The Class

Sonia Livingstone and Julian Sefton-Green started their answer-seeking journey by studying a group of 13- to 14-year-old adolescents at a school in a suburb of London to provide an instructive account of the ways adolescent learning and identity are shaped by digital media in the 21st century. The book, though written by academic scholars, is an easy read with a clear structure. In the first two chapters, the authors give readers some background on their project and how they got the fieldwork started. Following the introductory chapters, chapters 3 and 4 focus on social networks and identity shaping, while chapters 5 through 8 examine adolescents' lives in the space of school and home. The last two chapters, chapters 9 and 10, talk about the difference in cultural capital and social capital among young people from different social backgrounds. The authors present their ethnographic outcome in a plain storytelling approach that makes the reading feel like watching a narrative documentary.

Livingstone and Sefton-Green started the first day of their fieldwork when parents met the teacher to review their child's progress and set targets for a new school year. It is important to mention that their research site, Victoria Forest School, was located in a suburb about 8 miles from the center of London. The neighborhood was not dangerous, although it was not risk-free. The school was achieving above-average academic results, and it was economically, linguistically, and ethnically diverse. The diversity in economy, ethnicity, and language provided researchers with the different perspectives of students and parents on the value of formal and informal learning, social and power relations shaped by socioeconomic status, and social identities and relationships that are shaped at school.

The three core spheres of young people's life worlds that the authors examined are home, school, and peer group. In terms of identity and relationships, Livingstone and Sefton-Green tried to figure out how these young people create identities for themselves within the peer network, what young people's friends mean to them, and what forms of social relationship they sustain in public, private, online, and offline. By examining the students' friendship network, the authors showed that the handful of friends they did claim were mostly local and all well known to them. It seems that digital technologies, for example, social networking sites such as Facebook, did not fundamentally change how these young people perceived friends. Gideon, a boy in the center of the class network, valued his social success, but it did not

mean much to him in terms of intimacy. As the authors described Gideon, "On Facebook, we saw him putting in considerable efforts to create a successful persona, yet we had a strong sense that FB friendships meant little to him" (p. 89) and that "Facebook, like school, connected him to what he experienced as a somewhat undifferentiated mass—significant in terms of scale and thus the validation offered to him but undemanding in terms of commitment" (p. 90). The authors concluded that face-to-face communication is hardly displaced by digital media and that students value their offline connections with their peers. However, young people are exploiting online digital technologies to connect and disconnect in a wider network beyond the school circle.

In addition to online identities and friendship, the class network, unsurprisingly, is a reproduction of the relationship in wider British society. In particular, the core group, where Gideon is in the center of the class network described above, included all the higher socioeconomic-class young people, and most of them were white. Megan, one of the most popular girls in the core group, denied the fact that she chose her friends based on socioeconomic status; however, it turned out that most people she hangs out and is friends with are middle class. At the same time, a Turkish boy named Sedat spent time out of school with those who spoke Turkish at school, and he went boxing with other Turkish boys who lived close by. While it was comparatively safe for the researchers to draw the conclusion that economic status, social capital, and family background did have an influence on the formation of young people's social relationships, many students, according to the authors, did not like the researchers to push the conclusion in that way.

In addition to the online and offline connections and disconnections, the authors were interested in exploring whether digital technologies bridge learning at school and learning at home. It turned out that parents' efforts to bridge the home-school divide by organizing learning at home was unrecognized by the school, whereas the teachers' efforts to bridge the same divide using digital technologies were not effective and pretty short-lived. In the conclusion of the book, the authors call our attention to the fact that for both schools and parents, "the question is not only whether harnessing connections could bring improvements but whether pursuing it is worth the risk of getting it wrong" (p. 250).

The War on Learning

Quite different from Livingstone and Sefton-Green's exploratory and ethnographic approach to British adolescents' education, Losh takes a pretty clear stand on the role of digital media in higher education in the United States. *The War on Learning* sounds like a very political title, and Losh believes that instructional technologies are creating some conflicts between educators and students. The faculty, on the one hand, seem to be in control of course management systems, online quizzes, wireless clickers, Internet access to PowerPoint slides, and podcasts. On the other hand, students are armed with smartphones, iPods, iPads, laptops, and voice recorders when in class lectures. Due to the advanced computing and recording technologies that students can use, they are able to escape the lecture hall to go to their virtual world while still passing exams and getting good grades. However, Losh argues, "Each side is not really fighting the other, because both appear to be conducting an incredibly destructive war on learning itself by emphasizing competition and conflict rather than cooperation" (p. 26).

One argument that Losh presents in her book and that is criticized in higher education nowadays is that many of the initiatives involving educational technologies fail because they treat education as a product rather than a process. In other words, the use and distribution of technologies promote consumption rather than intellectual development. As Siva Vaidhyanathan, the author of *The Googlization of Everything*, commented on Losh's book, "This is an essential book that takes seriously all the furious pressures on college teachers and students to play with shiny new toys rather than immerse themselves in the projects of mutually teaching and learning" (Losh, book cover).

The War on Learning is a necessary book for any educator or education policy maker who is concerned about the future of higher education in the United States. In the first two chapters, Losh makes the statement that higher education is in crisis by presenting evidence from different perspectives. The adoption of technologies, the increase of online courses, the appearance of digital badges, and the rise of consumer-model, profit-driven education all send us one clear message: There is a war on learning, and we have to take it seriously. Losh offers readers abundant examples in the following chapters of how digital technologies have been used in class and how students reacted to those technologies.

Losh believes that the overuse of instructional technologies twists the essence of education because teaching and learning is an interactive process. In chapter 2, Losh talks about her Twitter experiment in her undergraduate class at University of California, San Diego. She created a Twitter hashtag #cat125 in hopes of creating a lively exchange about course content. According to Losh, after this Twitter experiment, she got a number of suggestions from students about how to improve the class in the future. In the students' postings, there was a desire for students' common digital efforts to be directed toward specific and measurable learning goals rather than to the flash-mob behavior celebrated by others. Losh's Twitter experiment told the educators that students have the desire to learn with the use of technologies; however, they want to get involved in the conversation about how social media and technologies should be used in college classrooms. Students have a voice to determine their own destiny in their education; however, who listens to them and whether their voices matter in this process is still a question.

This is the war that is not only between "our" technology and "their" technology, between students and faculty; instead, it is a war about how higher education itself will function in a fast-changing digital era. One of the examples on digital badges that Losh brought up in her book tells us how qualifications could be measured nowadays. As defined,

A digital badge is an online representation of a skill you've earned. Open badges take that concept one step further, and allows [sic] you to verify your skills, interests and achievements through credible organizations. And because the system is based on an open standard, you can combine multiple badges from different issuers to tell the complete story of your achievements—both online and off. Display your badges wherever you want them on the web, and share them for employment, education or lifelong learning. (p. 198)

Software companies, civic organizations, and advocates for higher education reforms are very interested in the digital badge concept. They support the concept of the Mozilla Open Badges project, which is devoted to developing the open specifications and applications that would allow any participating organizations to offer badges to their online learners.

Supporters of the digital badge believe that conventional modes of education assessment are out of date because they fail to capture the learning that happens everywhere and at every age. However, the type of courses that digital badges can offer is still limited. For example, medical students cannot learn how to operate on patients by merely watching online videos and consulting an online instructor. Biochemistry students cannot do their scientific experiments at home without proper equipment. Even though students in the social sciences and humanities do not need extra equipment to do their work and can just sit in front of their laptop to take courses, the lack of peer discussion, personal interaction, and knowledge sharing definitely decreases the value of a desirable learning experience.

Losh does not stop with just offering examples, however. In the last chapter of her book, she uses her two decades of teaching experience to offer six principles to guide effective pedagogy and decision making. First, the Golden Rule should dictate decisions about instructional technology. Being a faculty member nowadays means that one should never stop being a student. Faculties should be able to update their own knowledge as well as being updated with the instructional technologies. Second, faculty and students should use the same tools. In particular, Losh mentions that guiding students to use existing equipment and technologies on campus is far more important than wastefully purchasing new equipment with limited potential use. Third, "old" technologies should still matter. In a world that worships novelty, we sometimes unconsciously are in a mindset that new is always equal to good. Fourth, the occasions should be joyful. Classrooms that incorporate special occasions can make education feel more special, and the use of instructional technologies, such as open-mouse nights, game jams, or "Wikistorms," should make the learning experience more lively and enjoyable. Fifth, faculty should give students instructions and guide them to interpret, analyze, and think critically. Last but not least, Losh warns us that the novelty should have worn off. The assumption that students always love newness is not always right. For effective digital pedagogy to function and work, Losh believes that learners should be able to voice their concerns about access, equity, usability, and sustainability and to raise their objections as well.

From The Class to The War on Learning

The Class and *The War on Learning* focus on two populations in two countries. Digital technologies do not seem to have a huge impact on the formation of adolescents' social lives and friendships, whereas digital technologies are changing how higher education operates in the United States. Livingstone and Sefton-Green try to show us how digital technologies are integrated into British youths' education. Losh provides many examples that happened in college classrooms to examine the underlying causes of the "war." Both books give fellow researchers some perspectives on how to continue the research on education, digital technology, and social reality. The limitation of these books, as Livingstone and Sefton-Green admit in one of their interviews, is that their study explains adolescents' use of digital technologies in only one class in Britain. It is not generalizable because the adolescents in Britain differ from those in Asia, Africa, and other parts of the world. The generalization issue also applies to the book

The War on Learning. In Losh's book, the war on higher education in the U.S. seems intense; however, in a region with more limited adoption of technologies such as Africa, is there a war in their universities? Do college students in Africa master the skills and the capacity to use digital technologies that are popular on U.S. campuses? Comparative studies to objectively examine the benefits that instructional technologies bring us and the drawbacks of those technologies for college campuses are needed in the future.

Reference

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