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Fire Next Time: or revisioning higher education in the context of digital social creativity

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ABSTRACT This article presents an idea of ‘digital social creativity’ as part of social media and examines an approach emphasising openness and experimentation and collaborative learning in the world of information and communication technologies. Wikipedia and similar digital tools provide both challenges to and possibilities for building learning sites in higher education and other forms of education and socialisation that recognise various forms of information and knowledge creation. The dialogical nature of knowledge and the emphasis on social interaction create a tremendous opportunity for education, but at the same time form new hegemonic battlegrounds in terms of various uses of social media.

I believe that intellectuals who inhabit our nation’s universities should represent the conscience of a society not only because they shape the conditions under which future generations learn about themselves and their relations to others and the outside world, but also because they engage pedagogical practices that are by their very nature moral and political, rather than simply technical. And at its best, such pedagogy bears witness to the ethical and political dilemmas that animate the broader social landscape. Such pedagogical approaches are important because they provide spaces that are both comforting and unsettling, spaces that both disturb and enlighten.

Pedagogy in this instance not only works to shift how students think about the issues affecting their lives and the world at large, but also potentially energizes them to seize such moments as possibilities for acting on the world, engaging it as a matter of politics, power, and social justice. (Giroux, 2003, pp. 194-195)

Has Meaning Been Lost from Higher Education?

We want to defend the following argument: in higher education it is possible to save and renew higher learning’s critical and revolutionary function by applying various digital information and communication technologies and using them wisely to create abilities or literacies that we would like to call ‘digital social creativities’.

Many twentieth-century philosophers (e.g. Deleuze, Dewey, Foucault, Illich, Lyotard and Postman) presented visions of times to come in which there is a firm place for the idea of a true democracy. John Dewey’s elementary pedagogical idea focused around the idea of ‘associated life’, a cover term for all sorts of educational ideas and practices, old and new, in which people depend on one another and learn with one another (Bruffee, 1995). Ivan Illich talked about convivial society and free street corner learning clubs and webs in which people could enjoy media and create their own media and messages; Deleuze outlined a society based on rhizome-like networks; Foucault dreamed about diverse methods of critical communication and broadcasting; Postman saw teaching as a subversive activity. Likewise, Lyotard (1984) believed in the 1980s that computer networks and open archives could create a new citizenship based on transparency. It seemed as if new information technologies were fulfilling some of the early prophecies of these and other democratic utopias.

It is relatively easy to see that such discourses have subsequently been reproduced in diverse techno-utopias, including our own ideal of ‘digital social creativity’. These utopias are in sharp
contrast with the recent university policies and discourses in the Western world. We are repeatedly told that higher education is in crisis due to lack of public funding. As Mary Evans has put it in her *Killing Thinking: the death of the universities*, the end of the millennium 'has not been a happy time, since those years have seen the transformation of teaching in universities into the painting-by-numbers exercise of the hand-out culture and of much research into an atavistic battle for funds' (Evans, 2004, p. ix).

Colin Lankshear & Michele Knobel (2006) have characterised the new digital age on multiple dimensions in two different mindsets (see Table 1). In mindset 1 emphasis is on a business-as-usual way of looking at the world, whereas mindset 2 tries to find new concepts, vocabularies, and practices in capturing the reality of social digital creativity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mindset 1</th>
<th>Mindset 2</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The world is much the same as before, only now it is more technologised,</td>
<td>The world is very different from before and largely as a result of the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or technologised in more sophisticated ways.</td>
<td>emergence and uptake of digital electronic inter-networked technologies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The world is appropriately interpreted, understood and responded to in</td>
<td>The world cannot adequately be interpreted, understood and responded to in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>broadly physical-industrial terms</td>
<td>physical-industrial terms only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value is a function of scarcity</td>
<td>Value is a function of dispersion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An ‘industrial’ view of production</td>
<td>A ‘post-industrial’ view of production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– Products as material artefacts</td>
<td>– Products as enabling services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>– A focus on infrastructure and production units (e.g. a firm or company)</td>
<td>– A focus on leverage and non-finite participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on individual intelligence</td>
<td>Focus on collective intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expertise and authority ‘located’ in individuals and institutions</td>
<td>Expertise and authority are distributed and collective; hybrid experts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Space as enclosed and purpose specific</td>
<td>Space as open, continuous and fluid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social relations of ‘bookspace’, a stable ‘textual order’</td>
<td>Social relations of emerging ‘digital media space’; texts in change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. Some dimensions of variation between the mindsets (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006).

The tension between these two mindsets is increasing at the same time as economic discourse takes over and puts pressure on higher education. In response, three major attitudes can be discerned from the university debate: those who look at this crisis from the point of view of educational and economic policy making; those who see it from the vantage point of structures and administration; and who define it as a part of such megatrends as capitalist globalisation (i.e. Burbules & Torres, 2000; Bok, 2003; Noble, 2003). As William Tabb has put it:

> When people think about globalization, most focus on sweatshop labor and the loss of manufacturing jobs overseas. It is easy to understand the race to the bottom that results as factory workers in one place face more intense competition from lower-cost labor on the other side of the world. College teachers would do well, however, to include their own future prospects as they consider the impact of globalization over the coming years. The university will be a very different place in another decade or two, and what it will look like depends to a large degree on what version of globalization wins out. (Tabb, 2001)

Critical scholars have feared that traditional values of Western autonomous academia will be replaced by elements of the neo-liberal model: ‘making the provision of education more cost-efficient by commodifying the product; testing performance by standardizing the experience in a way that allows for multiple-choice testing of results; and focusing on marketable skills’ (Tabb, 2001). As Tabb further notes, at the moment these neo-liberal principles are manifested as ‘cutbacks
in the public sector, closing “inefficient” programs that don’t directly meet business needs for a trained workforce’, and in higher education courses and degrees being sold and packaged for delivery over the Internet. As many scholars have suggested, universities have suffered major structural changes in the name of businesslike efficiency that has had profound implications for critical inquiry (Huff, 2006, p. 30). Furthermore, the priorities and principles of universities ‘are being subtly and not so subtly shifted by the exigencies of corporate capitalism’ (Huff, 2006, p. 30). In addition to ‘diminished funding for higher education, proliferation of programs and new demands for student-oriented consumer services, there is a crisis of legitimacy that goes to the heart of the academic enterprise’ (Huff, 2006, p. 30).

Part of the talk about crisis is nothing but right-wing gimmickry, another attempt to overrule more liberal and critical voices. But an important part of the discussion has to do with a question that we as critical scholars ought to be able to answer: In what sort of a world are we living, and in what kind of a world would we like to be? Or to put it in pedagogical language: what are our goals in teaching and learning? Part of the crisis critical scholars refer to is the fact that a blind drive for measurement, evaluation and accountability in academic work has put these essential questions aside. And, who knows, maybe this has been the very purpose, or at least a hidden agenda, of various US-based conservative think tanks. These, along with conservative forces in academia, push the standardisation of learning and teaching forward, and want to run the university in what German-born social theorist Erich Fromm used to call ‘having mode’, in contrast to the ‘being mode’ (Fromm 1963).

The Promise of Digital Social Creativity as Collaborative Learning

New digital information and communication technologies (ICTs) are, at least in the affluent West, creating a phenomenon called network sociality. It can be understood in contrast to the idea of community, which involves strong interaction and long-lasting ties as well as rich narratives of the collective. Conversely, network sociality is not based on a common narrative but on various informational acts. In network sociality, the social bond is created on a project-by-project basis. In pessimistic interpretations, this mode of sociality is seen as narrowing down people’s possibilities for social and political interaction: sociality maintained via ICTs is about to erode enduring relationships and alienate people from one another.

In more positive interpretations, it is suggested that along the new form of sociality, the learning process has been turned upside down. For the first time in the history of humanity, even children and young people are afforded the opportunity and the responsibility to teach their parents and teachers, to guide their elders (with good and bad consequences). For example, when looking at explanations for Internet use, a person’s generation surpasses factors such as income, education, and profession. In other words, cultural and social capital and material resources of the older generation do not mean everything.

Thus, the young are not just experiencing the new era but are also actively shaping the future with their digital practices. In the ‘prefigurative age’ of the information society, it is highly probable that the necessary social and technical skills are best achieved through diverse dialogues and interaction as ways of multiple socialisation: adolescents learn from their peers and teach their teachers and parents. In the following, we are suggesting that the world is turning doubly upside down: first, the younger generations have an unusually strong role in creating the future and guiding their elders, and, second, informal education in peer groups, be they virtual or not, is needed to give vital feedback to institutions of formal education.

The qualitatively new features of this doubly upside-down world of learning are digital tools used for open collaboration. It is important to note that these tools are an amalgam of social and technological innovation. For instance, something like the free encyclopedia, Wikipedia, needs both technological innovation (wiki-software, the Internet, a server park, etc.) and new sociocultural practices (a certain ‘hacker’ relation to information, an attitude of anti-vandalism, informal hierarchies and division of labour, etc.) in order to function. This emerging and rapidly expanding amalgam is the Petri dish for open collaboration and so-called social media, be it in the form of the various types of wikis (Wikipedia, Wikibooks, Wikimedia, etc.), open content
production and distribution, social bookmarking, folksonomy, free/open source software, the blogosphere and so on.

Open collaboration with digital tools is potentially global, transgressing national, racial and economic boundaries. This in itself is already a big challenge for systems of formal education. While the rhetoric of equality, interaction and active citizenship typically dominate the official educational agenda, open collaboration with digital tools is most often part of children’s and adolescents’ informal education, and, more often than not, also something that seems alien if not threatening from the institutional point of view. Consequently, a growing gap of credibility is created between the world-view and sociality experienced through peer-induced informal learning and the world-view and socialisation offered through institutionally formalised education.

From the point of view of open digital social creativity it would be desirable to see these two realms – formal and informal learning – in tight interaction with each other in terms of teaching and assessment. One way to make this to happen would be to open up more possibilities for collaborative methods of teaching and learning. This is essential in the current situation in which students are no longer passive recipients, ‘empty vessels into which we pour our pearls of sociological wisdom, but ... active citizens, capable of absorbing a rich lived experience, participants in public debates they carry beyond the classroom’ (Burawoy, 2006, p. 15). In changing our pedagogical habits as academic teachers we need to learn collaborative teaching methods, and in the process learn to ‘share our toys’ (Bruffee, 1995). Using John Dewey’s terminology, we should substitute our individualistic, often merit-driven life for ‘associated life’. This might gradually change the way we think, and eventually change the world. The question is, of course, are we ready to change, and further, why bother? Kenneth Bruffee has summed up more reasons from the academic point of view:

Interest in collaborative learning is motivated also by recent challenges to our understanding of what knowledge is. This challenge is being felt throughout the academic disciplines. That is, collaborative learning is related to the social constructionist views promulgated by, among others, the philosopher Richard Rorty and the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. These writers say (as Geertz puts it in his recent book, Local Knowledge) that ‘the way we think now’ differs in essential ways from the way we thought in the past. Social constructionists tend to assume that knowledge is a social construct and that, as the historian of science Thomas Kuhn has put it, all knowledge, including scientific knowledge, ‘is intrinsically the common property of a group or else nothing at all’. (Bruffee, 1981, p. 746)

Consider, for instance, the epistemology of the Wikipedia. Though some recent comparisons suggest that Wikipedia articles in English in general are comparable to those of the Encyclopedia Britannica (Giles, 2005), the really revolutionary part of Wikipedia is not connected to reliability. Rather, first and foremost, the fact that articles can be written on almost any topic provide a wide folk-o-pedia with a scope far outstripping that of traditional encyclopedias. And, in addition, the wikipedia article always comes with its history and the connected discussions. This ‘genealogical’ stratum that is always connected to a Wikipedia article gives it an epistemologically different status from a Britannica article. And, as Bruffee (1981) maintains, collaborative learning ‘is related to these conceptual changes by virtue of the fact that it assumes learning occurs among persons rather than between a person and things’ (p. 746).

In reflecting on these questions, we should focus on the structures and processes of teaching and learning in the university classroom, and ask, are students’ attitudes deriving from the teaching methods, and how they are treated in the classroom? Are they kept as objects of teaching, or as co-thinkers and agents who are able to create their own world with their teachers and peers? In answering these questions honestly we have had to admit that our teaching has often been based on what Paulo Freire has referred to as the ‘banking method’ (Freire, 2005). In the banking method, students become alienated and lose their interest in learning, for as Freire put it in his Pedagogy of the Oppressed, it is the omnipotent teacher who knows and students who digest by listening.

In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates education and knowledge as processes of inquiry. The teacher presents himself to his students as their
necessary opposite; by considering their ignorance absolute, he justifies his own existence. The
students, alienated like the slave in the Hegelian dialectic, accept their ignorance as justifying the
teacher’s existence – but, unlike the slave, they never discover that they educate the teacher.
(Freire 2005, ch. 2, p. 53)

And, as Freire continues: ‘The raison d’etre of libertarian education, on the other hand, lies in its
drive towards reconciliation. Education must begin with the solution of the teacher–student
contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers
and students’ (2005, ch. 2, p. 53). Alternatives for the banking method are diverse student–student
and student–teacher collaborations and encounters.

In collaborative learning, students learn by working with each other on focused, open-ended
tasks, discussing issues face to face in small groups. Collaborative learning taps higher education’s
most powerful, yet repeatedly underdeveloped resource: peer group influence. According to
Bruffee (1981, p. 745), the ‘primary aim of collaborative learning is to help students test the quality
and value of what they know by trying to make sense of it to other people like themselves – their
peers’.

In addition, collaborative learning is a viable way to get to know each other in a face-to-face
setting, study some of the basic theories, methods, concepts and contents of a given field, learn
how to do things together (‘share our toys’), develop trust in an open atmosphere, build
‘transgressive,’ multidisciplinary competencies (Nowotny, 2000) needed in various professional
practices, learn how to learn professional interdependence when the stakes are low, and create a
democratic idea of knowledge and research work. By using collaboration, students are introduced
to methods of learning, problem-solving, and task efficiency that they can later employ in the
workplace. Here we are inclined to think like Lyotard:

If education must not only provide for the reproduction of skills, but also for their progress, then
it follows that the transmission of knowledge should not be limited to the transmission of
information, but should include training in all of the procedures that can increase one’s ability to
connect the fields jealously guarded from one another by the traditional organization of
knowledge. (Lyotard, 1984, p. 52)

Let us again think of Wikipedia as an example of this sort of mixing professions and often tightly
gated areas of professional knowledge. In writing Wikipedia text one can contribute and
collaborate anonymously without anticipation of academic or other merits or glory: we should not
be surprised by the fact that academic professionals often contribute to Wikipedia articles that are
not directly linked to their official ‘area of expertise’.

In this sense digital social creativity as collaborative learning is an argument against capitalist
higher education that trains students to individual obedience and reproduction of an organised
stock of established knowledge in order to succeed. It is also a statement against the system’s
continuous emphasis on individualism, relentless competition, and accountability creating an ethos
of hatred, envy and suspiciousness. The collective history of a Wikipedia article and the social
interaction on which it is based show quite clearly how individualism and malevolent suspicion can
be overcome with openness and collective responsibility. This does not mean, however, that
criticism is to be precluded: the easy modification of a Wikipedia article promotes a critical and
necessary distance from the ‘extended’ creation of new information and reproduction of old
information.

The Uneasy Relationship between Formal Education and Collaborative Learning

In our view, there are two major roots for the uneasy relationship between institutions of formal
education and the digital environments of open collaboration. First, open collaboration creates a
seismic epistemological and ontological shift in the production and legitimation of knowledge. The
claim to truth, knowledge and enlightenment that content produced in open collaboration makes is
not created through authority, certainty and legitimacy, but through dialogue, perspectivity and
pragmatic value in ‘imaginative’ groups and minds whether in the universities or elsewhere. For
example, the trustworthiness of an entry in Wikipedia is best evaluated by analysing its history, the
amount of criticism and alternative viewpoints that it has endured and incorporated, and the benefits for the reader.

Wikipedia is a paradigmatic example of the epistemological challenge, because it explicitly deals with knowledge and information, but the same effect is felt in various degrees throughout the field of content distributed and produced through open collaboration. The world-view and ‘hidden’ messages contained in collaboratively created audio or video content raises the same epistemological questions. A bricolage created by ‘rippin’ and ‘mixin’’ existing content often self-consciously challenges the presuppositions of classical epistemologies, such as finality, authorship, and assent. Teamwork and craftsmanship gain new importance as works of open collaboration resemble the works of Renaissance painters: the whole shop of disciples of various levels of talent and areas of expertise is involved in the production, more or less closely overseen by a ‘master’. Despite their rhetorical commitment to collaborative and interactive learning, institutions of formal education are having a hard time dealing with this epistemological shift.

Second, and not unrelated to the first point, open collaboration and social media emphasises the non-informational uses of the ICTs. Think about a teenager creating fan fiction: most likely, they will be multitasking with instant messaging, Internet relay chat, blogs related to the theme and other possible tasks (such as SMS-messaging with friends, listening to music, doing homework) all the time. Most of these activities are more readily categorised as social and communicative – having to do with identity, pleasure, entertainment – than as informative or educational. However, the experienced and convivially constructed world in which our fictive author of fan fiction operates is most intimately also the world in which she or he needs the skills and possibilities of literacy, criticism and autonomous creation.

This interrelatedness of the entertaining use of ICTs and human cognitive faculties has been brought up forcefully by James Paul Gee in his work on gaming and learning. He argues that video and other games played for fun can teach us what are the ingredients in what is commonly thought as ‘important’ learning. For Gee games are serious and valuable ‘teaching machines’ since they contain some of the basic elements of meaningful learning (Gee, 2004.)

Together these two features, the dialogical nature of knowledge and the emphasis on social interaction, create a tremendous opportunity for education. The platforms of open collaboration are fulfilling several goals of the convivial information society, like those of community and cooperation as key elements of democracy, freedom, openness and transparency, and active participation. However, we need a framework for bridging the gap between informal collaborative learning and formal education, so that they do not, in the worst case, work against each other.

By envisioning a world in which Wikipedia and various forks of it – for instance, Wikipedias with different partisan points of view – have existed for decades, we can gain an insight into the shape and function into which formal education should be moulding itself. All experts can be challenged in the blink of an eye by access to the Wikipedias. Expertise will transform into the skills of grasping wholes and seeing connections, and, most importantly, being able to participate in meaningful and rewarding collaborative work. This transformation, the beginnings of which we are already feeling when constructing curricula and choosing lecture material, is not well served by the tendency of restricting access to information and collaboration, be it in the name of safety, control or protecting intellectual property.

The problem of the credibility gap translates into a concrete question: how to secure the freedom of knowledge creation and learning also in the institutions of formal education? But the answer is simple: practice what you preach. Many teachers and educators use open content regularly, and participate in open collaboration through the Internet. The next step is to get involved in the collaborative projects and forms of social media that the students are already immersed in. This could mean getting involved in the world of digital games, manga, fan fiction or something similar, or it could mean producing a neighbourhood wikipedia or a local podcast.

It goes without saying that this plurality of uses bring about a pedagogical-normative question of the actual value and meaning of the variety; what is important and what is not, if it is altogether possible to make such a question not to mention such a distinction – using sociologist Richard Sennett’s (2006) words – in the world of ‘consuming politics’?

From the point of the view of higher education, however, the key issue is to focus on the content that is actual and relevant, so that the institutional involvement does not happen for its own sake in an academic vacuum, thus promoting institutional alienation.
involvement can overcome the credibility gap and become a partner in the dialogical epistemology, if and when it has a grounded point of view and a real stake in building a convivial information society for all. Institutions of formal education should be the hubs of open collaboration, instead of turning into gated communities of further segmentation and deepening digital divides. The system logic of formal education needs to be nourished by the logic of collaboration and sharing evident in informal peer-to-peer interaction of the digital world.

The Political Nature of Art as an Analogue to Free Collaboration in the Use of ICTs

What has been said above about the epistemological shift and potentially ‘revolutionary’ character of the new ICTs clearly has an analogue in how art is often described as an open-ended and non-final creative and collective process with its own genealogy. One of the main things in creative art are so-called focal practices or focal things that gather people in meaningful and social activities that have value for their own sake. The concept of focality comes from philosopher Albert Borgmann, who defines a focal practice as:

the resolute and regular dedication to a focal thing. It sponsors discipline and skill which are exercised in a unity of achievement and enjoyment, of mind, body, and the world, of myself and others, and in a social union. (Borgmann, 1984, p. 219)

A focal thing can be, for example, a violin or something other material and concrete which demands patience, endurance, skill and presence. For Borgmann technological devices are not focal things, but from our point of view a new ICT and social media have a potential for reconstructing authentic life and open collaboration in a social union. And this exactly what a focal thing does.

A work of art is one example of a focal practice. It gathers together mind and body, creates a social union and opens a world of significance. A work of art can always be seen not as a final product but as a process which opens a world from a new and possibly extraordinary point of view. As a focal practice a work of art has to challenge our ordinary way of life and open new possibilities. Arbitrary institutional operations do not form focal practices, but a freely self-organising practice integrated with natural and social environments is a good starting point. Technology has sometimes been seen as a pure functional thing without any connections to social, aesthetic or ethical values. As a focal thing technology has to be seen as a deeply inseparable part of social life and in a continuum of everyday practice. Andrew Feenberg (2000) gives us some tips on how this is possible. First, technical devices must be embedded in the natural environments and be combined with other technical objects. Secondly, as cultural objects technical devices have ethical and aesthetic values, too. These can not be separated from the industrial objects of technique. Thirdly, technological devices are a part of life processes. Feenberg puts it this way:

The doer is transformed by its acts: the individual ... who fires a rifle at a rabbit, will become a hunter with the corresponding attitudes and dispositions should he pursue such activities professionally. Similarly, the chopper of wood becomes a carpenter, the typer at keyboard a writer and so on. These human attributes of the technical subject define it at the deepest levels, physically, as a person, and as a member of a community of people engaged in similar activities. (Feenberg, 2000, p. 309)

It is important to remember that, for example, writing a wiki or blogging may include this kind of ‘vocation’, as Feenberg calls it. The wiki- and blogo-spheres are forums of members of a community of people who share a way of life and take part in a dialogue.

Feenberg’s fourth point is that it is possible to use technology creatively without a ready-made consumption position. Feenberg says that capitalism has led to the sharp split between producer and user, positioning and initiative. However, it is possible to break through the role of the consumer. Once again art is one example of using technology differently and actively. A focal art tries to find different ways to break modern subject positions in late capitalism and find new ways of finding meaningfulness with active practice. For example, in contemporary art and visual activism there are voices which proclaim that the visual environment in which we live should be everybody’s invention, a shared area of residence and life, a comfortable home. It is, however, often the case that the townscape, for example, is influenced most by other actors, ones for whom the city is primarily a domain for business, and not the living environment of human
beings. The city, however, marks the individual and is located in her or him, as part of personal identity, the lifeworld and its meaningfulness. The notorious makers of graffiti have often tried to make the townscape present alternative messages, albeit with poor results. They are regarded as visual troublemakers and terrorists, while a beer advertisement on a fence is part of the normal townscape.

There is an analogue here between the freedoms of art, on one hand, and ‘hacktivism’, on the other hand. Hacker activists emphasise and celebrate open digital environments, open code and free software, an ideology known as FLOSS (Free/Libre/Open-Source Software). Hackers as well as artists are sometimes labelled as free riders and even terrorists. This is of course due to the capitalist context that is ruling culture industry and technological markets. Hackers and the like are disturbing the apparent peace of money-making and constant flow of profits.

In some sense artists and hackers are revolutionary in finding alternatives to capitalist bureaucratic control and lifestyle. Art looks at things with different eyes, recombines them, produces insight and, above all, increases meaningfulness. In this sense, art is often politics, in one way or another. This does not imply politics in the sense of political parties or ideology in the traditional manner, but above all in terms of responsibility, independence and thought. Political art is revolutionary through overturning the power of capitalist technology, by evaluating the various forms of power and by proposing new perspectives. ‘Revolutionary’ should be understood here in Erich Fromm’s sense; revolutionaries are not fanatics or rebels, in so far as these get their spirit from hatred and aggravation. Instead, revolutionaries are free and independent, or what Immanuel Kant called mature individuals as opposed to the immature that take recourse to authority. Revolutionaries are ones who rely on their own reason, and think, feel and decide for themselves. At issue here is the realisation of individuality:

The revolutionary character is the one who is identified with humanity and therefore transcends the narrow limits of his own society, and who is able, because of this, to criticize his or any other society from the standpoint of reason and humanity. He is not caught in the parochial worship of that culture which he happens to be born in, which is nothing but an accident of time and geography. He is able to look at his environment with the open eyes of a man who is awake and who finds his criteria of judging the accidental in that which is not accidental (reason), in the norms which exist in and for human race. (Fromm, 1963, p. 162)

The revolutionary character is alert, also with regard to the numerous ‘truths’ that we are fed on a daily basis by political and economic systems. In his famous Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 2005, the playwright Harold Pinter (2005) noted that art does not speak the language of ‘truth’ that politics tries to speak, which is in fact the language of power, truth being what authority allows to be heard. The language of art, however, is something else, of neither power nor truth, and instead ambiguous, ‘quicksand’ and ‘an icy surface’, always leaving things open, allowing room for thought, experience and emotion, for the independent experiencing individual and the public.

If we seek meaningfulness, it will not be there like on a shop shelf. Meaningfulness that is to be sought is not an experience; it does not involve seizing the present moment and the pleasure it produces. Instead, as stated by philosophers throughout history, meaning appears only at the end, when a life that has been lived is summed and weighed as a whole. In the same way the important thing is to see meaning in the totality of academic life and learning, at the same time as historical and rooted in tradition and as lived and renewed in daily teaching and learning practices. Art as a means for taking the immediate environment seriously has had its roots in the quest for the essential, in striving to find the meaningfulness of life and to maintain it, to recognise its experience from under the offerings of the media industry.

**Conclusion**

German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, among others, has observed that the main task of humanism in antiquity was to find meaningfulness and humanity in the blare of the arena, with philosophy and art made to serve this purpose. Art exists for human beings to become real. Now is it time to wake up, and seek for the same from academia through new information and communication technologies in order to reach the human potentials for creating new collaboration, solidarity and economic as well as social well-being. For like the visual cityscape, also the academic world is being
taken over, almost, as it seems, with the speed of light by commercial contents, messages and interests.

We have maintained that social media of various kinds is a two-edged sword. On one hand, it allows speeding up of time and stealing the breathing room of authentic thinking. On the other hand, it can open up spaces allowing new forms of togetherness and collective creativity. When Lyotard (1984, p. 53) claims that ‘the age of the Professor’ is ending he means that academic professionals and other experts (in their often exclusive ivory towers) are no longer ‘more competent than memory bank networks in transmitting established knowledge, no more competent than interdisciplinary teams in imagining new moves or new games’. However, he seems not to acknowledge the possibility that ‘memory bank networks’ can also be ‘live’ products of human cooperation as is the case today in various cooperations between students, teachers and citizens in their search for the good and just society, and pursuit of new ideas, information, innovations, social justice, peace, knowledge, love and wisdom.

The university system is regarded as our best resource and potential not only for intellectual vitality and creativity but also more straightforwardly for the national economic competitiveness in the global markets. Yet those potential resources are increasingly marginalised by cultures of assessment and regulation (Evans, 2004). The crucial hegemonic struggle concerns the language implicit in the use of the new information and communication technologies. Whose language is it? Technocrats’, students’ or teachers’? What kind of language is it? Pre-set or alive? Are there many languages, many vocabularies? Who has the power to define the leading vocabulary? There is a threat that the very same forces that are managerialising and thus ruining the critical potential of the universities will set the standards for the language proper. Thus an initial resistance would be urgent; it could start as ‘a refusal of a language now inflicted upon university staff’ (Evans, 2004, p. 74). In this refusal ‘out would go consumers, missions statements, aims and objectives and all the widely loathed, and derided, vocabulary of the contemporary university. In could come students and reading lists’ (Evans, 2004, p. 74). To the ‘in-list’ we would include the use of social media in its various forms, and enough time for discussion, reflection, and debate.

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