Review Wikiworld

Juha Suoranta and Tere Vadén
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Wikiworld (2010) offers an engaging account of the possibilities opened up in the area of education and digital media by 'wikis'. The authors, Juha Suoranta and Tere Vadén, point out that wikis, as decentralized web-based writing platforms, represent a 'new' ethos of participation, collaboration and co-operation for higher education. They explore the ongoing fascination with new technologies in moving towards a progressive transformation from the institutionalized and individualized forms of learning to more open and collaborative learning. In this book, which was first released as an open-content online publication, the authors not only put forward a challenge to the integrity of the 'closed' university system – with its emphasis on qualifications, competition and the marketisation of higher education – but they support this with a broader critical evaluation of the development of Western information societies. Participatory online media such as wikis are proposed in this book as ideological battlefields, whose central characteristics include voluntary participation, sharing and anonymous collectivism. These activities, the authors claim, are 'practices of actual freedom' (p.1).

Wikiworld places emphasis on an analysis of education within a wider social and economic framework of contemporary capitalism, providing an intriguing overview of the use of new technologies and contemporary learning practices. The new kind of socialism, sometimes dismissed as "cybercommunism" (p.157), draws on a range of technologies that rely for their power on social interaction and the harnessing of input from a global audience. However, rather than focusing on the clichés and traps surrounding discussion about the generational digital divide, the authors instead unpack how the changing nature of education, in conjunction with the rise in the use of digital technologies, can lead to a more ethical and socially just future for more and more global participants. In this way, *Wikiworld* espouses the utopian ideal of a borderless education, which implicitly fights against the corporatisation of the education system by emphasizing collaborative and social working practices, which, the authors argue, heighten individual autonomy and thereby thwart corporatisation.

Arguing that critical thought and open access both need and nourish each other, the authors draw attention to a genealogy of theorists interested in critical pedagogies and the impact of new technologies. This is very useful for readers interested in developing a theoretical grounding in the tensions between technology and education, particularly as it is tied to the conceptualization of education as lifelong, everyday and emancipatory. For this general argument, their debt is particularly

strong to Paulo Freire (they take pains to draw attention to his online presence at <http://freireprojet.org>) and Henry Giroux. The opening chapters of the book have a lively discussion of the tradition of educational research and thought that helps in understanding various characteristics of the new networked 'wikiworld', with further chapters going on to discuss the development of a digitally literate elite and the issue of collaborative learning, particularly in the context of higher education.

While there has been much discussion of critical pedagogy as it relates to issues of material, social, political and cultural modes of production – with such related topics as class, gender, race and popular culture as critical social formations – *Wikiworld* sets out to directly address the effects of the rapidly growing field of digital production with its ever evolving technologies, ideologies and social codes (p.8). The authors point out that, in the scholarly debate about this topic, some generalized and entwined expectations about technology as a "teaching machine" (Heidegger, 1982) are commonly played out: new technologies are approached as either a threat or a promise. To start with, digital technologies are feared because of their implicit rationality, technological determinism, and covert features of alienation. The central threat is not what new technologies enable, "but that such technologies, when not shaped by ethical considerations, lose whatever potential they might have for linking education to critical thinking and learning to democratic social change" (Giroux and Giroux 2004, p.268). Rather than fearing the implications of a catastrophic breakdown of technology, there is an underlying concern that technology can work altogether too smoothly and seamlessly, and thereby lose any emancipatory potential (p.9). On the other hand, the authors point out with concern that the promises of the diverse digital learning tools has led to a form of "hyperpedagogy" (Dwight and Garrison 2003), and suggest rejecting much of this hype and pretension about techno-utopias and techno-fixes, which promise that all problems – social, political or educational – are susceptible to technological solutions and qualitative improvements. This kind of quick technological fix to broader education or ethical concerns will remind readers of the increasing use of text-matching software programs such as *Turnitin* as a cure for plagiarism and a solution to the complex issue of academic integrity.

Instead, the authors' argument centers on a more critical examination of the uses and misuses of digital media and digital literacy in education. *Wikiworld* goes beyond a discussion of technical skills to ask substantial questions about the critical or even revolutionary potential of social media, particularly wikis like Wikipedia and Wikileaks. They point out that it is not the form but the content of the new technology – what is said and why – that is important in evaluating digital media's effects, promises and perils. The authors tentatively define digital literacies as more than just the ability to use digital technologies, whether personal devices or communication networks, but the various *processes* engaged while using them. That is, digital literacy is about more than locating, creating and evaluating information; it also includes the skills called upon to build alliances to effect some kind of transformation, whether that be material, individual or social. These new emancipatory digital skills and literacies have a potential to enlarge and enhance levels of educational expertise. The authors go on to quote Kahn and Kellner (2006) to argue that:

people should be helped to advance the multiple techno-literacies that will allow them to understand, critique and transform the oppressive social and cultural conditions in which they live, as they become ecologically-informed, ethical and transformative subjects as opposed to objects of technological domination and manipulation. This requires producing multiple oppositional literacies for critical thinking, reflection and the capacity to engage in the creation of discourse, cultural artefacts and political action amidst widespread technological revolution. (p.11)

In this formulation, digital literacy is more than a mere technique or simple question of basic literacies, but "a way of reading the word and the world" (p.32).

The central premise of *Wikiworld* is that higher education is in crisis. The authors call for the extinction of the 'banking' model of education as outlined by Freire (2005), with an omnipotent, knowing teacher and a silenced student cohort who digests in relative silence. Instead, the book celebrates the alternate methods afforded by digital media, where diverse student-student and student-teacher collaborations are encountered to work on focused open-ended tasks and group discussion. This kind of collaborative learning taps into what the authors point out is higher education's most powerful yet repeatedly underdeveloped resource, that of peer group influence (p.122). 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 their peers. The authors unpack Wikipedia as a classic contemporary example; when writing a wiki entry one can contribute and collaborate anonymously without anticipation of academic glory. In this sense, what the authors call "digital social creativity" (pp.117-24) and collaborative learning are in opposition to capitalist higher education, which trains students to individual obedience and reproduction of an organized stock of established knowledge. They argue that the collective history of something both as simple and complex as a Wikipedia article – as well, importantly, as the social interaction on which it is based – shows quite clearly how fears and suspicion about new digital technologies and the perceived threat to educational integrity can be overcome with both openness and an appreciation of collective responsibility.

References

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Reviewer

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