The Discourse on Educational Technology Before, During, and After the COVID-19 Outbreak

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has considerably affected education, pushing institutions to quickly adapt to the emergency through the use of digital technologies. In this forced transition, a technocentric aura started permeating the educational discourse, along with a frantic search for the right technology that could fix instructional problems exacerbated by the pandemic. The incorporation of digital technologies in education became a space for disputes in which different players kept reframing the role of technology according to their interests. Seeking to better understand the discourses used to depict digital technology in education, this study focuses on how technology has been presented in a major yearly publication in three consecutive years – before, during, and after the outbreak of the pandemic. Considering that organizations can influence their audiences’ expectations about technology, a critical approach to their discourses can help teachers, parents, and other stakeholders make more informed decisions when selecting and implementing educational technologies.

Introduction

In the last decade, there has been a rise in the belief that mere exposure to specific technologies would trigger growth processes in different educational contexts, and a linear vision of development and innovation in education started to be accepted (Pischetola, 2015). Today, from corporate to government speeches, the incorporation of digital technologies in education is a space for disputes in which the role of technologies is allusive, negotiated, and reframed (Pischetola et al., 2019). These disputes result in various discourses on the uses of technology in education and fundamentally on society’s relationship with it. Such discourses can impact perceived needs and attitudes related to technology, and influence how it is expected to benefit education. Studies show that different discursive strategies are used to convince the audience that digital technologies have the power to solve major educational issues, such as literacy, evasion, and students’ performance (Barreto, 2017; Ferreira & Lemgruber, 2018).

The incorporation of digital technologies in the educational ecosystem reflects and is reflected by different social needs, values, and interests. However, to argue in favor of the broad adoption of digital technology in educational contexts, media and corporate discourses tend to be both alarmist about an allegedly inadequate educational system (Ferreira & Lemgruber, 2018) and overly optimistic concerning the capacity of digital technologies to transform the future of education (Mertala, 2021). In this sense, technology would not only be good for education, but – soon enough – one of the major factors responsible for solving educational problems and determining the nature of education itself. As a result, technology has been placed as a prominent agent in educational settings (Barreto, 2017). It is therefore essential to investigate the discursive techniques and strategies used by media and corporations to create and spread perceptions about the role of technology in education (McGarr & Engen, 2021).
The Study

Discourse can be used to naturalize particular ways of experiencing the world – to the detriment of others – making them seem fixed and immutable (Leonardi, 2008). One of the numerous means used to disseminate discourses on educational technology is the EDUCAUSE Horizon Report Teaching and Learning Edition, a highly regarded and extensively read yearly publication focusing on trends and technologies in higher education. This paper focuses on how technology has been presented in this report in the last three years, namely 2020, 2021, and 2022. Specifically, the overarching research question of this study is: In what ways does the EDUCAUSE Horizon Report Teaching and Learning Edition discuss the role of technology in education, considering the pre, during, and “post” pandemic scenarios?

To answer that question, this study relies on discourse analysis (Wood & Kroger, 2000). This methodology considers situated language in use and focuses on how discourse is structured and organized to serve different discursive functions. Data were collected on June 10th, 2022, via the publicly available online archive of the EDUCAUSE Horizon Report Library (https://library.educause.edu/resources/2021/2/horizon-reports). The analysis focused on the “Trends: Scanning the Horizon” section of the report. In this paper, preliminary findings are presented and discussed.

The EDUCAUSE Horizon Report is usually published in April. For the material to be publication-ready by the end of the first quarter of each year, the preparation of the manuscripts must take place in the previous one. This means that the 2020 report was debated upon and written in 2019, before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The following two issues, 2021 and 2022, were prepared in 2020 and 2021, respectively. As a result, while the first report of this data set illustrates ideas that permeated educational discussions before the pandemic, the last two issues represent the mindset change that took place as the field faced new challenges brought by the unprecedented global scenario.

Preliminary Findings

The preliminary findings of the analysis indicate four major themes that permeate the discourse of the reports across the years: large forces that impact higher education; an unknown fearsome future; the potential impact of technologies in this future; and education as a business – learners as consumers.

The analysis of the texts showed that future-oriented stances related to the role of technology and the very nature of higher education are common in the discourse of the three reports. Throughout the years considered for this study, EDUCAUSE states that (higher) education does not take place in a vacuum and is impacted by social contexts. Besides the pandemic, the reports systematically state that there are “macro trends,” “bigger picture developments,” “larger forces,” “larger trends,” “a variety of trends and forces,” and “trends developing within and around it,” shaping higher education. However, there is no mention of what these forces are and where they come from, apart from indications that higher education needs to adapt to current industry and economic affairs.

Although vague and allusive words are used to describe the “larger forces” that would be determining the path of education, the future prophesied by the reports since 2021 is harsh. Besides affirming that we will live “in a future that will be very much unlike our past” and that “there will be no return to ‘normal’ for many institutions,” “turmoil,” “cataclysm,” “crisis,” “troubling,” “decline,” “devastated,” “perennial challenges,” “threaten,” “urgent,” “unsettled,” “inescapable,” and “uncertain” are some expressions used to describe the present and the upcoming future in the 2021 and 2022 reports.

Even though an uncertain and hostile future is ahead, technology is presented as a transformational agent, capable of mitigating the hardships to be faced. From 2020 to 2022, the discourse on the role of educational technologies shifts from possibility (including benefits and risks) to inevitability. At the same time, the potential benefits of adopting different technologies were not taken for granted.

In 2020, the educational experiences were positioned as enhanced by technologies and fostering new ways of approaching education, as shown in excerpts [1] and [2] (italics added for emphasis).

[1] “The educational experiences of instructors and learners are always scaffolded and enhanced by systems and tools […]” (Brown et al., 2020, p. 9)

[2] “the opportunity to ‘think outside the box’ and reconceptualize their approaches to education.” (Brown et al., 2020, p. 9)
In following years, the reports picture a much more prescriptive and deterministic relationship between education and technology. Examples of these ideas can be found in excerpts [3], [4], and [5].

[3] “our dependencies on technology” (Pelletier et al., 2021, p. 6)

[4] “digital technologies even more vital to higher education” (Pelletier et al., 2021, p. 8)

[5] “one of the defining stories of higher education in the years ahead.” (Pelletier et al., 2021, p. 9; Pelletier et al., 2022, p. 9)

The 2020 and 2022 reports systematically mention “nontraditional students” as an emergent learner profile. In turn, what would be a “nontraditional education” is described as a trend for the changes in higher education, addressing the needs of the so-called “nontraditional students.” In 2020, this new profile is introduced as an “increasing population”; by 2022, the reports state that higher education needs “to support these longer-term consumer preferences” and focus on the needs of this population. Students are seen as consumers rather than learners, as the examples [6] and [7] show. As customers, they need to be pleased. However, their needs and wishes are described as aligned to those of the industry. The passages below show how this new student profile, reported by EDUCAUSE, seems to be intrinsically connected to business matters.

[6] “[…] will force institutions to reconsider their business models and practices and to align with evolving consumer preferences.” (Pelletier et al., 2022, p. 10)

[7] “These changes signal to institutions a need to realign education and business models to better fit these consumer and industry trends […]” (Pelletier et al., 2022, p. 7)

An increasingly prominent aspect of the discourse found in the reports is the idea of education as a business. More than other concerns, the reports show an evident preoccupation with the success of the current business model of higher education, questioning the existing costs vs. benefits ratio, and the (lack of) conformation to the demands of the industry, as in the examples below.

[8] “Institutions need to demonstrate their value and/or adjust to economic realities with new business/funding models.” (Brown et al., 2020, p. 10)

[9] “Institutions will need to adjust their courses, curricula, and degree programs to meet learners’ needs, as well as the demands of new industries and an evolving workforce” (Brown et al., 2020, p. 10)

[10] “the return on investment of the traditional college degree is and will continue to come under closer scrutiny” (Pelletier et al., 2022, p. 10)

[11] “institutional education and business models will be pressed to evolve” (Pelletier et al., 2022, p. 10)

[12] “clearer ties to the demands of the larger economy and workforce will be their new meal ticket” (Pelletier et al., 2022, p. 10)

Conclusions

Through a discourse analysis approach, this study examined how the role of technology in education was depicted by a prominent publication in the field. Data were collected from the EDUCAUSE Horizon Report Teaching and Learning, 2020, 2021, and 2022 issues, investigating how this discourse changed over the years. Preliminary findings show major ideas that permeate the discourse of the “Trends: Scanning the Horizon” section of the last three issues. First of all, the analysis showed that the reports mention “greater forces” that propel higher
education to change. However, besides the pandemic and some indications pointing to economic factors, there is no proper definition of what these forces are and how they impact education. Secondly, an atmosphere of fearing a cataclysmic future is presented, followed by the impacts technology would have in this future. Lastly, higher education is presented as a business and learners as its consumers. The reports indicate that higher education has to adapt to the needs of these consumers and address greater economic and workforce demands to survive.

The overall discussion drifts away from pedagogical needs and best teaching and learning practices toward finances, customers’ wishes, and how to better serve the industry. It is relevant to point out that this concern seems to be related to a for-profit approach to education. In contexts in which higher education is public and free of charge, the idea of adjusting business models to keep students-customers happy and maximize profit is not as prominent – or virtually not an issue at all.

This alarmist discursive strategy toward the future of education is not new. Literature shows that it is frequently used to convince the audience that digital technology is the only possible solution to educational problems (Ferreira & Lemgruber, 2018). Words like “dependency,” “necessity,” “vital,” and “defining stories,” in consonance with a foreseen cataclysmic scenario, indicate not only a deterministic understanding of the relationship between education and technology (Hallström, 2022) but also a narrative of failure, crisis, and the consequent need for an immediate solution (Ideland, Jobér & Axelsson, 2021).

The EDUCAUSE Horizon Report Teaching and Learning Edition carefully builds a narrative in which higher education is in crisis and in desperate need of a change to diminish a potential calamity in the near future. Still, this bleak, unforgiving future can be avoided as long as higher education institutions adapt their business models, becoming hostages to the whims of economic and corporate desires for profit – either by altering their curricula to please their students-consumers or by adopting technologies in ways that work in favor of the industry. Reports such as the ones analyzed in this study are presumed to be “neutral” and to inform their readers based on unbiased evidence. However, the narrative in the reports is constructed – if not fabricated – on budgetary preoccupations and industry needs. Such discourses can impact not only perceived “trends” in educational technology but also the how people conceive education itself. This study reinforces the importance of critically analyzing discourses on educational technology, since they are not neutral (Teräs et al., 2020) and can influence perceptions and uses of technology on a large scale.

References


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