

University Education in Overzealous Promotion of Technology

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Introduction

A technology instruction expert advised his sons monthly: “Circumstances don’t make or break you; they reveal you.” Certainly, in this age of high pace technological advances, circumstances could reveal the character of students revealing themselves unprepared for the future workplace as soon as they graduate. This is reflected in difficulties in job matches in that when the students graduate, they cannot find the jobs that they have been taught to do, e.g. an overemphasis of technical skill in mathematical problem-solving exercises. Yet, throughout their education, they have been told that high-quality instructional materials involving the use of technology would provide them with the engaging learning opportunities beyond traditional barriers of place and time, all in the name of technology integration. This may leave many graduates disappointed and ultimately can lose trust in higher education. In a



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2022 Students and Technology Report, EDUCAUSE, (Robert, J., 2022), a survey of 820 undergraduate students asking what the most important success of education is perceived by them, 30% (the highest percent), consider completing a degree to be the main objective, 15% consider securing a job. While 11% consider achieving personal growth to be important; and for those, learning the right technology certainly would be a good motivation, securing a high salary (10%) is clearly the ultimate highly valued goal.¹ A majority of students today care only earning a degree of recognition, not so much what they learn.

This paper argues that learning technology for the sake of technology cannot be the key to success. Educators need to go back to teaching students the basic skill of critical thinking (Ellis, 2002; Fahim and Masouleh, 2012; Werhun, 2024). Life is not about multiple choice and true/false questions. In this age of ever-changing technology, graduating students coming to the workplace will find their productivity depend not so much on the mastering of a particular technology, but largely may depend on good communication based on their ability of asking substantive questions and finding solutions for it. In a recent Vancouver Entrepreneur Forum discussion of AI ethics, an international head-hunter speaking at the forum described today's employers are looking for individuals who "can contribute to the organization", not just knowing how to follow instructions. The ability to engage in constructive dialogue with employers will be the type of job that would not easily be replaced by AI. To do so, it will be the responsibility of instructors to engage students in-and-off classroom to practice constructive dialogue. Learning from that perspective is not from top down, but what can be called collaborative learning, aiming students to take responsibility for their intellectual development, rather than learning a particular technology as the goal, as any technology will be likely be replaced by another technology due to the force of

Endnotes:

¹<https://library.educause.edu/resources/2022/10/2022-students-and-technology-report-rebalancing-the-student-experience>

creative destruction (Schumpeter, 1942). It is entirely possible that a particular technology mastered by a student becomes obsolete even before a student graduates.

Collaborative Learning--an in-class attitude transferrable to workplace

Students addicted to instructions, whether by instructors or by technology, cannot adjust to a working environment doing things that requires hidden goals to be found. A student going through a training period of a brand-name company failed her 3-months probational period because she had always waited for instructions; and when instructions were given, she found them not being clear enough for her to follow. She lost out to the competition, even though she might have a bag of technology coming into the job. Indeed, it could be a sign of a general failure of education that GenZ are going now into a lazy girl syndrome.²

Collaborative learning has been studied in an earlier paper emphasizing the use of current-eventdriven videos to drive analytical discussions in classrooms (Lorne & Hlozkova, 2017). Independently, a large number of scholars have thoughts on practicing this methodology of teaching across various usages such as cognitive, social, psychology, instructional design, etc. (Hmelo-Silver, et.al., 2013; Rutherford, 2014). Theoretical support for this type of methodologies arguably existed since the Socratic age, but it is useful to bring it up for consideration because of the rapid obsolescence of knowledge and technology that we are experiencing now. The inspiration of the piece by one of the authors in this essay was written in the backdrop of the 2008 financial crisis. Conventional economics had failed to anticipate, and financial theories did not apply.³ Unfortunately, a new framework has yet to be identified. This being a result of Schumpeter's creative destruction applied to the methodology in the field of economics. Some MBA programs today have deleted

² <https://www.forbes.com/sites/markcperna/2023/12/12/meet-the-latest-version-of-quiet-quitting-lazy-girl-jobs/?sh=3db116b6446e>

³The most notable theory being Robert Lucas Jr., who won an Economic Nobel prize (1995) on his work on rational expectation.

economics entirely as a requirement. Yet, we cannot say that economic theory is totally non-applicable and not useful for today's economy, as it is the critical thinking skills that economics can most usefully contribute to the gaining of knowledge, at least for business acumen.

Clearly, the mission of today's education, irrespective of which program of study, is to inject an attitude of learning of a subject matter that would be transferable to the workplace (Swedberg, 2024), or for students who view learning as a simple pursuit and the understanding of the meaning of life. The presumption that whatever an instructor had learned in his/her training can be carbon-copied into today's classroom is not the right approach. Instructors can, through their respective academic disciplines, provide rich, balanced, and non-judgmental opportunities for students to develop their own values, beliefs, and opinions (Elias, 2017; Roche, 2009). Indeed, some would say that teaching is a moral enterprise, Palmer (1998). An in-class experiential relationship rests on a strong student-teacher relationship, even though not all students in the class may value those relationships. That relationship obviously relies a lot on trust.

Collaborative Learning is different from what is sometimes called a Learning-focused approach (O'Brien, et.al., 2008; Bart, 2017). For example, a Learning-focused approach prides itself as a "shared decision making" approach, putting students in a position the same as a teacher, or at least requiring the teacher to advise students on matters outside the teacher's expertise for the simple gesture of just being "nice". Likewise, there can be an overstressing of friendliness in that it is important to write a caring or welcoming outline as a tool to motivate, making the instructor warm, and approachable. (Richmond, 2016). This is not the collaborative learning approach that the authors in this essay would advocate. As a facilitator of collaborative learning, the instructor must have the critical thinking skill to discern whether a point raised in the discussion may be too tangential to be further elaborated, whether a point is out-of-context, whether elaboration is too lengthy and too repetitively. It hinges on the instructor's ability to intervene with conversations, with discretions at the right time.

Otherwise, a well-intention collaborative learning can evolve to become a drift-away conversation without proper focus.

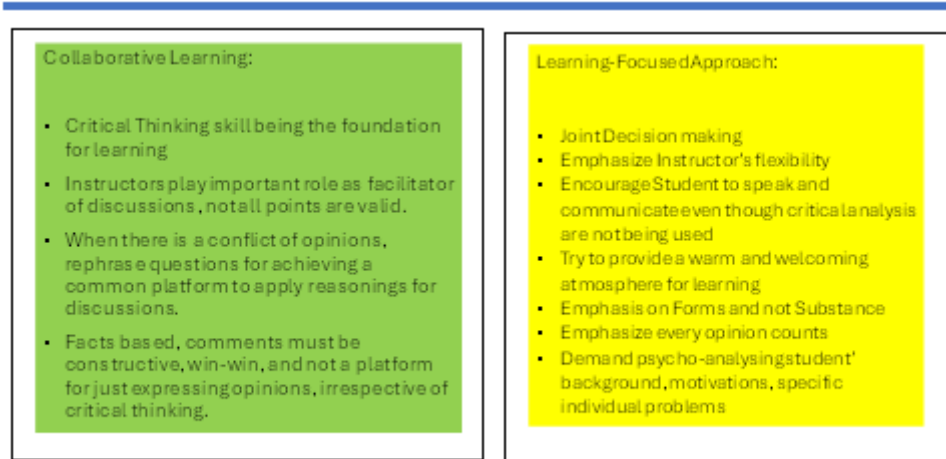


Figure 1. Difference between “Collaborative Learning” and “Learning-Focused Approach”

The collaborative learning approach this paper advocates is not in form and appearance, which the Learning-focused methodology stresses, but in terms of substance. The tool of a Learning-focused methodology builds on a syllabus. The presumption is that a good syllabus can set the tone for the course that will result in good learning. True collaborative learning needs to depend on results. Does the stock of knowledge increase as a result of collaborative learning. An objective measure of that could be research publications, opinion pieces arising from collaborative learning, or simply the ability to ask insightful and constructive questions. In institutions of high academic excellence, teacher/student creative works are common. A content-focused syllabus is the hallmark of academic excellence whereas a learning-focused syllabus encourages instructors to focus on classroom behaviors.⁴ Regardless, the relevant

⁴ A Learning-focus approach, if stretched to the limit, holds an instructor entirely responsible for student learning the subject matter, irrespective of the student's motivation. An example would be when a student shows a lack of interest in the subject matter being taught, how a faculty is being advised to handle the situation. A Learning-focus approach would suggest having a private discussion with the student to identify his or her motivation to fix whatever misalignment of expectation. A content-focus approach would be to emphasize the features in the content of the class (perhaps in a different way) that can provide a more inclusive discussion for the whole class, as there are multi-angles to collaborative learning. Assessment of a classroom interaction based on an extreme Learning-focus approach can

question that needs to be addressed is how activities in the classrooms are transferable in the sense of an experiential learning to the modern workplace today.

Bringing critical thinking skills in the form of collaborative learning in the working place has been noted in various career advising platforms (Indeed, 2022; PMC, u.d.). Employers are looking for employees who can make a difference and not just to fill a lazy girl's job. (Mortensen and Edmundson, 2022). Creating meaning collaboration is recognized as an important workplace ethical standard (Harvard Human Resources, u.d.). Expert advises: "The first aspect employers notice is the way you communicate, your command over the language and how well you present yourself to them. Great communication gives the employer an insight into how confident and clear your vision towards your career and goals are." (Tambe, 2023). To be sure, students entering the workforce today must be somewhat technology savvy, but that's different from having an institution or a course structured around a particular technology. For example, Amazon in the city of Vancouver had planned on hiring 10,000 employees, but it does not mean the schools in Vancouver should be all teaching AWS as a course in their curriculum. Likewise, no higher learning institutions that the authors are aware of would adopt Microsoft's Co-Pilot as a theme for a course. Education in a crowded technology-driven economy usually lets a student choose the learning of a particular protocol. It is a student's own self-learning pursuit based on each person's individual interest and goal, and not necessarily rigidly defined in types and forms even though that might be what some teachers would like to adopt.

Collaborative learning can be conducted physically in classrooms or online. The determination and the gauging of the mix of on-and-off classroom activities is the instructor's choice, based perhaps on the background knowledge and motivation of students perceived by the instructor in a class. Except by regulations, most universities now conduct hybrid classes to allow instructors to experiment with the best mix of platforms. In this age where the workplace is increasingly digital, not only is this

result in evaluating a class on the basis of students' body language, instructor's compromise of time for students in a class, and students use of cell phone during class, all superficial observations in forms, not in substance of the subject matter being taught in the classroom.

format provides flexibility, but it arguably is essential. In another paper, as a result of collaborative learning in a special topic course, one of the authors in this paper has pointed out that digital dialogues should be the focus for the 21st century economy (Lorne, et.al., 2024). The education business, like any business, has to think of ecosystem positioning in this complex technology evolving environment. A course is only a product in the whole education catalog of an education platform/institution, like a meal in a menu of a restaurant. The business, like any other business, will be subject to competition for designing its own ecosystem positioning.

For online or offline, constructive dialogues for collaborative learning are exceedingly important for higher learning institutions that emphasize academic excellence. To be sure, not all students' comments and contributions are valid. For example, social media where everyone has equal right to "contribute" has lots of noises. Educators most likely would need to have good critical thinking skills themselves first in order to facilitate collaborative sessions so that they can steer constructive dialogues to fulfill the objectives of a content-focus syllabus. There could be noises, disagreements, agree to disagree moments that if collaborative learning is not well-managed, and sometimes requiring a bit of forcefulness, it can be evolved into aimless discussions with frustrations, with each side accusing the other side of being "emotional", however unintended the true motivations might be. That would be the worst-case scenario of collaborative learning.

Collaborative Thinking Skill Under the Shadow of Technology Myths.

In this age of emerging technology and the AI we are about to face, educators in all higher learning institutions are asking the same question: How do we assist classroom teachings with the latest technology. Even though the question is of good intention, this can be a prone spot where the critical thinking skills that most faculty in higher learning institutions value may be compromised. At the outset, AI in principle can replace all teachings; and even if complete replacement will not happen, there will be a core of administrators looking for new opportunities to obtain new means to gain

power. Critical thinking skills will be under assault first in small instances but will likely grow if the force of technology becomes increasingly convenient for management to use as a whip.



Figure 2. An AI-Driven Baby Carriage suggesting the raising of a young mind can be totally managed by technologies. *Source: Photo by authors at InnovateWest show, April 16-17, 2024, Vancouver, Canada*

Some specific examples further illustrate how critical thinking skills can be disrupted by mesmerizing the glamor of technology.

- a. Losing common sense in believing technology guidelines gives the “best” answer to an exercise on social engineering, the method of phishing.*

In this age of high cybersecurity risk, it is normal to expect an ordinary person to be paranoid about things. Allegedly, someone famous was eating guacamole in a meal and commented that it was a bomb. Yet, critical thinking can lead us towards developing some type of self-guided defensive mechanism set for various risks.

Universities, however, do provide additional training for guidelines to follow based on “technologic” expertise. In the name of information security, such teaching lessons can be misleading and ambiguous, adding to fear rather than mitigating fear.

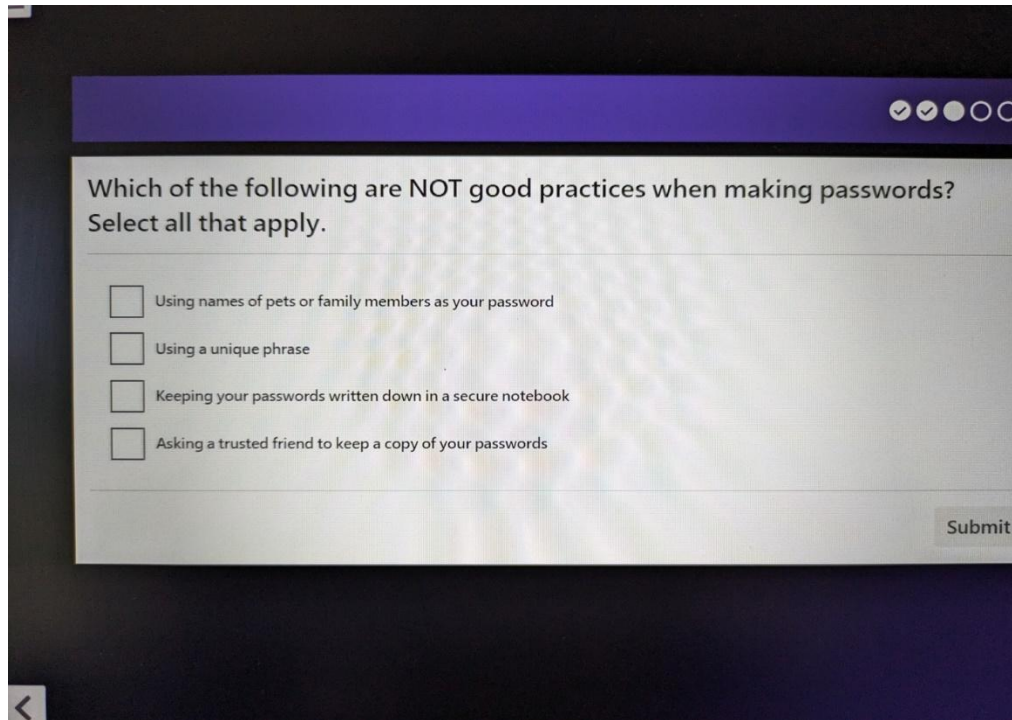
The image shows a screenshot of a web-based multiple-choice question. The question text is "Which of the following are NOT good practices when making passwords? Select all that apply." There are four options, each with an unchecked checkbox: "Using names of pets or family members as your password", "Using a unique phrase", "Keeping your passwords written down in a secure notebook", and "Asking a trusted friend to keep a copy of your passwords". A "Submit" button is located at the bottom right of the question area. The interface has a dark purple header and a light gray question box.

Figure 3. Multiple Choice of a Cyber security training tutorial.

Source: Know-Be-4 Training Tutorials, 2024

Above template is an example from a typical technology learning tutorial, teaching users on safe ways to manage emails. The correct answer to the question of managing passwords is rather surprising: All the options are NOT good practice except “using a unique phrase”. In the first place, what kind of phrases will contain special characters, numerical, and at least one upper case? Moreover, how a technologist supremist can believe that all other circumstances specific to how an individual manages his/her life should be subservient to the unique phrase method? There may be all sorts of situations where individuals choose their method of handing privacy. Some individuals may have mental disability that rely on someone they trust to keep passwords for them. How could there be only ONE good way to manage passwords! Whoever was designing the question cannot be assumed to be using common sense and critical thinking in the

design of the question. The “right” answer humiliates the critical thinking of the respondent.

It is also interesting to note that universities have set up high security standards requiring okta verification to everything online, as if we have data as important to protect as financial institutions and alike. We note that paranoid is the result when nothing is absolute. The flip side of any security measure is cyberthreat, from outside and possibly inside of an organization. Our personal experience is that in spite of okta, fake email notification from administration is still appearing in our mailbox. Thus, there is no bullet-proof defense to cyberattacks simply because the resources spent (attackers and defenders) are relative. If one is disabled of the critical thinking skill to evaluate and discern specific circumstances, blindly following guidelines, it could be more dangerous than following guidelines.

b. Worshipping technology can disrupt a class discussion that stresses critical thinking.

As pointed out earlier, the overzealousness of technology may not be coming from the technology or the AI itself, but from the managing administrators supporting them. This could become burdensome for faculty seeking academic excellence and other means for creativity in classroom to accommodate, as the administrators could be aiming for “forms” and not “substance”. For example, educators sometimes believe that good discussions can only be held on the platforms they create for discussions and will blame an instructor for not having sufficient discussions on the online discussion platform. The truth of the matter is, almost in every class, students “discuss and talk” on a platform outside what the institution provides, e.g. Whatsapp, Wechat, etc. As an example, when a “fake” news discussion was carried out in a classroom by one of the authors, administrator/evaluator pivoted on a topic of media forensic, simply because the administrator himself has certain preference on what should be discussed.

The dark cloud of the technology myths could be everywhere and not just in the classroom of higher learning institutions. For those who completely rely on technology or the disciples of technology, an untamed humanoid robot’s interaction with a human

could illustrate that the interaction may not be as smooth as one would expect.⁵ Human's critical thinking skills are way above the robots!

- c. *The development of a set of KPI is good in and of itself even if the KPI does not contain meaningful measures, all in the name of being more objective and scientific.*

Technologists pursue and pressure the creation of measurements. Yet, many quantitative assessments are either meaningless or easily evadible. For example, a scoring method to evaluate student learning based on the objectives of a course mentioned in the syllabus is absolutely meaningless if the instructor has to assign a number subjectively and arbitrarily to individual student in a course based on a set of subjectively defined goals; and somehow, somehow, some “objective” criteria are being defined for the success of the whole course. The exercise could be, in one form or another, playing with numbers as self-assurance that somehow a subjective measure becomes an objective measure.

The belief that by creating KPI monitoring in classrooms that somehow the quality of teaching will be improved is a rather naïve way of managing higher learning education standards. Granted that performance requires monitoring, it is not necessarily true that the creation of KPI for the learning process in higher education means that a higher quality education will be provided.

Ed-Tech Survey

Technology upgrade is a necessary step-up for all organizations including education institutions. Most education institutions have an educational technology committee of some kind to oversee and plan the technology needed for the institution. This is a good thing, and arguably very much needed amidst the digital technology wave we are facing. For example, upgrading equipment, e.g. touchscreen displays, classroom furniture, managing institutional emails, effective ways to deliver online courses, establishing internal protocols, etc., all are very important infrastructure/capital costs

⁵ See the Nvidia GTC event in March 2024: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=51TYhPJ4zys>

decisions that every education institution must make. The diligence of the administration is to be commended.

Yet, one has to also look at how faculty is viewing the assistance of technology, like the survey that is typically run for students for a class they have taken. Administrations like to criticize the low response rate for classroom evaluations, pushing faculties to repeatedly remind students to respond based on low response rate by students. They should subject themselves to the same methodology of self-evaluation. The institution in which the author(s) in this article works at conducted an Ed-Tech Survey in 2024. In spite of numerous institutional promotions of the Ed-Tech Survey, response to technology was less than overwhelming. The lack of good response could be that individual faculty already recognized what technologies would be best to conduct the class they feel are most suitable for the mission of their teaching. For example, if the class a faculty is teaching emphasizes collaborative learning in classroom, the need of technology is very little, because the exercises require oral skill in building constructive dialogues, which is the very needed skill that decision makings in the real-world require, not the type of skill that will be easily replaced by robots or AI.

Table 1. Response rate of an Ed-Tech survey

Source: Authors' email correspondence

New York	FT Faculty (from directory)	FT Faculty Submissions	FT Faculty Participation %
Architecture & Design	40	6	15.00%
Arts & Sciences	67	11	16.42%
Engineering & Computing Sciences	48	13	27.08%
Health Professions	37	17	45.95%
Management	27	3	11.11%
Osteopathic Medicine other		1	
TOTAL	219	50	22.83%

Vancouver	(from directory)	Submissions	Participation %
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Full-Time Faculty	21	4	19.05%
Adjunct Faculty	60	1	1.67%
TOTAL	81	5	6.17%

The above table showed that among all the programs listed, the School of Management has the lowest response rate, 11.11% on the main campus. The Vancouver campus full-time faculty response rate of 19.05% was not broken down into programs. In view of Vancouver's campus high emphasis on cybersecurity training, it is rather surprising that the response percentage is not higher than its equivalence of 27.08% for the main campus. In other words, the quest for technology and AI integration into classrooms could rely mostly on self-learning for the instructors and students in the classroom, depending on the subject matter to be taught.

Conclusion

We live in a world where circumstances are changing very rapidly. The powerful force of creative destruction cannot be expected to be unlikely, but likely, to “make or break” a person. The defense needed to deal with the situation is not being complacent in hoping what is to be “revealed” is always on the winning side of the creative destruction process. Learning a mixed bag of technology is not a good strategy to pursue because (1) competition is likely to result in many losing technologies, gaining expertise in one will be very risky, but diversifying by learning all will result in someone being “a Jack of no trade.” (2) critical thinking skill is necessary for reading situations and circumstances even though the perception one has about what's coming may not be accurate; but the ability to strategize in reaction to changing circumstance is important, including the workplace requirements. (3) the blue-link economy (i.e. leads on the internet from a conventional search) is unlikely to be completely replaced by AI. What the 21st century employers really need should become the mission of university education, and not mislead students in believing a particular institution is the flagship of technology. The paper argues collaborative learning, teaching students to engage in constructive dialogues useful for the organization they serve could be a more fruitful path for the success of students and the mission of the educators.

There is no point in shaping our students to be a computer chip, not even a Blackwell chip. We live in a transformational environment. There is unlikely to be a one-size fits all teaching framework that can serve the multi-dimensional, multi-professionals based, and multi-disciplinary programs typical in a university. The overzealousness of a technological push can be manifested in many ways in higher education these days. Institutional support can be misfocused, particularly if the administrators are not trusting faculty and students in their own ways to pursuit a good mix of critical thinking skillset. University education can certainly be assisted by technology of the kind to provide enhancement of a particular critical thinking skill suitable for its respective professional needs. However, it is highly doubtful that a universal framework concerning technology adoption for learning in higher education exists. The push for changes in higher education based on technology needs to be critically examined.

With the world moving towards automation, with AI replacing human functionality including teaching, implying there will be a core of humans supporting its own destruction, this paper reviewed some alarming observations. There can be methods of increasing knowledge and methods of increasing students' employability in the workplace. These methods can only be evaluated by the experts in their own fields. While cross-disciplines opportunities certainly exist, and indeed, it is an opportunity that administration can assist; but most of these opportunities are based on human chemistry, starting at the level of faculty, via micro projects, and in the case of classroom situation, via collaborative learning. Administrators with preconceived teaching paradigms can hinder individual faculty development in achieving academic excellence.

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