

Networked learning and utopia

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Abstract

The corporate infrastructures and policy trajectories of contemporary digital education are rarely seen as utopian. To a significant extent they are extractive, utilitarian, colonising and homogenising. At a historical moment of multiple, intersecting crises, scholarship in networked learning can contribute new methods for imagining and re-building digital education – unpicking its histories, imagining better futures and – ultimately – maintaining hope. This paper uses Levitas's (2013) 'Utopia as Method' as a way to approach this challenge, applying its three-part analytical sequence – archaeology, ontology and architecture – to networked learning and digital education.

Keywords

Utopia; digital education; desire; networked learning; Levitas

Introduction: utopia, reformism and the education of desire

The scholarship of utopia dates back to 1516 and Thomas More's original coining of the term to describe a fictionalised, idealised, perhaps impossible society (More 2001). Over the centuries, it has become a vast area of scholarship spanning literature, political science, architecture, sociology, art, theology and beyond. Education research has engaged with the idea of utopia in a range of ways which Lewis (2007) defines as taking three broad forms: it has either been 'stigmatized as an elite blueprint of the perfect future imposed by top-down administration', venerated as a 'vague concept ushering forth from critical pedagogues', or reduced to a set of loose ideas relating to the possibility of 'an educational third way' (216). This 'third way' approach is evident in the broad tendency of education scholars to date to focus on 'pragmatic' or 'feasible' utopias (eg Halpin 2003, Barnett 2018) which are perceived to be realisable within the structures and understood possibilities of the present. Such approaches are subject to criticism from scholars who are concerned more with the idea of utopia as an opening up of the potential for a holistic, radical 'reconstitution of society' (Levitas 2013). Webb (2016), for example, characterises 'pragmatic' approaches as 'utopian realism', critiquing them as a 'domestication' of the utopian imagination. For Levitas (2004) they are reductive formulations, reducing utopia to managerialism, and 'annihilating it discursively by claiming the space of utopia for reformism' (271).

For Levitas, to reduce utopia to reformism is to concede to current status quo politics, neoliberal hegemony and instrumentalised education – it gives up on the idea that radical social change is possible. To work with utopia in a more radical sense we need to give free rein to imagination and desire, taking a holistic, society-wide approach which allows us to liberate our vision for the future from an over-entrenchment in the micro-possibilities of the local present. As Levitas (2004) points out, 'we have to understand that if we do not demand the impossible, all we will get is more of the same' (273). A more recent turn in literary, sociological and, to an extent, educational utopian scholarship has also started to embrace the scholarship of utopia more as a way of organising an integrated 'forward dreaming' (Bloch 1986) – a political move in which it becomes concerned with drawing out 'the connections between economic, social, existential and ecological processes in an integrated way' (Levitas 2013, 18). This is an approach which is evident in the work of increasing numbers of scholars in education and networked learning (Yosef-Hassidim and Baldacchino 2021, Amsler and Facer 2017; Nørgård 2022; Ross 2022). Another critical theme for educators engaging with utopia is the philosopher Miguel Abensour's 'education of desire' – an idea which has become one of the 'foundational concepts' shaping current research in the field of literary utopian studies (Wegner 2021). Abensour (1999) sees utopia as a specifically *educational* impulse focused on the centrality of desire to the utopian imagination:

the point is not for utopia (unlike the tradition that calls for the 'moral education of humanity') to assign 'true' or 'just' goals to desire but rather to educate desire, to stimulate it, to awaken it – not to assign it a goal but to open a path for it.... Desire must be taught to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire otherwise. (145-6)

Desire here is an explicitly educational issue, framed in terms of utopian purpose. As Wegner (2021) has summarised it, utopia as the education of desire is an unending process, 'there will be no final realization of utopia,

no end of history, no perfection to be realized, but rather a continuous reformulation of the object cause of desire pulling us forward' (170).

How might networked learning in its various digital forms be positioned within such a utopia – one that enables us to desire differently, and better? What are its responsibilities for the education of desire? What might its place be in a more humane, caring, responsible and just future?

Utopia as method: imagining and shaping a just future

The remainder of this paper will focus on the use of Levitas's (2013) 'utopia as method' as a structured way of analysing the past, and re-imagining the future of networked learning and digital education. In developing this method, Levitas turns the scholarship of utopia toward sociological concerns by acknowledging the interdependence of its aesthetic and political dimensions. Utopia in this way becomes a form of 'speculative sociology' (153), working to an idea of utopia not as a blueprint, but as a holistic, reflexive way of imagining and building toward better forms of social organisation. The method Levitas sets out has three modes, each interconnected but with its own emphasis:

- the analytical **archaeological** mode in which existing political programmes and imaginaries are interrogated in order to make explicit the model of the 'good society' embedded within them
- the **ontological** mode, which considers the subjects of utopia and what ways of being and flourishing might be blocked by current social arrangements, and enabled by alternatives
- the **architectural** mode, which imagines how we might design institutions and modes of organisation in which such ways of being and flourishing would be enabled.

The next three sections apply these modes to the some of the artefacts, political programmes and social imaginaries embedded in digital education and networked learning.

Archaeology: fragments of utopia in networked and lifelong learning

Levitas's analytical archaeological mode focuses on extracting the fragments of utopian vision in existing political programmes and accounts, interrogating their gaps and silences and scrutinising the model of 'good society' which is embedded within them (2013, 154). For example Levitas herself (2013) conducts an archaeological analysis of the concepts and political enactments of meritocracy, civil society and economic growth. Here, I focus on 'lifelong learning' as a way of touching on contesting educational models of the 'good society' and their intersection with digital education and networked learning.

Lifelong and networked learning have long been intertwined (eg McConnell 2002), while digital education more generally has always had what Knight et al (2023) call an 'intimate engagement' with lifelong learning programmes (2). This latter is an entanglement which goes back, in UK policy terms, to at least the late 1990s. At that time, what was then called 'ICT' was seen as an enabler for a utopic 'learning society' in which access to education through life had become accessible to all through digital technology – a conviction which the UK New Labour government of the time 'enshrined in a series of multi-million pound government initiatives', including the ultimately unsuccessful University for Industry and its online delivery platform *learnirect* (Gorard et al 2003, 281). Much of the government rhetoric of the time – emphasising the 'accessible to all' nature of content delivered online – was typical of an era in which the newness of 'ICT' seemed to open up wide possibilities for inclusive access to lifelong learning.

Even at the time this was derided by some as 'technological utopianism' (Robertson 1998, 5), and critiqued by others for its failure to understand that individuals' ability and willingness to engage with lifelong learning, regardless of 'delivery' mode, is 'intrinsically related to long-term social, economic and educational factors' (Gorard et al 2003, 292). The emergent scholarship of networked learning at the time did essential work to emphasise that educational use of 'ICT' was primarily valuable as a means for putting community and an intellectual commons – rather than technology – at the heart of practice. McConnell's (1998) concept of 'networked collaborative learning', for example, defined it as:

the bringing together of learners via personal computers linked to the Internet, with a focus on them working as a 'learning community', sharing resources, knowledge, experience and responsibility through reciprocal collaborative learning. (McConnell 1998)

The UK 'University for Industry' programme of the early 2000s was, however, less interested in reciprocity and learner community than in the utilitarian skills and employability agenda, being the government's 'principal instrument for creating in the UK a highly-trained, globally competitive workforce' (Gorard et al 2003, 6). As such, it did have a vision of the 'good society' embedded within it: one in which wide access to learning through

life was made possible through new technology, enabling individuals to be educated throughout adulthood in order to maintain themselves as ‘employable’, therefore supporting not only individual but also societal economic flourishing.

This was ultimately, however, an early instance of the instrumentalisation of lifelong and networked learning in the interest of human capital development and economic growth – a shift which continues to dominate 21st century policy. While the rapidly growing community of networked learning scholars and practitioners were galvanised by the potential of digital technology to enable new forms of community and connection, and adult education proponents continued to emphasise lifelong learning as a human right with a strong, emancipatory social agenda, it has been the utilitarian and economic model that has gained most traction globally.

The language of skills development and economic growth that shapes contemporary policy visions in the UK is a striking example of the de-humanised and instrumentalising language currently used in relation to lifelong learning. The recent National AI Strategy (UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport and Office for Artificial Intelligence 2021) focuses on the ‘talent pipelines’ required to strengthen a newly-invigorated ‘innovation ecosystem’ supported by a ‘reconfigured skills system’ through which employers will be given more leeway to ‘generate the skills they need to grow’ (27). This kind of rhetoric around AI and lifelong learning is, as Eynon and Young (2021) have shown, common in wider policy perspectives within and beyond the UK, and notable for its disconnect with the perspectives not only of academics, but of commercial developers of AI products. Burying digital lifelong learning within a purely skills agenda leaves no space for what Levitas (2013) calls ‘non-capitalist envisioning’ – making it less about ‘the education of hope or desire’ and more ‘an exercise in social and ideological control’ (136). The current overarching context and imaginary driving digital education may primarily be the ‘neoliberal utopian blueprint’ (Van Dermijnsbrugge and Chatelier 2022, 11), but that makes it all the more critical that we work to imagine otherwise.

Scholarship in networked learning continues to support this re-imagining via a consistent, research-led emphasis on the entangled and emergent relation between humans and technology, and by its focus on the power of reciprocity, collaboration and action, which might be seen as showing a utopian impulse:

A commitment to collaborative inquiry and joint action in the face of shared challenges raises questions about knowledge, values and action, learning and doing, meaning-making, negotiation, shared projects and praxis, scale, scope, pace and duration and the capabilities needed to shape a world worth living in. (Networked Learning Editorial Collective 2021)

If this broader intellectual project of networked learning is to ‘shape a world worth living in’, it also needs to consider the nature of those who might inhabit such a world, and the way in which these might support both human and planetary flourishing. This leads us to the ontological mode of Levitas’s utopian method.

Ontology: becoming incomputable

The ontological mode of utopia as method considers the ways of being that are assumed and enabled within political programmes and social imaginaries:

[It] addresses the question of what kind of people particular societies develop and encourage. What is understood as human flourishing, what capabilities are valued, encouraged and genuinely enabled, or blocked and suppressed, by specific existing or potential social arrangements: we are concerned here with the historical and social determination of human nature. (Levitas 2013, 153)

Utopia as method does not essentialise ‘human nature’ but does recognise it, seeking to understand how it is constituted, and how it might be constituted better. In networked learning, this concern with the ontological is often framed in terms of relations rather than with ‘human nature’ as such, highlighting the ontological implications of post-digital and more-than-human ways of understanding, and opening up ‘questions about trust, power, identity, belonging, difference, affection, reciprocity, solidarity, commitment and time’ (Networked Learning Editorial Collective 2021).

This final point – time – is a good place to start in terms of an ontological analysis of digital and networked learning. Thinking differently about time opens up space for radically different, utopian temporalities in education which allow us to glimpse alternative ways of being and desiring. Webb et al (2020), for example, consider how chronological conceptions of time lock ‘educated subjects’ into particular imaginaries of educational futures. Focusing on learning analytics platforms using student data to track progress and manage and predict future performance, they critique the underpinning ‘chrono-logic’ of these, which measure time quantitatively, reifying a fixed relation between past, present and future (286). Countering ‘chronological time’ with alternative

formulations of lived time (time experienced as repetitive, cyclical, engaging both past and present simultaneously), they argue that the latter open up new possibilities for different kinds of technological intervention, and more open ontologies through which desire can be educated differently.

If utopia's temporality is one of 'suspension between the present and the future' (Levitas 2013, 180), its ontology is 'processual' – 'one of becoming, both at an individual and a social level' (180). What might this look like in relation to forms of digital education which push against datafication, quantification, standardisation and instrumentalisation to take human and planetary flourishing seriously? One route might be that taken by the networked learning scholars who explore in depth the relations between human and machine through theories of the postdigital, posthumanism and sociomateriality, and via forays into a 'politics of hacking' (Webb et al 2020, 294). These are approaches which work playfully with the possibility of 'becoming-subject' with machines. For example the early intervention in teacher automation, 'teacherbot' (Bayne 2015), enabled human and non-human teachers to work together in a roughly-hacked teaching assemblage which refused 'ontological hierarchy in the interest of productive play' (460). These are approaches which offer us ways of working with differently-entangled ways of being in networked learning spaces, and of acknowledging that the categories of 'human' and 'machine' are co-emergent with each other.

However, such a prospect is utopic – a source for human and planetary flourishing – only where the configuration of the 'machine' does not lie in the hands of profiteering big tech, and where there is meaningful democratic control over the 'means of prediction' (Kasy 2023, 1). In taking such an agenda forward, digital education might work more closely with forms of radical ecopedagogy which also counter the conventional educational project of 'becoming human' via a 'challenge [to] ontologized subject-object or human-Other divides' (Lloro-Bidart 2015, 140). These approaches recognise that there is no human flourishing without planetary flourishing, and that 'human' and 'biosphere' are also ontologically inseparable – 'ecopedagogy is unabashedly utopian' (Horsthemke 2018, 191). To understand the purpose of education as being to support individuals to become 'active and unfinished learners and makers of worlds' (Amsler and Facer 2017, 10) is also to work with the idea of the human as ontologically inseparable from a world also in the process of becoming.

Architecture: becoming differently technologised

In 'Utopia as Method', the task within the 'applied' or architectural mode 'is to imagine alternative ways of life that would be ecologically and socially sustainable and enable deeper and wider human happiness than is now possible' (Levitas 2013, 198). This mode diverges from purely sociological and analytic methods in that it demands 'speculation, judgement and suspension of disbelief on the part of both writer and reader' (197). It is a work of the imagination. In this sense it perhaps has a closer resonance with the speculative, creative methods which emerge from humanities and design-oriented disciplines and are growing in popularity with scholars in the broad field of networked learning (Nørgård et al 2019; Ross 2022; Dunne and Raby 2013), its goal being to work with the archaeological analysis and ontological framing to suspend disbelief and actively imagine alternatives within a holistic 'reconstitution of society'.

This final part of the paper therefore attempts to outline what a utopic architecture might look for networked learning, digital education, and education more broadly. As Jandric and Ford (2022), writing in the context of postdigital ecopedagogy, remind us: 'we need new utopias' (3). Continuing with the link between networked learning and radical ecopedagogy opens productive space for such new imaginings. In their move to integrate ecopedagogy with postdigital theory, Jandric and Ford acknowledge the roots of the former in the work of Illich, Freire and the critical pedagogy movement, while at the same time working to actively 'reinvent ecopedagogies in the light of recent sociotechnological developments' and the reconfiguration of human-machine-planet relations over the course of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Such a reconfiguration includes taking account of the ontological turn toward emergence, acknowledging 'the endless indeterminacies of the postdigital age, the crossing and hybridization of borders between the human and nonhuman, the analog and digital, the subject and object' (7).

Ecopedagogy in this formulation remains distinct from education for sustainable development or environmental and outdoor pedagogy in its explicit and holistic refusal of capitalism, and its recognition of a more-than-human ontology – it is a more complete reimagining. However, in imagining a form of digital education which works against the 'paranoid humanisms' (Majaca and Parisi 2016) of anthropocentric, ecocidal late capitalism we must acknowledge that we are in a tight spot. Digital education in its current form is dependent on material infrastructures which might be seen as being inseparable from the 'catastrophic operations of global capitalism' (Crary 2022, 5). It also embeds forms of practice which have been significantly co-opted by neoliberal policy agendas and colonising norms of knowledge production, as we saw in the 'archaeology' section of this paper.

Contemporary programmes of 'digital transformation' of education rarely take account of the planetary health imperative to cut back, reduce and streamline organisational uses of digital technology, or consider how we might

need to re-imagine the organisation of current teaching practice in the interests of planetary flourishing. Abundance in perpetuity is generally assumed. However scholars in networked learning and digital education are starting to imagine what a counter-move might look like. Selwyn (2023), for example, outlines a set of strategies for re-imagining digital education from the perspective of ‘digital degrowth’. Such a move would require us to ‘forcibly talk about ways of doing education technology differently’, with an emphasis on acknowledging restraint in the use of digital technologies as a ‘defiantly progressive’ move, and a willingness to ‘radically rethink education technology in terms of a social movement with collective benefits’ (3). It would require a shift toward ‘simplicity, slowing-down, and a foregrounding of local approaches toward coproduction and sharing’ (4). Macgilchrist (2021) imagines a future for educational technology in terms of ‘rewilding’ – a vision for ‘wilder, muddier edtech futures’ which she frames explicitly as a form of ‘concrete utopia’ (Bloch 1986). In Macgilchrist’s vision over-consumption, extraction and over-use of digital technology give way to deceleration, attention to ‘new growth among the toxic wreckage of the world’, regeneration and recuperation (no page). She is clear that sustainability of technology devices and infrastructures is only one element of this wilder, better future for digital education – we also need to think again about the practices of digital education and networked learning, and the forms of human flourishing they support.

Shared stewardship of technology and its organisation through ‘collective democratic processes’ (Selwyn 2023), the return of personal learning networks and community-based learning, and – most fundamentally – the dissolution of educational institutions as we currently understand them in favour of forms of distributed knowledge-sharing (for example, Connell 2019) all open up glimpses of educational possibility beyond the dystopias of the present. Knowledge-sharing in the form of ‘threads’, or movements, beyond and outside the (arguably) broken institutions of formal education in the global North is a theme developed by Sarah Amsler, who has consistently written on how the organisation of learning ‘outside hegemonic institutions and their regimes of recognition, worth and value’ (2019, 927) opens up new possibilities for democratic education beyond European modernity (926).

That the utopic horizons of an alternative ‘global knowledge politics’ (Amsler and Facer 2017, 12) lie to the South, in autonomous movements and indigenous and diverse knowledges is a proposition increasingly taken up in digital education and networked learning research. For example Gallagher (2019) highlights how edtech policy in sub-Saharan Africa – focused on the ‘massive scaling of educational provision’ (41) via technology adoption and the ‘redesigning of local pedagogy toward global indicators...and other supranational policy pressures’ (41) is undermining local educational autonomy and standardising it within a global, marketised ‘new normal’. As a counter to this, Gallagher emphasises the vital need to respect and amplify ‘local educational and technological practices’ through which new, ‘horizontalist’ imaginaries of digital education can emerge (48).

Re-thinking education in these terms is not just about tweaks to curricula or teaching methods, but about a fundamental re-structuring and re-organisation away from institutions as we currently understand them. Such a project would involve a commitment to a fundamental re-constitution of society.

Conclusion

The architecture for digital education utopia outlined above touches on aspects of its material infrastructures, models of knowledge production and geographies. From these, we can begin to craft a set of implications for the way we work as academics, teachers, students and researchers. While much of the power of utopia as method lies in its acknowledgement of the political power of imagining differently, Levitas is clear that she see utopia as ‘operating at the level of experience, not merely cognition, encouraging the sense that it does not have to be like this, it could be otherwise’ (Levitas 2011, 143). Utopia is about what we can imagine, but also about what we can do.

This paper has sketched out how, as researchers, teachers, academics and students of networked learning we might build toward a version of utopia based on justice and planetary health by excluding and refusing edtech’s most toxic systems and practices, while organising for and demanding fairer, better, more democratic technology infrastructures in our institutions. We can explicitly recognise in our practice the negative implications of unbridled technology use for planetary health, and actively advocate for care, restraint and renewability in the way we use technology to teach. We can engage diverse knowledges and perspectives in our teaching, allowing counter-hegemonic thinking into our own ways of understanding and our own knowledge projects. We can advocate for change within our institutions, and speak confidently about alternative ways of understanding what these institutions might be. We can actively build local, collective and co-designed educational technologies and approaches, while maintaining hope in the potential of technology as a means for achieving global solidarity and connection. Most importantly, perhaps, we can imagine new utopias, reflect on them collectively, discuss and acknowledge together the power of desiring differently.

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