

Denormalising the Future Digital University: A Feminist and Decolonial Perspective

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Abstract

Universities have become increasingly dependent from digital platforms and AI-assisted learning environments, with unprecedented investments in educational technologies during the pandemic. Generative AI is now raising new promises of a radical transformation of education, with machine learning supporting academic writing and customised learning. It is not surprising that the most normalised narrative about the future university is that it will be highly automated and datafied. Grounded in feminist and decolonial theories, this short essay poses questions to explore alternative imaginaries to this narrative.

Feminist scholarship has contributed to epistemological relativism by questioning values that are embedded in techno-scientific knowledge production. It has pointed at the way rational modern subjectivity embraces homogeneity and denies difference, identifying equality with sameness. Adopting a feminist standpoint allows us to assess discursive-material attributes of technologies that are silencing differences. Critical/speculative questions following this approach could be: what does technology do in academic spaces? What are its political effects? How does/can it silence differences? Decolonial scholarship has shown how modernity is intricately linked with colonial logics, a relationship that is particularly evident in the rhetoric of progress and technological innovation. Most recently, it has stressed how digital technologies and AI shall be assessed in terms of their potential to oppress people and increase inequality. Decolonial thinkers focus on the subjectivities of those who are involved and consider institutions as a space for political action. Critical/speculative questions that go in this direction will ask: in the benefit of whom are technologies used in academic spaces? What are the invisible risks of these uses in terms of social justice? How do digital technologies reproduce social oppression?

We argue that the dialogue between these theories can allow us to make the effort of *denormalising* the role of digital technologies in the future university and understanding how structural change might occur.

Keywords

Digital education. Future of the university. Feminist studies. Decolonial studies.

Introduction

In recent years, unprecedented investments in a data-driven model of university and automation of educational delivery have changed the profile of Higher Education (HE) institutions, with consequences on teachers' de-professionalisation and loss of academic values (Clark, 2023). The pivotal switch to remote teaching during the pandemic has further legitimised the pervasive presence of digital technologies, generating a plethora of techno-solutionist discourses (Morozov, 2013), with teachers and students being rarely in the position to know how their data is used (Beetham et al., 2022). At the moment of this writing, generative AI is sparking new promises for HE, with scholars stating that chatbots will drastically improve academic writing by providing intelligent data analysis, and increase efficiency of learning, assessment, personalised materials and tutoring (Wu, 2023). This paper moves from a critical examination of the hyped imaginary related to a technology-driven future university, where a central focus is set on the role of AI, digital tools, platforms, and predictive analytics (Means, 2018). In line with the tradition of speculative research, we aim at actively seeking alternative imaginaries for the future university (Facer, 2022; Ross, 2023). Our proposal is to do so with a theoretical frame based on feminist and decolonial theories. These two perspectives have in common their understanding of politics as distributed decision-making activity, which takes place in a variety of settings and through multiple interactions and struggles of power (Fry & Tlostanova, 2021). This entails examining the political qualities of technologies, that is, the specific forms of power and authorities that technologies hold (Winner, 1980).

In academic spaces, apparently neutral tools such as digital technologies bring about specific material and spatial configurations with political effects. Studying the university through this lens can allow us to question homogenising and universalising processes enacted by of a technology-driven model of HE and rediscuss the narratives that are driving not only the future but also the present of the university.

Criticalities behind the technology hype

The idea of a technology-driven university rests on underlying assumptions that have extensively been examined by critical studies. First and foremost, technology is associated with research innovation, societal progress and development, as well as transformation of obsolete practices and anachronistic educational processes (Pischetola, 2021). The narrative of a highly technologised university unfolds the promise of change, which will depend on technologies more than on human relationships, despite scarce research evidence about the improvement of education through digital technologies. Second, technologies are often assumed to offer more equitable learning environments (Clark, 2023), to create democratic spaces, to bring “salvation of a free society” (Winner, 1980, p.122). Critical scholarship has extensively shown how technologies are shaped by social interests and economic forces (Macgilchrist, 2019).

Whereas previous research has sought to problematise how digital technologies in HE have stabilised certain ideas and marginalised others, this paper introduces a new angle of speculation on how structural change might occur in the future. In this perspective, we need to make the effort of *denormalising* the existing narratives and interrogate their homogenising and universalising political effects.

Speculative research

Imagining how to frame a ‘good’ future for HE has long inspired counter-dominant discourses based on different values and assumptions. Szadkowski and Krzeski (2019) have suggested that there is a need to think politically about the future university, and they defended the ideal of a university based on the ‘common good’. In the same line of thought, Barnett and Bengsten (2020) have highlighted that the ‘knowing effort’ is precisely what defines the core purpose and spirit of the university. These reflections have generated a whole field of studies that focus on the future of the university as ‘yet to be decided’ (Ross, 2023).

Speculative research methods are the most relevant contribution to the field, with scholars stating the need for reflexive imagination that is comprised in the “space between critique and desire” (Facer, 2022, p.204), or between “the mental and the material” (Jasanoff, 2016, p.329), to explore the political power that academics hold in imagining the future differently. Set against this background, foundational questions arise for new speculations: What are the purposes of the university? What do we mean by ‘good’ university? How do we imagine its futures? Where are the politics enacted?

Feminist studies and the critique of homogeneity

Feminist scholarship has slowly moved from a focus on social disadvantage to broader topics related to social structure, power relations and inequality. As such, it has greatly contributed to epistemological relativism, by questioning cultural values, interests and conceptual frameworks that are embedded in scientific knowledge production (Harding, 2008). The modern scientific reason associated with technology focuses on understanding the functioning of nature for productive ends. Intelligence, rationality, logics, and abstraction can be seen as means to homogeneity, as they create a common ideal of rational modern subjectivity which is deeply entangled with technology. This is reflected, for example, in the portrayal of a singular homogeneous group of ‘have-nots’ within the discourse of digital inclusion, a rhetoric that is reinforcing educational and social inequalities (Clark, 2023). On the other hand, beyond apparent neutrality and objectivity, technologies carry with them specific values, theoretical structures, choices of design and language that contribute to the suppression differences, while reinforcing Western cultural imperialism (Pischetola, 2021).

Feminist studies understand this search of homogeneity as denial of difference. They expose the modern division between mental/material labour as a process of social oppression. They point at the way modern thinking identifies equality with sameness and difference with deviance (Young, 2022). Furthermore, feminist theorists underline that the categories used in conventional humanist research are not social constructions but result from specific material assemblages that produce race, gender, sexuality, and ability as human naturalised attributes (Butler, 1993).

Adopting a ‘feminist standpoint’ means giving space to pluralism and exposing the dominant discursive-material practices that are silencing difference. This entails producing research questions that are outside of the representational logic (Snaza & Tarc, 2019), that is, affirmative questions that recognise specific needs of social groups and actively seek to undermine oppression, in what Freire (1996) called a process of liberation. Ultimately,

feminist theory defends a politics of difference, as an everyday lived practice that embraces the complex struggle of many interests, including the interests of those who were historically disqualified and dehumanised (Fry and Tlostanova, 2021).

On these grounds, we need to analyse the narrative of a technology-driven future university in terms of critical and affirmative research questions, such as: What are homogenising doings of digital technology in academic spaces? How do digital platforms, machine learning, and generative AI reinforce a normalised gaze on social categories? How do biases and stereotypes embedded in technologies silence differences?

Decolonial thinking and the critique of universality

The contemporary decolonial turn in HE has brought attention to the fixed ontological assumptions of the human as “a normative and unquestioned category of existence anchoring educational philosophy and theory in the global North” (Snaza & Tarc, 2019, p.2). Prevailing disciplinary divisions have been constructed entirely around a particular conception of the human being, naturalising it as the universal human being. Sylvia Wynter’s seminal work on decolonial thinking shows how education globally has structured a specific anti-Black/anti-Indigenous worldview that appears to be an economic colonial project (Wynter, 1995).

This theoretical perspective has shown how modernity is intricately with colonial logics, a relationship that is nowadays reproduced in the entangled histories of capitalism, Eurocentrism, patriarchy, racism, and ecological degradation (Means, 2018). In this view, technology shall be critically assessed in terms of its potential to limit and oppress people in different parts of the world in different ways, contributing to increase inequality and injustice (Gammelgaard et al., 2023). We need to reckon that technology will always be biased, in that it defines who has access, how contents are framed, and to what extent the uses of data are transparent.

Decolonial theory can thus offer a very insightful perspective on the role of technologies in HE, as it shifts the focus from teaching tools and strategies to the subjectivities of those who are involved (Hayes et al., 2021). In this perspective, it considers teaching as a space for ethical and political action, where meaningful pedagogical encounters take place (Freire, 1996). On the other hand, however, it also acknowledges the relevance of institutions to justice, where complex consequences emerge from adopting “a narrowly static social ontology” (Young, 2022, p. 28). In other words, as long as the perspective of the privileged is perceived as neutral, objective, and universal, institutionalised oppression will not be challenged (Gordon, 2021). As long as a hierarchical division of labour reinforces exploitation (Young, 2022), academic spaces will not produce social justice.

Research questions that seek a politics of justice should then ask: In the benefit of whom are technologies used/included/supported in academic spaces? What are the invisible risks they pose in terms of social justice and inequality? How do digital technologies reproduce social oppression?

Conclusive remarks

In conclusion, denormalising the unified idea of a technology-driven future university allows us to rediscuss issues that are made invisible through this narrative, namely homogenising and universalising processes. The dialogue between feminist and decolonial theories reveals two key issues for future speculations.

First, we need to further address the narrative of a technology-driven university as performative, that is, looking into the ways it creates particular social effects, favours some interests over others, and reinforces suppression of differences, based on a universal idea of Man (Wynter, 1995). This will allow us to seek a politics of difference and a politics of justice within academia.

Second, we need to place particular importance on institutional work, as the political properties of digital technologies cannot be conceived outside institutionalised spheres (Winner, 1980). This is the first step for reclaiming collective decisional power about the future of the university, to whatever extent this is within our power (Young, 2022).

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