

Reclaiming Disruption

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Editor's Note

This was originally posted to [Karen Cangialosi's blog](#) on June 30, 2017.

One of the problems with being a slow writer, is that as you are in the middle of putting something together, you keep reading and wanting to add more. (I blame twitter for this).

Just after returning from Domains17, I started reading tweets from the New Media Consortium 2017 conference (which I didn't attend), then the transcript from [Audrey Watters keynote](#). And the lurking ghost in my mind materialized with her words:

"No matter the predictions we make about disruption, in time everything in ed-tech becomes indistinguishable from the learning management system." AW

Of course we want our DoOO project to succeed and for many students to engage. But the fear that the 'administration' or the college 'marketing and communications' office or whoever, will want to take this project from us and turn it into something else if we become too successful, too visible or too widespread has been haunting me from the beginning.



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This ghost has of course plagued others that have come before me. Martha Burtis, in her Domains17 keynote, '[Neither Locked Out, Nor In](#)', asks: "How do we free our students from the shackles of corporate and commercial Web spaces without creating some new kind of shackle?" As someone who has been employed by an institution for a long time, but considers herself an activist, I am accustomed to working with [One foot in, One foot out](#). We become at least semi-comfortable with this quagmire, we use Trojan horse solutions. (Over the years, my co-conspirators and I have effectively wheeled in a lot of Trojan horses). But only those of us with privilege (like tenure) can even do that. Yet another paradox.

"We prefer to think of ourselves as professors or pedagogues or scholars or students, not as consumers or users." AW

But my worry about our DoOO project being co-opted by the dominant systems, the consumer-driven forces, feels especially frightening now, because more than ever before, Higher Ed IS A CONSUMER-DRIVEN BUSINESS. Even here, in spite of our designation as a "public" college. Or maybe especially here, BECAUSE of our small, poorly funded public college status with far fewer resources and high student debt (only 8% of our funding comes from the state). So we are fairly low in the higher education [caste system](#) (a la Bryan Alexander), and efficiency and productivity drive everything we do now.

And Silicon Valley ideology creeps in more and more every day.

"That is to say in my mind at least, Silicon Valley ideology – libertarian, individualist, consumerist, capitalist – seeks to mediate all relationships: social, professional, civic, familial." AW

The ideologies that we hope will shape our DoOO project, when we use words like inclusion, connection, community, agency, access, contribution could be undermined, transmuted into things that we did not intend. This keeps me up at night.

"New technologies, and the ideologies that underpin them, have brought the language of efficiency and productivity out of the workplace and into the classroom and into the home – into the realm of reproductive labor. Everything becomes a data-point to be tracked and quantified and analyzed and adjusted as (someone deems) necessary." AW

And especially kicks the bees in my bonnet ([HT Tanya D E](#)) about institutional 'assessment'. Because really it's about surveillance, isn't it? And we have "confused surveillance for care". I am haunted by the knowledge that Domains, Domains of our Own, or whatever we call this thing that we are doing, is/are not immune to being turned into an electronic portfolio system that can be 'assessed'. The distinction between assessment and surveillance seems really blurry to me.

I take Audrey Watters work (not just in this piece, but in all of her writing) as a call to action. If there are those of us that want a different educational narrative, a more compassionate ideology focused on actual care, and real 'transformation' based on voices that promote these ideas- instead of the now dominate, capitalistic, greed-based, corporate scheming that is currently underlying the 'ideologies that underpin our technologies'- then we need to be explicit in our work and our writing about this, we need to organize together to promote a different kind of messaging, we need to openly fight against this mechanistic and profit-based for the sake of profit mentality that is driving not just educational technology,

not just education generally, not just (jeezuz!) parenting – but EVERYTHING that we do, that we believe in, that we believe is our reason for existing on the planet in the first place.

EVERY SINGLE WORD OF THIS. "Thinking Dangerously: The Role of [#HigherEd](#) in Authoritarian Times" by [@HenryGiroux](#) <https://t.co/tviNDTo8bE>

– Robin DeRosa (@actualham) [June 28, 2017](#)

YES. EVERY SINGLE WORD OF THIS. (Please go read the whole thing, there is so much more there than what I can include here and ALL of it is critical).

[Thinking Dangerously: The Role of Higher Education in Authoritarian Times by Henry Giroux](#)

This brilliant piece helps illuminate the links between education and real democracy that Audrey Watters is constantly talking about.

"At the core of thinking dangerously is the recognition that education is central to politics and that a democracy cannot survive without informed citizens. Critical and dangerous thinking is the precondition for nurturing the ethical imagination that enables engaged citizens to learn how to govern rather than be governed. Thinking with courage is fundamental to a notion of civic literacy that views knowledge as central to the pursuit of economic and political justice. Such thinking incorporates a set of values that enables a polity to deal critically with the use and effects of power, particularly through a developed sense of compassion for others and the planet. Thinking dangerously is the basis for a formative and educational culture of questioning that takes seriously how imagination is key to the practice of freedom. Thinking dangerously is not only the cornerstone of critical agency and engaged citizenship, it's also the foundation for a working democracy." HG

We all need to become braver, more dangerous thinkers like Audrey Watters. And more so, we need to be willing to speak up, step up and take risks like she does. We need to teach so that our students learn how to think dangerously. I believe that Domain of One's Own projects need to be about this.

"Education is also vital to the creation of individuals capable of becoming critical social agents willing to struggle against injustices and develop the institutions that are crucial to the functioning of a substantive democracy. One way to begin such a project is to address the meaning and role of higher education (and education in general) as part of the broader struggle for freedom." HG

YES. This is the conversation I believe we should be having. How do we address the meaning and role of higher education as a struggle for freedom? We have done an excellent job at pointing out the problems, but I believe we need to be more consciously and actively working on solutions. Higher Education is currently imploding in many ways. The time is now to redirect it, reshape it, make it become what most of us have always wanted it to be- A place for the "creation of individuals capable of becoming critical social agents willing to struggle against injustices".

It's time to not just reclaim the web, but to Reclaim 'Disruption'. That word needs to be taken back, (the way many of us reclaimed the word 'dyke' a long time ago). Give it teeth, make it have some power. Can DoOO be the pathway to truly transmuting higher education? Can it provide the culture chamber for "an educational culture of questioning"? Where students can be nurtured and allowed to "deal critically with the use and effects of power,

particularly through a developed sense of compassion for others and the planet"? THIS IS KEY.

Reclaiming Disruption means that we need to keep raising 'in your face' questions and work towards answering them.

Lora Taubs in her [Reclaiming the Web](#) post asks:

"Where are the radical possibilities within higher ed? How can we connect Domains to those initiatives? To civic engagement? Global studies? LGBTQ initiatives? Teacher Ed? Departments with social justice missions? Initiatives like Intergroup Dialogue? Where are the spaces/partners working to advance social solidarities? And how can we propose Domains as an ally, an amplifier, to these efforts?" LT

And just about everything that Jesse Stommel and Sean Michael Morris ever said. ("NO, you don't own your own domain if I grade it." JS for example)

And when we're thinking about WHO is doing this work, shaping our ideologies, we need to think about who ISN'T shaping our ideologies now, who hasn't been invited to the table, and why. We need to focus actively on making sure they get there. (One of the things that stuck in my mind from domains17 was the opening night gathering at the Retro Flashback pub. A fun place filled with arcade/video games that you could play as much as you want for free. Tanya and I tried a few games and then realized that we didn't really know the rules for any of them. Then Tanya, Sundi, Martha, me and some other women were chatting, we felt this familiar feeling, and then named it. This is a boys place; a white boys place. Yeah, some of us noticed.)

Reclaiming Disruption means that we need to disrupt the 'audit culture' of education. It means to prevent students from becoming trained pigeons.

"Audit cultures support conservative educational policies driven by market values and an unreflective immersion in the crude rationality of a data-obsessed market-driven society; as such, they are at odds with any viable notion of a democratically inspired education and critical pedagogy. In addition, viewing public and higher education as democratic public spheres necessitates rejecting the notion that they should be reduced to sites for training students for the workforce — a reductive vision now being imposed on public education by high-tech companies such as Facebook, Netflix and Google, which want to encourage what they call the entrepreneurial mission of education, which is code for collapsing education into training." HG

Maybe Reclaiming Disruption means that our domains projects need to be a sort of civil disobedience of the web. Where we, as teachers, cultivate the compassion in our students but let go of all of the control, so they can disrupt our institutions and create pathways to freedom outside of them.

"Educators, students and others concerned about the fate of higher education need to mount a spirited attack against the managerial takeover of the university that began in the late 1970s with the emergence of a market-driven ideology..." HG



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