

Review: The War on Learning: Gaining in the Digital University

By Elizabeth Losh

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Losh, Elizabeth. *The War on Learning: Gaining Ground in the Digital University*. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2014. xi,302 pp. ISBN: 9780262027380, hardback. US \$29.95. Also available: ISBN : 9780262323246, e-book, US \$20.95.

More than ever, today's educators work in a technology-based environment equipped with interactive resources, connected with PowerPoint courses, using plagiarism-detection aids and unlimited online resources reunited on a single web site. On the other hand, the 21st century students facing them habitually come to class with their laptops and smartphones, when not following courses from elsewhere through distance education devices. This is exactly the author's main setting and her argument from the first pages of *War on Learning*: the digital university has consistently changed the way people are now learning in what she coins as "scholarly technofuturism" (p. 8). Right from the start, Elizabeth Losh (from the University of California at San Diego) reminds us that many of these technology-layered initiatives can often fail "...because they treat education as a product rather than a process..." (p. 8). Moreover, these new technologies for education are usually manufactured in third-world countries by low income workers; their generalized uses in high-tuition universities have become common and seem almost inevitable in industrialised countries: "...they promote values of consumerism and consumption rather than other ideologies — such as intellectual development and scholarly participation — that don't fit with market models..." (p. 8).

Elizabeth Losh's *War on Learning* is obviously not a book for university professors wanting to add more flamboyant technology to their courses. Rather, it is a plea to bring back the fundamentals in humanism, pedagogy, and critical thinking into classrooms without eliminating every technology (p. 231). Within this context, technology has become a utopia, a mirage, even in the Third-World: "The visual rhetoric of need, anticipation, darkest Africa, and American techno-salvation for people of color is difficult to miss..." (p. 122). Citing the "One Laptop per Child Initiative", the author identifies new marketing strategies that target educators in what is already seen as the emerging markets for software corporations (p. 122). Issues of homogenization, standardization, and ultimately the race to the bottom are discussed as well.

Of course, *War on Learning* must not be seen as an anti-technology pamphlet or a nostalgic cry from an old professor incapable of adopting cutting-edge technologies. This is not the case. Quite the opposite, this author reflects on her own teaching experiences and her classes in *Second Life* (p. 188). Her whole message is delivered with nuance and countless quotes. Incidentally, the final pages adopt an optimistic tone and reaffirm a strong belief in efficient digital pedagogies (p. 239). In sum, *War on Learning* should not only be read by scholars in Educational Technology, advocates of on-line learning, or disciples of computers for education. In fact, any educator or thinker in fields such as sociology of education will find here an inspiring reflection about how technology and consumption can create new educational models that in the worst-case scenario would not allow a return to the “good old methods”. Graduate students in the philosophy of science and technology (but also in the sociology of science and media theory) would surely appreciate this innovative book.

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