

Educational Philosophy and Theory

Incorporating ACCESS

ISSN: 0013-1857 (Print) 1469-5812 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rept20>

Learning in the age of digital reason

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To cite this article: Jeremy Knox (2017): Learning in the age of digital reason, Educational Philosophy and Theory, DOI: [10.1080/00131857.2017.1410475](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1410475)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1410475>



Published online: 06 Dec 2017.



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BOOK REVIEW

Learning in the age of digital reason, edited by Petar Jandrić, Rotterdam, Sense Publishers, 2017, xvi + 422 pp., € 41.65 (ebook), ISBN 9463510761, 978-9463510769

Learning in the Age of Digital Reason is a collection of impressively rich and wide-ranging conversations between Petar Jandrić and a notable line-up of educators, theorists, historians, artists and activists. Sixteen engaging dialogues deliver the reader through an array of themes that, through their collection here, convey the diverse issues to which this field of 'digital learning' has tangible and important connections: history and philosophy; media studies; education; practice and activism; and the arts. The interlocutors are varied, and Jandrić describes the collaboration as a 'party', and in at least one place, a 'dance'. Weaving through this eclectic get-together, the reader discovers insightful reminders of the histories (and futures) of education technology from Larry Cuban, an elaborate post-Marxist critique and elucidation of the Anthropocene from McKenzie Wark, a sharp outline of critical posthumanism from Sian Bayne, ruminations on countercultures and the personal empowerment afforded by digital networks from Howard Rheingold, and a boisterous expedition through media theory and science fiction from Paul Levinson. The sequencing of the various dialogues (although Jandrić suggests that this should be 'taken lightly', p. 359)—from established disciplinary areas to the more contemporary, and from older interlocutors to the younger—establishes a structure and chronology to the affair. Ultimately, this medley of conversations demonstrates how education research can be so much more than merely the discussion or measurement of 'learning', and any 'technologizing' (as discussed with Larry Cuban, p. 13) seems to connect educational concerns even more substantially with the pressing social, economic and political issues of our times.

The philosophical and theoretical territory in this book is broad, but generally within the domains of critical theory, critical pedagogy, and (post-)Marxist traditions. In this sense, it is infused with the kind of analyses that are lacking in much of the discourse around 'learning in the digital age', and it offers a worthwhile compendium of perspectives that would be of immense value to any scholar searching for avenues for research in this area. The straightforward significance of this book is in the sheer range of critical views on show. This seems particularly important for digital education, which tends to be viewed 'as a purely technical concern' (in Conversation with Sian Bayne, p. 195), and where technology itself is 'rooted in a kind of mad instrumentalized culture of positivism and technological rationality' (in Conversation with Henry Giroux, p. 141). While these conversations will not disappoint the critically minded reader, they will also no doubt appeal to those interested in a leftist resistance to consumerist, neoliberal and managerial visions of education. Here also, one gains a sense of the personal mission that underpins this book; an assembly of encounters with influential writers, colleagues, and friends that conveys Jandrić's diverse scholarship, and his politics of interdisciplinarity.

Philosophical weight comes from Conversation with Andrew Feenberg, who, amongst a plethora of other insights, emphasises his views on the marginalisation of the philosophy of technology within the formal Anglo-Saxon discipline, and calls for more open academic communities and integrated ways of working. As Feenberg suggests, the Internet, 'like the whole field of communication, is a latecomer and it too is not an object of a single established discipline. Interdisciplinarity is essential in such fields for this historical reason'. This appears to be one of the key threads that underpins this work: a necessity for this assortment of dialogues and ideas, but also a call to take it seriously; to draw together the medley of conversations into something of a united educational critique. Indeed, alongside the clear

positioning of critical voice for and of the precariat (see Conversation with Henry Giroux), the 'poor and the powerless' (see Conversation with Peter MacLaren, p. 185), the 'unschoolers' (see Conversation with Astra Taylor), and the activists (see Conversation with Marcell Mars and Tomislav Medak), there is an intentional informality about the way this collection is presented; something more akin to Wark's 'low' rather than 'high' theory (one of the conversations with Wark takes place in a café in Queens, New York).

However, concurrently, one is also aware of the deep traditions that are apparent in the form of this book. Dialogue is that most established of (Western) philosophical forms, and serves here to not only underscore the significance and authority of the critical perspectives on offer, but also to demonstrate the productive ways in which this process of exchange is able to exhibit, define, and shape the understanding. The conversation with Michael Peters pays particular attention to dialogue; attesting to the long and varied traditions in the Western canon, and advancing the much less antiquated idea of a dynamic and ever-changing vehicle for thought and for engagement' (p. 31). This, then, is one of the principal strengths of the book: to enervate an established form through vivid, interdisciplinary critique. The form is, of course, not something lost on Jandrić, or his interlocutors Christine Sinclair and Hamish Macleod, as the fine finale demonstrates. Here, the complexities of academic publishing are also added to the dialogic frame:


The majority of conversations have been (p/re)published in various journals, different formats ... and several languages, so they have been shaped by many different, often anonymous editors and reviewers. (p. 357)

What better way to highlight the intertextual challenges of presence, authenticity and authorship, without even so much as a mention of the digital. At the very least, the afterword serves as a noteworthy account of the (thought) processes behind the assembly of the book, and at best, a valuable reflection on the subtle intellectual layers surfaced in the dialogic method: a coming together of form and process, which while being, one might say, as authentically academic as they come, also works to elucidate the meaning-making processes through which critical understanding of learning-in-the-digital-age is developed across multiple fronts, and in defiance of established disciplinary boundaries.

Conversation with Henry Giroux provides theoretical prestige to the theme of boundaries, rearticulating the concept of 'border crossings' (2005) towards the questions of digitally mediated learning, and pedagogical potentials of the public sphere. However, a question more fundamental to Giroux's concept seems to motivate the general approach to this collection of multidisciplinary discussions: 'How do you theorise the political in a world where borders are really pushing people back into all kinds of silos' (p. 140). For Jandrić, this trans-/inter- disciplinarity is undoubtedly political. In extolling the virtues of *homo universalis* in the afterword, he reminds us that a 'shift in focus from epistemology to politics of disciplinarity is crucial for the contemporary project of collective intelligence' (p. 374). There is for the author, one realises, a palpable delight in any of the 'epistemological anarchy' (Feyerabend (1970/1993), as discussed in Conversation with Michael Peters) that you, dear reader, may have experienced in the previous chapters. Indeed, as Michael Peters suggests, '[t]he structure of conversation is unpredictable, often disjunctive, highly interactive, although it may also be simply a set of parallel structures that touch occasionally' (p. 32). This is the revelry that Jandrić presents to us in this book, and the pleasure and value of its reading lie in embracing the unruly gathering of voices. They, with you, may only touch occasionally, but it is truly worth it when it happens.

References

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1410475>

