Online Education, God, and the Stance of the Nonbeliever

Heather Greenhalgh-Spencer

Texas Tech University

In "Technology, Attention and Education," it is David Lewin's intent to push against binaries and explore the possibility that, because attention can be virtual, online education may have the potential to be truly educative, rather than just a shoddy experimentation aimed at getting money. I am not convinced by his "push" against binaries, or by his claims about online education and bricks-and-mortar education. I will say more about this later.

What Lewin's essay *did* do was allow me to name one of the reasons I have felt so uneasy with the binary between online education and bricks-and-mortar education. Lewin uses discourse steeped in religion and the mystical to talk about traditional classroom spaces; and this discourse sets up a binary whereby those who participate in traditional education have inherently mystical and transcendent experiences, and those who participate and even laud online education usually do not. While I applaud Lewin's *desire* to question the binary of the "pure" educational experience and the technologically-mediated experience, he does so by using language that cements binaries through a structuration of traditional education as transcendent and online education as always suspect and mired in capitalism.[1] I, too, want to push against binaries, but as a practitioner — and even celebrant — of online education, Lewin's work *positions* me as a nonbeliever; I am once again pulled into the binary of those who do traditional education contra those who do online education. The language associated with religion, used in this essay and others, only mires those who do online education ever deeper into a position of opposition. This discourse frames me as a heretic when I write about the pleasures, intimacies, connections, and possibilities of online education. Using religious or mystical discourse to talk about educative experiences produces binaries; it does not deconstruct them.

In this essay, I first focus on the ways that the binary between online education and bricks-and-mortar education is framed in religious terms. I then use my stance as a nonbeliever — as a skeptic — to challenge some of Lewin's claims. Finally, I explore what it might mean to deconstruct the religious discourse that shapes the online binary and move toward a stance of openness and multiplicity.

Religious Language

The discursive turn toward language associated with religion, God, or a mystical experience exists in many papers that extol the virtues of education in a bricks-and-mortar classroom as opposed to an online classroom. Lewin's work is not unique in its usage of these terms. However, because my essay is fashioned as a response to this specific author, I will draw my examples of this discursive turn using quotations taken from Lewin's essay.

Lewin is explicit about equating the bricks-and-mortar classroom with religion or the mystical when he writes about our relationship with God as structured

through time and space; and, within this discussion, he argues that only bricks-and-mortar classrooms *are* structured through time and space. He draws on philosophy of religion to establish connections between a specific modality of education and religious experience.

Lewin also uses religious metaphor to describe the "profound possibility" of online education. He locates the positive possibilities of online education in the idea that, like a monk who can interiorize his meditative and religious practice, online students can draw their "attention" to learning in ways that may allow them to have an experience that counts as *real* education. This move toward advocating an attention that exists in the interior — in the mind — is another way he participates in binaries; in this case, the duality of mind/body. Lewin validates the idea that, when online, we become detached from bodies, time, and space, writing: "Where am I when I am online? Everywhere and nowhere?" He also suggests, "If online education overcomes spatio-temporal situatedness, it may also undo some essential qualitative dimension of spatio-temporality." According to Lewin, the "profound possibility" of online education seems to come from the mind's ability to draw attention, or have attention drawn, to multiple things, ideas or views — regardless of whether that attention is connected to spatio-temporality. And yet, this very claim of redemption is grounded in the idea that, once online, we have become unmoored from physicality, materiality, temporality, and embodiment.

Notice other uses of religious or mystical language used to describe bricks-and-mortar classrooms. Lewin applauds bricks-and-mortar classrooms by connecting them with "the irreducible significance of the physical encounter." He also claims there is an "uncanny quality of physical presence" and that "being physically face-to-face with students has a singular, irreducible pedagogical power." This type of language — irreducible, singular, uncanny — turns bricks-and-mortar education into a mystical experience, one that can only be had, apparently, if you are in the proper church.

Lewin also uses language connected with God or the Mystical to decry online education. He equates online education with "uncanny disengagement" as well as "existential disengagement," and also with "negating some aura of presence essential to the community of education." This discourse cements binaries and goes a long way toward inculcating an us-versus-them stance within the field of education.

My Stance as Nonbeliever

If bricks-and-mortar education is positioned as the producer of mystical experiences, and the antidote to the "dirtiness" of the capitalism "inherent" in online education, then anyone who affiliates, willingly, with online education is instantiated as a heretic, an apostate, a nonbeliever. And the stance of a nonbeliever is inherently skeptical — hopefully not mean or cruel — but most assuredly skeptical.

As a skeptic, a nonbeliever, I am not convinced by Lewin's claim to ambivalence and desire to push against binaries. Rather than talking about pedagogical strategies that erase the lines between online educative experiences and experiences that happen in bricks-and-mortar classrooms, Lewin situates online education as both less than and in opposition to bricks-and-mortar education. How can one claim ambivalence toward

online education and yet also write, "educational technology substitutes for actual and authentic personal engagement," or "the impetus to develop online education is founded, first and foremost, on economic rather than pedagogic concerns," or "online education contributes to a culture of individualized and consumerist learning that suppresses the examination of the purposes of education?" This type of language does not suggest an ambivalent stance.

As one positioned into the stance of the skeptic, I am also compelled to look into claims made by Lewin that don't seem quite right. The believer allows little inaccuracies or oversimplifications to go unchallenged. The skeptic questions. For example, I am concerned by, what I will claim here as, the misrepresentation of Katherine Hayles's work. Lewin suggests that Hayles is troubled by online education and the use of the digital because it can lead to an inability to think deeply. He draws on quotes from Hayles, not by reading Hayles, but by reading Stiegler's version of Hayles, so perhaps this is the root of the problem.

When Hayles talks about deep attention, hyper attention, and bringing them together synergistically, what she actually says is, "Whether the synaptic reconfigurations associated with hyper attention are better or worse than those associated with deep attention cannot be answered in the abstract. The riposte is obvious: Better for what? A case can be made that hyper attention is more adaptive than deep attention for many situations in contemporary developed societies.[2] In the article quoted by Stiegler, and in much of Hayles's work for the last several years, Hayles argues for a turn to pedagogical methods that embrace the digital. Hayles is an advocate for the turn toward digital humanities and pedagogies that draw on the digital. She gives examples of combining video games, social media, online collaborations, and the reading of the traditional canon, to create opportunities for deep and hyper attentive thinking together. The main thrust of Hayles's argument is expressed in this passage:

> Whether inclined toward deep or hyper attention, toward one side or another of the generational divide separating print from digital culture, we cannot afford to ignore the frustrating, zesty, and intriguing ways in which the two cognitive modes interact. Our responsibilities as educators, not to mention our position as practitioners of the literary arts, require nothing less.[3]

Her work is a good example of pushing against binaries toward hybridity and not, as Lewin claims, toward wringing one's hands over the ubiquity of digital media.

Furthermore, Lewin's use of information from Susan Greenfield in an article by *The Guardian* also seems disingenuous. He portrays Greenfield as an expert who stands in for multiple experts who are concerned about the ways that digital media are not just changing, but warping, our brains. In the article quoted by Lewin, where Greenfield *does* worry over what the use of digital media might mean for cognitive abilities, that same article also states, "Lady Greenfield has coined the term 'mind change' to describe differences that arise in the brain as a result of spending long periods of time on a computer. Many scientists believe it is too early to know whether these changes are a cause for concern."[4] Furthermore, this same article states:

> Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, a cognitive neuroscientist at University College London and co-author of the book *The Learning Brain*, agreed that more research was needed to know whether technology was causing significant changes in the brain. "We know nothing at all about how

the developing brain is being influenced by video games or social networking and so on.… We can only really know how seriously to take this issue once the research starts to produce data. So far, most of the research on how video games affect the brain has been done with adult participants and, perhaps surprisingly, has mostly shown positive effects of gaming on many cognitive abilities," she said.[5]

In my position as skeptic — the position of nonbeliever — I find these elisions to be problematic.

Why This Matters

How we speak about practices, about modalities, about theories, matters. It matters if we use a language that produces and validates a binary of believers and nonbelievers. It puts us all in positions that are less open to each other. If we automatically assume that there is some divine experience inherent in the bricks-and-mortar classroom — that the nature of bricks-and-mortar spaces include some irreducible quality that is both wondrous and ineffably good — it makes bricks-and-mortar education above questioning, above learning something from online education, above examination without assuming a heretical or apostate stance. Furthermore, this religious or mystical discourse positions those who do not adopt wholeheartedly the dogma — of the irreducibly positive power of bricks-and-mortar spaces in comparison to online spaces — into the position of heretic, apostate, or nonbeliever. This stance makes it difficult for practitioners of online education to feel open to the questions and challenges that can come from proponents of traditional classroom spaces. Neither side is open to learning from each other because they are positioned as having "a side."

Truly pushing against binaries involves more than pointing out binaries; it involves a change in language and a change in practice. It involves the erasure or troubling of lines that demarcate online education from bricks-and-mortar education, blurring them to the point where it is hard to say when it is online education and when it is bricks-and-mortar education. The great potential for hybridity, ubiquity, deep thinking about the digital, and simultaneous connections among and between online and physical spaces is precisely what I find so intriguing.

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1. In the original version of this essay, I did not immediately acknowledge the work that Lewin does to try to take a more ambivalent position.

2. Katherine Hayles, "Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes," in *Profession* (2007): 8, http://www.jessicapressman.com/CAT_winter2013/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Hayles-attention.pdf.

3. Ibid., 12.

4. Ian Sample, "Oxford Scientist Calls for Research on Technology 'Mind Change,'" *The Guardian*, September 14, 2010, http://www.theguardian.com/science/2010/sep/14/oxford-scientist-brain-change, accessed February 5, 2015.

5. Ibid.