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Assembling an Ed-Tech Imaginary: Telling Data Stories About Higher Education After Surveillance

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Abstract: The term “ed-tech imaginary” was coined by Audrey Watters (2019) as a way to describe the collective assemblage of the stories we tell ourselves about the potential and power of technology in education. Pointing to the binary of utopian and dystopian narratives, she suggested a shift in perspective is needed.

The question is then: what can we do to assemble a new, more nuanced and critical ed-tech imaginary? If the ed-tech imaginary influences not only practice and policy but also educational epistemologies (Watters, 2019), how can it be assembled to better reflect the often profound beliefs of those committed to Higher Education as a social good? In this paper, we focus on technologies that present opportunities for surveillance, both benign and malign. We describe a “data story-telling” approach that combines Deleuzian assemblage thinking with speculative fiction, to facilitate the expression of hopes and fears about Higher Education after surveillance.

Paper: In this paper, we report on research exploring the “ed-tech imaginary” in relation to the post-surveillance University.

The term “ed-tech imaginary” was coined by Audrey Watters (2019) as a way to describe the collective assemblage of the stories we tell ourselves about the potential and power of technology in education. Watters argued that this imaginary is a powerful influence on not only practices and policies in contemporary education, but also on our beliefs about education itself. Noting that too much of the public discourse about educational technology is ‘Wizard of Oz ... stuff’ (2019, n.p.), Watters recognized that we have reached a point on the pendulum swing between utopian and dystopian narratives where a shift in perspective might once again be needed. Collier and Ross (2020) have gone on to suggest that, at present, ‘[b]reathless evocations of technology for the sake

of innovation, revolution, or salvation, trump concerns for student and staff data privacy' (p. 277.) In the context of an ongoing transformation of Higher Education into a more technologized enterprise, we may be approaching a tipping point – and as Collier and Ross caution, '[i]f people who care about higher education do not stop to question those stories and their assumptions, the risk of harms increases – harms that may undermine the futures for which they are working' (ibid.).

In this paper, we focus on aspects of technology that present opportunities for surveillance, both benign and malign. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, universities were becoming increasingly reliant on digital technologies for many aspects of study, academic work, management, governance, communication and accountability. With the adoption of each new system, new data are generated, stored and shared both within and outwith the university setting. These data may be used in many surveillance-related ways, including, for example:

- by software companies to monitor technology use patterns, “improve” services and increase their market share;
- by university and team managers to monitor work and efficiency;
- by university managers to monitor trends in grades and student achievements;
- by university staff to monitor student compliance;
- by university staff to monitor student “engagement”; and
- by staff and students to self-monitor and compare their performance to others.

While the forms of surveillance available through these new technologies can sometimes be of substantial benefit to students, academics and/or managers, they are not without drawbacks and causes for concern (Collier & Ross, 2020). One example that has gained some recent attention is plagiarism- or similarity-detection software. While such software may improve the efficiency with which text similarities are picked up, it might also be seen as turning student work into an economic asset, undermining notions of intellectual property, authorship and academic writing, constructing students as plagiarists and turning assessment into a game of similarity avoidance (see, e.g., Introna, 2014; Ross & Macleod, 2018).

Covid-19 has not only increased the pace of adoption of these technologies, but also introduced new dimensions of technology use for surveillance that have the potential to profoundly shape the nature of the relationships that comprise the University. Digital proctoring services take the already-present construction of students as potential cheats another step further, justifying a remarkable invasion of students' private spaces. Software such as Office365 may make communication and collaboration easier, but they also make it more complicated and multi-layered, and allow for far greater monitoring of what are only ever surface layers of work practices.

However, decisions about the procurement of digital technologies in universities are largely taken by small groups of people, often excluding the academics and students who will both use them and be subject to them in their research, teaching and learning. Even those who are tasked with rolling new systems out are rarely consulted. Learning technologists, in particular, are often effectively voiceless within the universities that now rely so critically on their support and expertise.

The question, then, arises: what can we do to assemble a new ed-tech imaginary that constructs a more nuanced and critical account of technology and surveillance in both contemporary and future Higher Education? If the ed-tech imaginary influences not only practice and policy but also

educational epistemologies, how can it be assembled to better reflect the often profound beliefs of those committed to Higher Education as a social good? In this paper, we describe an approach to the generation of new “data stories” that combines Deleuzian assemblage thinking (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988; Feely, 2019; Wilson, 2020) with speculative fiction, to facilitate the expression of hopes and fears about Higher Education after surveillance.

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