

# Digitocracy in the New Normal

## Rethinking the Learning Spaces in Higher Education

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### 1. Introduction

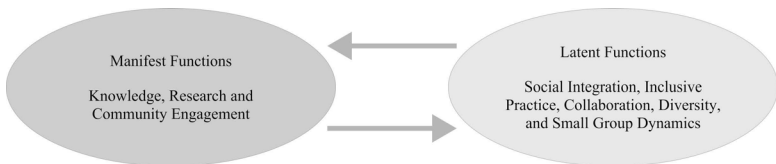
In sociological discourse, education performs two functions – manifest and latent functions. Manifest function explains the core responsibility of education in the context of teaching, research, and community engagement (Kunstler, 2006, p. 33; Julayanont, McFarland & Heilman, 2020). In functionalism theory, this role is widely acknowledged as an important social institution in sociological discourse for development (Godofsky, Zukin, and Horn, 2011). From medieval to what is now known as 21st century reality, the cardinal objective of the education sector as the citadel of knowledge and fostering discoveries in the new area of knowledge has not changed. In the context of knowledge dissemination, research endeavour, and community engagement (Cherrington et al., 2019). The act of knowing and curiosity to know has been the propelling force behind human interaction with their environment and social mobility in society. Bolaji (2010) stressed the manifest function of education as an indispensable tool to man and society for sustainable development. Dewey (1966, p. 89) also affirmed that through education, society could formulate its purpose, organize its means and resources, and shape itself with definiteness and economy in the direction it wishes to move. Education must channel all the individual's intellectual, moral, physical, social, aesthetic, and spiritual potential into a societal ideal (Farayola, 2007). In a nutshell, the manifest function of education is far-reaching and beyond overemphasizing. Outside the manifest function, the school has been regarded as the breeding social setting for social integration, intercultural awareness, and inclusive diversity otherwise known as the latent function of education. According to Brown-Weinstock (2022), the social aspect of education makes collaborative practices, inclusive classroom

engagement, and small group dynamics compelling pedagogical approaches in the education sector. This social platform has made the educational setting a place for students to learn about various issues, foster relationships, opportunities for social and political leadership and advocacy, and build skills in relating with people of diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. The descriptive nature of the functions of education is conceptually framed below to deepen understanding of the importance of education as a vehicle of both knowledge and social transformation of society.

## 2. Conceptual Framework on Functionalism of Education

The conceptual framework of functionalism, as seen in the diagram below (Figure 1), deepens understanding of the manifest and latent functions of school as the avenue that makes an individual become a member of society.

*Figure 1: A conceptual framework to deconstruct manifest and latent function of education by the Author.*



This act is made possible through interface with curriculum knowledge, discoveries of many other ways of acquiring knowledge and exploring the skills gained from knowledge discovery to help the community or society. This manifest function is what Gracia and Levitas (2022) called civic and capital values because of the cash value benefit associated with knowledge acquisition or dissemination. The term »cash value« in this paper alludes to the pragmatism philosophy that refers to the practical usefulness or immediate application of an idea or concept. Pragmatists believe that the value of an idea lies in its ability to solve problems and improve the human condition, rather than in its inherent truth or abstract correctness. The »cash value« of an idea is its tangible, real-world impact, and the results it produces. This emphasis on practicality and utility is a key aspect of pragmatist philosophy. The Durkheim's theory of func-

tionalism provides an overarching understanding of how groups and societies evolve through social interaction (Allen, 2022). This theory is quite relevant to our discussion because it shows the interconnectedness between the two functions of education. More importantly, how through social integration and inclusive practices, knowledge sharing, and teamwork can be productive to attain both individual and group aspirations and goals. The latent function helps to appreciate the cooperative learning approach, project method, and inclusive classroom collaboration that has been the hallmark of the 21<sup>st</sup> competencies skills in the teaching and learning sector (Merton, 2016). The distinctiveness of the two functions remains the major discourse in sociology of education. Manifest function as rightly deconstructed, is a consequence of an action or institution that is intended and recognized by the actors involved. For example, among many pragmatic goals, the manifest function provides education and skills for future employment. The latent function enhances the socialisation of children into the norms and values of society (Merton, 2016). The distinction between latent and manifest functions highlights the importance of considering both the intended and unintended effects of social behaviour and institutions in understanding social reality's complex and multifaceted nature (Merton, 1957). The search for a good society and person has been a consistent effort of various schools of thought, individual philosophers and theologians. These include Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Illich, and Dewey. This list is not exhaustive. Similarly, the search for a good educational system with all the socio-cultural and intercultural attributes has been the major concern of educational philosophers (Bolaji, Olufowobi & Oluwole, 2013; Bolaji, 2011; Farayola, 2007).

The educational system in any society is influenced by different educational philosophies and philosophical traditions. For instance, the two classical philosophies and their corresponding philosophical traditions that influenced British education were Perennialism and Essentialism. Perennialism is a philosophy that emphasizes the timeless, universal ideas and knowledge that form the foundation of education (Malik, 2021). It believes that these fundamental concepts and skills should form the core curriculum and that education should be focused on passing down this cultural heritage to future generations. In a constructive approach, essentialism is a philosophy of education that emphasizes the acquisition of basic knowledge and skills in core subjects such as reading, writing, and mathematics (Reimer, 2022). It stresses the importance of a structured and disciplined curriculum, as well as the development of character and moral values. Essentialists believe that

education should be focused on providing students with the essentials they need to succeed in life (Noddings, 2018). These two philosophies of education have Realism and Idealism, respectively, as their philosophical traditions.

In contemporary times, we have Progressivism and Reconstructionism as educational philosophies that is deeply rooted in Pragmatism upon which the American educational ideology rested (Sleeper, 2001). Pragmatism is a philosophical movement that emphasizes the practical application of ideas and the importance of experience in shaping beliefs and actions. It holds that the truth of a proposition should be judged by its practical usefulness and success, rather than just its logical consistency or correspondence with some external reality (Bolaji, 2011). However, these seem to be the case before and even after the 21st century digital revolution, the higher education sector has been driven by these two functions. The functions have been the driving force behind institutional engagement, and in fact, the core foundation upon which the nexus of engagement between students and teachers rest on (Merton, 2016). That is why breaking from the tradition of classical and didactic practices in knowledge delivery has been a challenge for the traditional higher education sectors whose approaches and modes of operation are firmly rooted in both manifest and latent functions of education skills being encouraged neither in today's educational reform efforts nor in colleges and universities (Merton, 2016; Bolaji, et al, 2013).

Since late 2019, the space of education, especially higher education has witnessed a shift from the traditional narrative to the era of new normal because of the COVID-19 crisis which has had a major impact on the global education sector (Mateen, & Kan, 2021). This paradigm shift has made the space of education an interesting space to work in, with the new systemic level of engagement and operational architecture that has characterized the scope of teacher education offerings globally. The shift has made digitalisation of higher education a necessity. traditional schools were able to adapt to the changing landscape of higher education delivery, but the pandemic has shown the importance of digital infrastructure and support for students in order to ensure that they can continue to learn and succeed during challenging times. Since the classical approach seems to be broken because of the pandemic disruption, navigating a new approach in higher education through online delivery, collaborative ideas, digital learning futures, distance education, and the use of stimulation to cater to some aspects of teacher education is the reality in the current clime (Moyo, 2020; Diaz & Walsh, 2021). It is based on the current reality of the new normal that this chapter takes a critical look at the digitocracy and its nuances in defining the new mode of learning outside the convention of face to face have its im-

pacts and implications. While both online and face-to-face learning have their advantages and disadvantages (Nieves, 2021), parents, teachers, students, and schools need to monitor the new trends to prepare for the future of learning. This chapter acknowledges the need for teachers to refine their methods to create a more engaging online environment for their students. It also recognizes the need for students to leverage the available technologies and use additional study resources (Nieves, 2021).

However, education in the new normal has its pivots and consequences (Scott, 2020). This chapter among many consequences seeks to understand how the manifest and latent functions imbedded in the classical teacher education programs would flourish in this new normal. More importantly, how digital affordances could foster social integration and cultural awareness or intercultural understanding in higher education remains an issue in this chapter. It makes digitocracy of the learning environment a challenge. For emphasis, digitocracy in this chapter is not the term used to describe a political and social system. It is about the influence of digital technology, media, big data, and algorithms on higher education, as well as the unequal distribution of technological resources and skills across different intercultural and social groups in the context of teaching and learning. It is how digital literacy and access to technology can play a key role in fostering intercultural awareness (Reidenberg, 2017). This concept has become increasingly relevant as the use of digital technology has grown in recent years, and as the internet and social media have become major sources of information and political discourse. Hence, the chapter seeks to advocate for a digital learning platform that can make both manifest and latent functions in higher education possible in the learning spaces in the age of the new normal. In addition, digital advocacy to solve the challenge of inequalities and lack of access to digital or online education in the era of pandemics (Duroisin & Tanghe, 2021) is essential. To start this conversation, what is digitocracy in the new normal?

### 3. Theorising Digitocracy in Higher Education

The word »digitocracy« is a philosophical jargon crafted to subject digitalization to philosophical analysis. Ballesteros (2020) used the word to discuss the concept of power and governance to understand the different layers and manifestations of the act of ruling and being ruled. The word has been used extensively to discuss the impact of digitalization on industrial development and in-

dividual lives (Clegg et al., 2023; Dziubina, 2013). For example, digital transformation has a profound effect not only on individual industries but also on value perception. An economy is driven by data no longer emphasizes specific features of a tangible product. Efficiency, convenience, and ease of use are the new currency. In a simple expression, digitalization is seen as a tool for accelerating development in all facets of human endeavors. Also, it has been used interchangeably to connote technologies, technocracy, digital futures, and artificial intelligence (Gulson et al., 2022). In this chapter, digitocracy is a philosophical act of expressing the global revolution evolving through digital technology. This definition is useful to understand how technology has become a tool to demystify the role of humans in all aspects of engagement or interaction (Lumi, 2020). Ballesteros (2020) buttressed the power of digitalization as a way of understanding the inhuman world through strong artificial intelligence (AI). There is hardly any sector of human life including medicine, economy, and political life that digital knowledge has not impacted. This perspective seems to be the new trend, especially in the era of the new normal. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to say that digitisation has been accepted as the norm for shaping power, society, and humans (Ballesteros, 2020; Cooke, 2021). In a recent research report conducted by Fang Lee Cooke (2021), the project funded by *International Labour Organisation* established that digital technology is having a positive impact and is evident in a number of business sectors in terms of changing the nature of their operations. It has become increasingly clear that digitocracy has become the new face of reality globally. In this chapter, it's imperative to understand that digitalisation is not a new phenomenon in pedagogical discourse but has become more relevant in this era of the new normal due to pandemic. What is relatively new in theorising digitalisation is the epistemological standpoint of how this phase of new normal is designed to capture the essence of human engagement, especially in the field of education.

It is not a surprise that the space of education has been caught in this new wave of the digital revolution. The expression of digitalisation, digital classroom, digital literacies, smart classroom, digital pedagogy, and coding have been more amplified by advocates of digitocracy. In fact, the last few years characterized by pandemic, border closure, isolation, and restriction of the movement nationally and internationally have made digitocracy a far more reaching approach to navigating the world of uncertainty. Therefore, rethinking the direction of education pedagogy of engagement in the new normal is a model that is time has come. This new phase has given recognition to the emergence of the 21st century universities with a blended pedagogical

approach as a way of learning with a more virtual and digital hybrid to build the nexus between students and teachers (Chambers & Sandford, 2019; Gort & Sembiane, 2015). However, the intricacies that have necessitated the shifts, how the change has impacted knowledge delivery and knowing if further knowledge is needed about this shift are some of the contending issues that are yet unclear. I am aware of the inherent opportunities with digital learning but an understanding of the learning processes and systemic organizations from the perspective of digitalisation and to what extent this has changed when compared with the pre-pandemic conditions means to learners and teachers is something that seems to be well articulated in the body of literature. As the philosophical tradition is, meaning making and making sense is the business of philosophers, (Carr, 2005) discussing the perspectives from both students and teachers in the new era of datafied learning environments remains a fundamental issue yet to be addressed by those advocates of digitocracy. The advantages of digitalisation of the education sector cannot be left unmentioned in this chapter.

#### **4. For Digitocracy: Supporting the Narrative**

Using online platforms as a mode of reaching a wide range of audiences or diverse groups locally and internationally has been the order of the day many school systems. The higher education sector is not an exemption. Even the traditional higher institutions that so heavily relied on face-to-face approach in teaching have embraced the act of digitalisation or digital learning futures. The sector cannot do otherwise with the business model of profit maximization drive that universities are noted for in recent times, especially in Australia that generate over \$19 billion as revenue from higher education (Norton, 2014). The digitalisation of the sector for transnational opportunities arguably affirmed the need for the new normal. Digitalisation has been reported in the literature as the vehicle for the deliverables of educational programs across the globe (Hashim, Tlemsani, & Matthews, 2022). Outside the field of teaching and learning, money-making opportunity, managerialism of both the students and teachers is another pointer to digitalization as a necessity in the sector (Deem & Brehony, 2005). Through digital futures, the management of higher education sector can access the productivity of the teachers and students' engagement or interaction. Some digital learning futures like Algorithm, Tableau, and blackboard collaborate are some of that software that are often used to gener-

ate such data for decision making process. As with other forms of assessment in higher education, students are also empowered to evaluate their teachers, so, self-evaluation assessment form otherwise known as SELT is commonly used for such assessment. Thus, digitalisation has clearly shown the epistemological transformation of how the stakeholders in the sector are perceived by their supervisors or coordinators (Sadin, 2016). Through digitalisation, the search for individual identity is made possible. To a large extent, the number of realities presented to the managers of education about students, teachers, and other stakeholders in education is virtually infinite according to Ballesteros (2020).

The perspective of technology in teaching and learning is so rich it has become an everyday part of life. This assertion may not appeal to traditional humanism philosophers because of their rationality that is informed by human interaction with the environment and seeking happiness in this life and helping others to achieve the same. However, if we think about the shift and the way in which we make meanings and interact with each other in this contemporary dispensation, we will agree that digitalization of school is essential. Technology is not only enhancing knowledge dissemination and encouraging active participation of the actors in the school system, but it has set a new level of paradigm in communication otherwise known as digital literacies. There are a number of social digital platforms that have proven the legitimacy of digital literacy as relevant against the conventional language skills that the schools are highly noted to enhance in their students. Facebook, Blogs, Twitter, Instagram, We Chat, Gather, and others have consistently redefined literacies beyond the productive and receptive skills focus of the school context. According to Walden (2021), digital language is the trend and other conventional mode of communication is incapacitated to cope with this innovation. The future of language is gradually influenced by modern technological inventions, thereby creating a gap between older people, who cannot keep pace with these advancements, and younger people, leading the digital language evolution. In a nutshell, digitalisation of education is not but stressing its relevance for schools and suggesting ways of enhancing social learning, literacy and literate practices (Carrington & Robinson, 2009; Walden, 2021).

## 5. Not Against Digitocracy: But What?

In theorising digitocracy, a number of scholars have reported their reservations about the direction of education in the age of the digital revolution. Some of the thoughts are useful and important for acknowledgment. Some of these reservations are related to reliance on technology as a product engagement in the education context. The work of Floridi et al (2015) gave impetus to the assumption that the analysis of humans as superior to other living organisms is a clear distinction that makes total reliance on digitalization a very blurring concept. In a clearer sense, the work of Ballesteros (2020) that reiterated the concept of human dignity again necessitates the need to seek a deeper meaning of life to know if technology makes the human enigma better. According to Herrmann (2015), there is diversity in our educational environments, including racial and ethnic diversity, linguistic diversity, ability level diversity, and more. Herrmann interprets this as indicating that most classes and schools have undergone a significant change that is likely to persist. As diversity in the classroom and school widens, so does the need for educators to be responsive to diverse student and family needs, beliefs, values, and attitudes. For example, contextual nuances, interpersonal dynamics, emotion and feelings and non-verbal communications are diversity issues that cannot be well captured through digitalization (Cormier, McGrew, Ruble, & Fischer, 2021; Bolaji, et al., 2022). This assertion has provided a contextual narrative of culture as an essential context in the 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching and learning. To this end, this paper argues that digitalisation of education should be designed to foster cultural competences and culturally responsiveness to cater for the mixed abilities in the classroom setting (Yang, 2021).

The cultural competence awareness in education situates within the sociological discourse of functionalism – manifest and latent functions that higher education is designed to achieve in its learners. The cultural competence awareness in education is situated within the sociological discourse of functionalism in the sense that functionalism views society as a system of interrelated parts that work together to meet the needs of its members and maintain social stability (Zhiming & Wee, 1998). In this context, cultural competence awareness in education is seen as serving the function of promoting social harmony and reducing intercultural conflicts by promoting understanding and respect for diversity. Functionalists argue that education plays an important role in transmitting cultural values and norms to future generations, and that promoting cultural competence awareness is an impor-

tant aspect of this process. By teaching students to understand and appreciate different cultural perspectives, they are better equipped to navigate diverse social settings and interact effectively with individuals from different backgrounds and as well as to question their cultural bias or perspectives in their relationship with others (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011; Kalantzis et al., 2016). In this sense, cultural competence awareness in education can be seen as fulfilling a functional need in society by promoting intercultural understanding and reducing conflict, thus contributing to the overall stability and cohesiveness of society. The higher education environment is structured to produce people who are culturally competent and share a variety of attributes. Each of these helps the person to produce better outcomes in the context of rich diversity and understanding of cultural awareness and responsiveness for themselves and others (Kirmayer, 2012). For educators, cultural competence helps students achieve at higher levels and helps students be prepared for college and careers in the 21st century. According to Herrmann (2015), any educator who has been working in the teaching and learning industry for a long time has likely seen the differences between students who were in their classrooms 20 years ago and students who are in their classrooms today. In this vein, I argue that the role of cultural competencies and awareness is apparent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching and learning just as digitalization of education is as well relevant. Achieving a state of symmetry to accommodate both digital futures and functions (manifest and latent) in higher education would be the ideal way to navigate the age of the new normal. How do we achieve this is the question?

## 6. Digital – Cultural Pedagogy: The Both ways Approach

The tradition of this both ways approach or pedagogy is more rooted in a blend of both traditional knowledge and western knowledge what Illich called deschooling society (Michie, Hogue & Rioux, 2018). This premise is to set the tone for a productive blended pedagogical ideal that would connect and foster social imperatives through the aspect of digital futures in teaching and learning. The last three years have witnessed a rise in the number of digital online learning spaces for the dissemination of knowledge. Some of these learning platforms ranging from Blackboard Collaborate, Gather, Google, Codecademy, Moodle, Pluralsight, Skillshare, Coursera, Teachable, and others have made the acquisition of knowledge through the online platform easy and effective. What they have failed to achieve is how the social imperatives attributes of functionalism

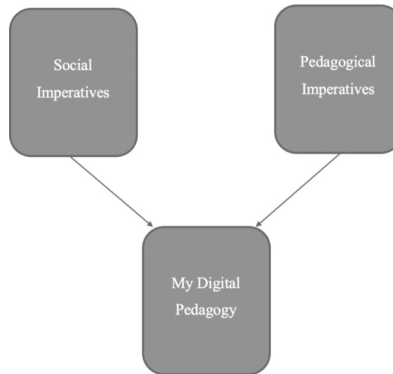
in higher education can be enacted to cater to the interpersonal relationship of both the learners and teachers in the industry. The social imperatives in the context of this paper are cultural awareness, the value of diversity, responding to cross-cultural differences, learning about students' cultures, and making positive changes. Fostering these imperatives seems to be lacking in the current structure of the online platforms (Bolaji, et al. 2022).

The importance of digitalisation of higher education cannot be overemphasized. As mentioned in the introduction section of this chapter, many scholars have reported the inherent opportunity towards the digital transformation of the universities that seems to have a positive effect on the teaching methods (Zawacki-Richter, 2021), improving the quality of education (Rodríguez-Abitia et al., 2000) and the need to move between embodied and digitalized forms of learning towards an integral pedagogy (Aroles and Küpers, 2021). From the managerialism perspective as well, digitocracy has been accepted as the new normal because of the potential opportunity for creativity and innovation in the educational experience, cultivating the desirable entrepreneurial spirit within the academic communities (Ratten, 2020). Developing blended pedagogies, particularly in relation to social imperatives, literacy practices, and digital learning futures would make the space of learning futures (Mehta and Aguilera, 2020). That is devoid of that social inequality for an educational pedagogy that promotes humanism traditions in teaching and learning (Foucault, 1984; Mehta & Aguilera, 2020). The drive for a blended approach largely is based on the concern of the educational stakeholders who believe that education is about social integration and that people are the center of any educational outcomes. Hence it can be argued that digitalisation is a pedagogy and social imperatives is also a pedagogy on their own. Therefore, both must connect to have a holistic digitocracy as a way of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century education. Thus, social imperatives are not only drivers for a digital pedagogy but also pedagogical imperatives (Howell, 2012; Castanëta & Selwyn, 2018; Means, 2019; Grange, 2020; Tavin, 2021).

A preliminary report from a study on »virtual learning and cultural awareness in higher education« by three colleges of education in Germany, Australia, and Israel in 2020 revealed the need for a constructive connection between educational perspectives and socialisation against the narrative of hybrid digitality and datafied realities. Making sense of digital learning in connection with social imperatives has the potential to enhance epistemological intervention in digitalization of education. The proposition in this paper is a blended pedagogy captured in the framework below (figure 2) as the most effective way for

both teachers and students upon which knowledge and functionalism of education rest.

*Figure 2: Proposed blended pedagogy for engagement in the new normal drawn from Howell (2012) thoughts on digitalization of education.*



With this framing of the role of digitocracy in education, how can teachers whose didactic approach and epistemological engagement or knowledge delivery is rooted in face-to-face pedagogy imbibe digital pedagogy as a new normal for knowledge dissemination? Pedagogy as widely defined is the study of being a teacher and the act of teaching (Howell, 2012; Shirke, 2021). Beyond the literary definition as a method of teaching, pedagogy shapes teaching beliefs and understanding of culture and different learning styles. More importantly, it is the essential components for meaningful classroom relationships for both students and teachers (Shirke, 2021). The emphasis on social integration in a classroom setting is achievable through the instrumentality of pedagogical techniques. With the digital revolution, there is a need for advocates of digitalisation to look beyond the opportunities that digital affordances offer to accommodate the structural functionalism of social integration and that makes face to face pedagogy a compelling approach for learners (Parsons, Inkila, & Lynch, 2019). Currently, the digital learning platforms are yet to capture the latent functions of engagement in higher as they should to promote that rich intercultural understanding and diversity dynamics which is the position of

this chapter. Arguably, I understand the nature of digital technologies is fast-changing and evolving, desire to have digital learning spaces to cater to social inclusion, intercultural relationship, and diversity enrichment (Wellstead, 2017), learners and teachers should be the focus of education in the new normal.

## 7. Conclusion

This chapter leverage on the understanding that the last few years can be seen as the era of a new normal because of the COVID-19 crisis which has had a major impact on the global education sector (Mateen, & Kan, 2021). This new normal has made space of education an interesting space to work because of the systemic level of engagement and operational architecture that has characterized the scope of teacher education offerings globally. The engagement in the new normal necessitated a wide range of strategies ranging from online delivery, collaborative ideas, digital learning futures, distance education, and the use of simulation to cater to some aspects of teacher education has been widely discussed in the body of literature (Moyo, 2020; Diaz, & Walsh, 2021). As argued in the chapter, the new approach fostered the narrative of digitocracy as a new mode of learning outside the convention of face-to-face pedagogy that we are familiar with. As it has its impacts and implications (Nieves, 2021), teachers, students, and schools need to monitor the new trends to prepare for the future of learning. The chapter discussed how digital learning has been an effective pedagogy in meeting the manifest function of education in knowledge dissemination and research engagement, but the latent function seems to be neglected, which in a sense makes the whole essence of higher education a one-sided (Fischer, Lundin, & Lindberg, 2020). In this paper, I explore the nuances of digitalization from both side of the same coin and concluded that virtual and digital tool has come to stay as the mode of engagement in the 21st century teaching and learning. However, any digital affordances that cannot foster social integration and cultural awareness or intercultural understanding in higher education make digitocracy of the learning environment a challenge. Hence, there is a need for digital learning platform to make both manifest and latent functions in higher education possible in the learning spaces in the age of the new normal.

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