Editorial

Big Tech, Big Winners, and Big Debt

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Connecting the Dot-Coms in the Classroom: Big Tech, Big Debt, and Pandemic Profiteering

There is a powerful and tangible hope that in the days ahead an array of vaccines will help protect us from COVID-19. But in the wake of this global crisis, what will protect students, democracy, and all those served by our educational institutions?

The year-long pandemic has been catastrophic in countless ways. To date, the virus has infected some three-quarters of a million Canadians and taken more than 20,000 lives, while exposing significant structural failings of our long-term-care facilities and other social support networks. The economy has also been devastated. Statistics Canada reports that “non-annualized real GDP growth rate declined by 2.1% in the first quarter of 2020 and 11.5% in the second quarter of 2020” (Barton & Lambert-Racine, 2020, para. 2) for an overall annual decline of 5.1% (Tencer, 2021).

To address the dramatic economic contraction, governments at all levels have taken on tremendous debt in order to provide economic stability and to prevent a more dramatic collapse. The federal debt alone is expected to be \$380 billion for 2020–21 (Lim, 2020). We will be dealing with the financial consequences of this moment for generations.

Yet there have been some real winners of late. Big Tech, in particular, has made billions, with Big Tech billionaires pocketing cash hand over fist. Consider the four biggest tech companies—Amazon, Apple, Google, and Facebook—that earned \$38 billion in profits (Molla, 2020) in the second quarter of 2020 alone. Over the past year, the seven most-valuable U.S. tech firms have added \$3.4 trillion in market capitalization (Levy, 2020). Beyond profits, many tech giants have further consolidated coveted market shares.

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Individual wealth has grown just as extraordinarily for the lucky few. The collective worth of the world's 2,800 or so billionaires has risen to \$10.2 trillion (Neate, 2020a), with American tycoons getting \$1 trillion richer and the Canadian superrich adding \$63.5 billion to the bank since the pandemic was declared (McCarthy, 2020). Ten individuals have reaped some \$400 billion, while Amazon's Jeff Bezos grew his wealth by \$70 billion in just the first 6 months of the crisis (the soon-to-retire CEO is now worth some \$182 billion; Neate, 2020b). Merely the *increase* in wealth that the world's top-10 billionaires have seen would be enough to provide vaccinations for the entire planet ("Wealth Increase of 10 Men," 2021), a fact that has prompted Oxfam to advocate a special tax on the superrich (Oxfam International, 2021). Indeed, Oxfam has also pointed out that Canada's 44 billionaires could collectively give each of the country's poorest 3.8 million people a cheque for \$16,823 and still be as wealthy as they were when the pandemic began. (Oxfam Canada, 2021).

You don't need to look too far to find cliché sayings about the importance of turning a crisis into an opportunity—and there's plenty of wisdom in that sentiment. But what are we to do when a few unbelievably wealthy individuals profit from the challenges and crisis of so many? The shocking numbers above, and many others like them, raise many urgent questions—about obscene profit rates, economic inequality (VandelHei, 2019), growing political clout over the political process (Hindman, 2018), and spreading misinformation (Kreps, 2020).

Data for Big Tech, Big Debt for Education

Recently, legislation has been tabled in the Canadian Parliament that would have social media companies reimburse news organizations for the content on which many profits are made (Wyld, 2020). This follows other legislation that's been tabled to regulate U.S. streaming services, such as Netflix and Disney+ in order to support the creation of Canadian content (Wong, 2020). These are positive developments for Canadian culture, but there's a third leg of the stool still missing: we must also radically transform our economic frameworks around education funding, and the best place to start is with those who have profited the most from the pandemic. We must find ways to repatriate and redistribute that Big Tech wealth to schools, among the hardest hit financially.

Let's be clear: those working remotely, and especially families with children in virtual classrooms, have been coerced into a digital world not of their making or choice. Indeed, compliance is required in order to participate. While participation in any form of education is a privilege (and often a pleasure), is it morally justifiable for deep-pocketed tech companies to walk away from the pandemic with so much while educational institutions are burdened with an unprecedented debt?

This is a doubly important question considering that educational institutions are responsible for passing along and providing the very context and venue for much of that profit generation. Without much choice at all, an educational institution that attempts to maintain connections with its distanced students is helping to facilitate Silicon Valley's billions in the short term; in the long term, it is helping Silicon Valley harvest something even more valuable, something that will continue to generate wealth well beyond the pandemic. And that's our data and that of our children.

Even before COVID-19, data had been dubbed the new oil by the likes of *The Economist* ("The World's Most Valuable Resource, 2017) and it's this resource that's lining pockets while we struggle to connect students with their teachers and engage with curriculum. We have consented to the bargain—indispensable digital technologies in exchange for our information. While there are user agreements and the language of consent, choice in this context is all but an illusion. Outside of schools, individual consumers are responsible for their own technology choices, even if they rarely read the fine print. What is categorically different in this new educational context is that students—and, yes, parents—cannot choose.

Long before the pandemic, groups like the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC, n.d.-a) were advocating for "screen-free weeks" (CCFC, n.d.-b) in recognition of the dangers our devices present. And as it's been widely reported, many top software developers and CEOs actively limit their own children's access to smartphones and tablets (Akhtar & Ward, 2020). Of course, these are insiders who know all too well the psychological research that goes into their products. Some were also raising questions about the harvesting of student data by Alphabet (Google's parent company) and others. Google's manipulation of metadata, in particular, is extraordinarily alarming (Okhiro, 2020). Are we really supposed to listen to a recent wave of popular headlines (e.g., see McGinn, 2021) that tells us to stop worrying about kids and their pandemic screen time?

For the past several years, a growing movement has called for the dismantlement of Big Tech monopolies through the application of antitrust laws, specifically in the United States (see Kolhatkar, 2019). But as experts like Harvard's Shoshana Zuboff (2021) have pointed out, Gilded Age legislation, even forcefully applied, won't fully address our problems. That's especially true in our schools. As Canadians, we need to work with federal and provincial governments to expand our toolbox of solutions—solutions that can help us truly protect our educational institutions

Targeted taxes belong in that toolbox. Whether broken up or not, some of those billions made in the past year by pandemic profiteers should be collected and applied to support education. Call it a "Pandemic Profiteering Education Tax."

Dollars and Sense: Pandemic Profiteering Education Tax?

Even as money fills the coffers of Big Tech, there is no doubt that we will soon hear the argument that mounting government debt requires cuts to education. Education is an essential sector, just like health care. But it always seems to be among the first place politicians go to make cuts. Just as we have learned that we can't be healthy unless everyone is healthy, we can't have a functioning democracy if we don't educate our students in an equitable manner. In these turbulent times that is harder than ever—and no amount of economic disparity can truly be addressed by simply throwing iPads and Chromebooks at the problem.

It's important to connect the dots.

How do we reconcile the profits of tech companies with the education falling further and further into the red? If data truly is valuable, if it really is the new oil, then Big Tech must not only be better regulated but also pay for that data in ways that help schools, teachers, and education in general with the financial burden we face. Without a Pandemic Profiteering Education Tax, schools and universities will be left bankrupt; inequality of education will be even more pronounced. Unless we demand action, educational institutions at all levels will only further compromise their autonomy and their quality, as Big Tech offers more and more self-serving "help."

The consequences of COVID-19 will be compounded if one of its most-lasting cultural impacts is a boon for tech and a financial apocalypse for education. This is not some distant hypothesis; we are seeing some of the consequences already. For the first time in Ontario's history, for example, a university (Laurentian University, in Sudbury) has been forced to apply for creditor protection, citing "unprecedented financial challenges" (Rushowy, 2021, para. 9). As we emerge from the shadow of the pandemic, we ought to tax those tech companies that have most infiltrated our schools, so that some of their extraordinary profits go back into an essential but broke system.

Teachers already bear a significant COVID-19 burden in terms of death and the threat of death, to say nothing of mental-health stress. Those still teaching in the classroom face an overwhelming danger—many have been updating their wills (Waldrop, 2020)—while simultaneously teaching and managing kids who may struggle with health-safety protocols. Those teachers working remotely face steep learning curves while adopting new pedagogical models overnight (Collier & Burke, 2021). Whether in the classroom or on a screen, these educators have been forced to use technologies in ways they never imagined or wanted. To burden them with added financial uncertainty—whether their own or that of their schools—is hard to justify as tech companies take home billions.

Democratic Renewal: Education as a Public Good

When I poll my university students on the role of technology in the post-pandemic classroom, they are quite sure there will be more and more of it. But they are less sanguine about democracy. Pandemic or not, countries around the world are facing what researchers have called democratic decline—even those democratic countries that have long been seen as stable (“Democracy Continues Its Disturbing Retreat,” 2018). As we re-emerge from the health crisis, we need recognize threats to democracy and do everything possible to ensure its survival. We need a democratic arms race in education.

We can look to the U.S. to see the consequences of when education as a public good is abandoned. The outcomes for democracy are problematic, and we must be proactive in ensuring that education serves as a bulwark against populism. Researchers show that populism and the Far Right is strong and established in Canada (Friesen, 2021).

As University of Ottawa researcher Joel Westheimer (2021) has noted, “A well-functioning democracy needs schools that teach students to recognize ambiguity and conflict in factual content, to see human conditions and aspirations as complex and contested, and to embrace debate and deliberation as a cornerstone of democracy” (para. 11). But complexity and civilized conflict are anathema to Big Tech, whose algorithms monetize and reward simplistic polarization, reactionary discord, and a post-fact world. When it comes to the protection and promotion of democracy, education and powerful technology companies are strange bedfellows indeed.

I’ll leave the details to the accountants and policy makers—and lawyers. But for now, it’s important that we begin to think about and anticipate the true consequences of the pandemic for education, educational funding, and the democratic function of education. High schools and universities named after Google or Facebook are not the answer. Unless we change course, COVID-19 could turn out to be the best thing such companies could have hoped for—but also the end of education as we have known it. And none of us should consent to that.

In This Issue

Following the publication of our special issue—Pandemic Pedagogy: Innovative Strategies for Uncertain Times—in summer 2020, and as we pass the 1-year mark of the COVID-19 pandemic in North America and its ensuing closure of schools and universities, *Brock Education* now presents an impressive range of important essays about education.

In “What’s Bred in the Bone: Transference and Countertransference in Teachers”, Sherry et al. investigated how classroom teachers understand and experience transference and countertransference. Their study analyzes interviews with four school teachers on their

understanding and management of the two concepts in the classroom; identifies themes (schema, relationship, context, unconscious, background experience, self-awareness, and self-reflection); and concludes with implications both for teachers and for counsellors.

In “The Terrain of Place-Based Education: A Primer for Teacher Education in Canada”, Webber et al. consider the trajectory of place-based education (PBE) by drawing on literature from outdoor, experiential, environmental, critical, and land-based education to map key intersections and influences. They explore directions for PBE in relation to decolonization, re-inhabitation, and the meaningful acknowledgement of Indigenous knowledge systems, and also consider the implications of PBE for teacher education.

Quite relevant for all we novice or veteran online instructors, Cardinal et al. in “Being and Becoming Online Teachers: A Collaborative Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry” retell the process of their investigation into our experiences of teaching online. They ask two questions: What is online teaching? Who are we in this space? Noting how our individual backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives have influenced the ways we see, create, and navigate our (and our students’) place in virtual classroom communities, they discuss how our diverse identities have shaped the way we all live and experience online teaching. In conclusion they emphasize the potential and value of autobiographical narrative inquiry for all those being and becoming online teachers.

In “A Promising Family Literacy Project Based on Male Reading Models”, Carignan et al. discuss an innovative family literacy project that was implemented in a community setting. Male trios consisting of a male significant figure, a struggling reader in elementary school, and a pre-service teacher were convened. The study showed an improvement regarding students’ motivation to read in the context of male trios, different reading practices inside the trios, and a positive evolution in the relationship between the student and participating male relative.

In “Perspectives From Students: How to Tame the Chaos and Harness the Power of Technology for Learning”, Ge et al. highlight student perspectives of learning with portable devices to inform the use of portable technology in the Canadian school system. The authors surveyed 704 students in Grades 6 to 9 about their use of iPads in the classroom during a 1:1 technology initiative. The authors identify three key themes—engagement, inclusivity, and learning—and lessons learned, especially in the area of self-regulation, and make recommendations on how to harness the power of this multi-faceted learning tool and minimize the chaos it can create when not utilized deliberately and carefully.

In “Teacher Efficacy for Online Teaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic”, Dolighan and Owen examine secondary teachers’ efficacy for teaching in a fully online teaching environment during

the sudden transition brought about by the global pandemic. They investigate how specific variables, teaching experience, professional development (PD) experience, and teaching supports correlate with the self-efficacy perceptions of teachers transitioning to online teaching during a pandemic. More specifically, the authors examine self-efficacy perceptions of teachers in the domains of student engagement, instructional strategies, classroom management, and computer skills. The results indicate that higher online teaching efficacy scores correlated with having taken online Additional Qualification (AQ) courses and online PD sessions.

In “Teacher Candidates’ and Course Instructors’ Perspectives of a Mandatory Indigenous Education Course”, Oskineegish and Berger describe a mixed methods study examining non-Indigenous teacher candidates’ attitude towards a mandatory Aboriginal Education course in teacher education from teacher candidates’ and course instructors’ perspectives. The results suggest the need for mandatory Indigenous Education courses and for faculties of education and school boards to provide further learning opportunities with Indigenous education content and resources

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