

Reinterpretation of Knowledge on the Web in the Postmodern Moment: Trends and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study, from a perspective of postmodernity is to discuss online education as the new environment for the challenging interpretation of the production, structure and dissemination of knowledge transformation within the economic, socio-political and cultural, dynamics of postmodern society. This is, of course, a new component of postmodern society and mainly characterised by globalisation process. The main reason of this is that production, structure and dissemination of knowledge has begun to expose a structural transformation. Online education, as the new environment of this transformations, has brought a challenging process that requires a paradigm shift for teachers, politicians, economists, managers and educational administrators.

Keywords: Online, Postmodernity, Knowledge On The Web, Distance Education, Turkey, Anadolu University.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary period is often characterised by unpredictable changes. All granted assumptions are being shaken and displaced. Globalisation, consumer society and marketization as the dominant trends of current conjecture have underlined this era. The changes have created a pressure felt in different dimension of life. That pressure has also been felt in structure, delivery and curriculum of education. Permanently developing computer and telecommunication technologies, globalisation of markets and newly defined postmodern features of societies have reconstituted education as a institution in the society. Online education, in this framework, has emerged by creating an opportunity of access to education on a global scale as a challenging concept. In this sense, education as a change agent has been reinterpreted on the web. This is, of course, a new component of postmodern society and mainly characterised by globalisation process. Multicultural virtual learning communities has began to emerge rapidly and globally all over the world. Online learning environments and virtual learning communities, in this sense, mean much more than simple or trivial changing in education. The main reason of this is that production, structure and dissemination of knowledge has begun to expose a structural transformation. Online education, as the new environment of this transformations, has brought a challenging process that requires a paradigm shift for teachers, politicians, economists, managers and educational administrators.

The purpose of this study, from a perspective of postmodernity is to discuss online education as the new environment for the challenging interpretation of the production, structure and dissemination of knowledge transformation within the economic, socio-political and cultural, dynamics of postmodern society. This doesn't mean that effects of postmodernity are accepted uncritically. On the other hand, by engaging issues and problems arisen by postmodernism, it's intended that an interpretative framework in which online education may be critically evaluated can be constructed. This paper is constituted by two parts. In the first part, some of the key socio-economic and socio-political and cultural changes that are held to constitute the condition of postmodernity in the process of globalisation were

outlined. In the second part, the question that how some of those changes are being manifested in education generally and in online education in particular is examined.

THE POSTMODERN CONDITION

The current conjuncture in which education finds itself is one that itself poses difficult questions of interpretation. According to Giddens (1991), the economic, technological, and cultural changes those constitute a condition of late modernity and represent an intensification of already existing trends. On the other hand, for Lyotard (1984), these trends signify the inability of modernity to fulfil its aspirations and represent a new term called as condition of postmodernity. In effect, the only things that appear certain are the lack of certainty about the interaction of the processes that characterises the increasing global complexity of contemporary industrial society and its condition and the unprecedented uncertainty faced by all spheres of education and life. Postmodernism as both a part and a way of understanding global contemporary condition indicates some of those uncertainties which has matured in the trends of global industrialisation process. Examination of industrialisation trends as the original parameters of globalisation can highlight the current conjuncture in which education is reinterpreted on the web.

Although the logic of industrialisation thesis had been strongly discussed among different thinkers in different ideologies especially at the beginning of twentieth century, thoughts of the past began to be re-evaluated within the concepts of modernism in 1970s. In early 1970's, changes in the world economy started a new transitional period that would mark next thirty years. In the strict competition, with the emergence of Japan as an industrial giant and oil crisis, corporations revised their manufacturing policy and began to seek new places to transfer their capital (Jarvis, 2000). Corporations transferred their capital to the places where the most efficient and the cheapest means of production and labour force exist. This resulted in the decline in manufacturing industry in much of the developed countries. According to Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), this is the world economy. The world was seen as a global market and investment area. All of those constitute a base for the global world. On the other hand, with the revolution in informational technology especially at the second half of the 1980's, availability of new technologies prepared a fundamental base for the process of socio-economic restructuring for the next twenty years (Castells, 1996). As the process has progressed, continually improving telecommunication and transportation systems, free circulation of muscular and mental labour power on the world, free circulation of finance and emergence of international law and institutions that provide a legitimised base and powerful international norm for the system have been some processes that emphasise the critical trend of new world order called as 'globalisation'. Within this framework, neo-liberalism has also emerged as the dominant policy in terms of governments and market dynamics since especially last decade of the 20th century.

In short, the current conjuncture has been characterised in economic terms as a period of revitalised capital accumulation based on globalisation--the integration of the economies of nation-states through market mechanisms, accompanied by the transnational flexibility of capital and labor markets and the new forms of information technology--all of which have helped bring about new forms of production, distribution, and consumption. The greater integration of the global market, thus, results in homogeneity and heterogeneity simultaneously. (Murray, 1989; Giddens, 1990). Marketization and a culture of consumption become central to the economy as a whole. Changes in products, services, and working practices--for example, multi-skilling--reconstruct the workplace and the social definition of skills (Featherstone, 1995,p.81). Related with that, the space-time reorganization which both produces and is produced by globalisation. While this occurs at many levels and in many ways, two seemingly paradoxical yet interlinked processes are emerged. Space-time compression where hitherto separated time and space are brought together to produce a literal as well as metaphorical sense of the world as one place and time, coupled with an increased emphasis on place and identity, as well as diversity and singularity (Edwards and Usher, 1997).

Within the globalized economy, this paradox is manifest in the competition between regions for investment and jobs with each emphasising its uniqueness and difference as a place that will offer the most advantageous conditions for free-floating capital. Coca-Cola, for example, now refers to itself as "multi-local" rather than multi-national (Featherstone, 1995). The same paradoxical process of homogeneity and heterogeneity, it is argued, is emerging from globalisation in the cultural sphere. An urban and rural area become more identical with familiar images such as the McDonald's shops and with certain advertisement images seen in every corner of the globe. We are witnessing a process of global cultural, the production of universal cultural products and global market consumers, linked with a commodification and "imagization" of culture. (Kenway, Bigum, and Fitzclarence, 1993, p. 118; Edwards and Usher, 1997). For example, the reference point, in this sense, for differentiation between rural and urban is now how to consume rather than how to produce. At the same time, however, globalisation causes a cultural specificity. The media explosion generated by various means of communication has been one that resulted in an apparent irresistible pluralisation of voices. The globalisation of culture, then, far from repressing the local and the specific, actually stimulates it. (Featherstone, 1995, p. 114).

Changes in economy induce the changes in cultural structures. Different spheres of culture such as film, music, entertainment, fashion, architecture, art are narrowly defined. Modernist seriousness and the search for deep, often hidden meaning has begun to be replaced by postmodern "playfulness," deathlessness, eclecticism, and self-referentiality by expansive use of signs and images. The aesthetic and cultural displace the functional. So style and design play an increasingly significant role in providing consumption of goods and services. Images and lifestyle has begun to play an increasing role in the choices of consumers. Thus, the new learning opportunities especially for adults have increasingly recentered away from meeting need towards supporting lifestyle practices (Edwards and Usher, 1997). With the increased significance of images in culture and social life, industries such as entertainment, the media, and increasingly education itself, become more critical in contemporary social formations and in the development of a consumer society (Field, 1994). In this context, education as an institution become much critical in contemporary social formations and in the development of a consumer society. Our preferences as an output of that consumption culture of postmodern society are thought and even imposed by different modes of thinking in education. Online education as the new instrumental realisation of postmodern discourse has been environments that reproduce the new discourse effectively and expansively. Individualism as a result of the interaction between cultural change and economic change has emerged as a parameter that determines culture of consumer. In fact, it's a sub process that dominantly characterises the postmodern era.

The Reinterpretation of Knowledge on the Web in the Postmodern Society All of those technological, economic, and cultural changes have resulted in a changed postmodern condition of knowledge (Lyotard, 1984). For Lyotard, the distinction between knowledge of postmodernity and a modern condition of knowledge is a matter of purpose. He argues that in modernity the production and dissemination of knowledge is justified on the grounds of its contribution to the pursuit of truth, liberty, and the betterment of humanity. These metanarratives of progress serve to legitimate instrumental rationality, the canons of scientific investigation, and disciplinary knowledge. For Lyotard, rationalist and humanist discourses that try to justify certain forms of knowledge, certain universal moral stances and their accompanying educational practices are challenged by a postmodern condition (Edwards and Usher, 1997).

In terms of postmodernity, developments in technology, particularly telecommunications, resulted in a revolution in information technology, play a significant part. Lyotard (1984) argues that with the impact of those technologies, knowledge is redefined. Asynchronous online learning environments as one of the most brilliant product of this revolution have become the places in which different modes of knowledge are commercialised. In other words, logic of computers constructed on the web has commodified knowledge into information and provided new opportunities of access to education. Technologically mediated knowledge circulation on the web has created some

implications. Firstly, Asynchronous online education has emerged as a new environment in which knowledge is decentralised in postmodern condition and changing goal and power of education is reproduced. Secondly, online education environments provide the basis for individualising learning in a more complex and active way. For instance, individuals through computers on the web, CD-ROMs, different software instruments such as e-mail, chat or cyber navigators can access information, interact with it and with others, without having to attend conventional centres of learning. One consequence of this individualising is that educative processes are displaced and reconstituted as a relationship between producer and consumer in which knowledge is exchanged on the basis of the value. The modes of this exchange are realised as the consumer-as-learner and the learner-as-consumer. It certainly seems to be the case that the trading of information and knowledge especially on the web is spreading increasingly from the commercial realm to the realm of higher education, with institutions increasingly reconstructing themselves as enterprises to 'compete in the knowledge business. (Edwards, R. Usher, R., 1997).

Thirdly, related with last condition, role, structure and purpose of the universities have been redefined. The criterion of optimizing the efficient performance or "performativity" of the system comes to the fore. Linked to this is the position that it is the usefulness of knowledge in supporting economic competitiveness that justifies it rather than its contribution to the progress of truth and humanity. In higher educational institutions, it is skills rather than minds and ideals that are increasingly emphasised (Sarup, 1993). Although this, of course, is not a new phenomenon that since the mid-nineteenth century, universities have experienced demands to gear themselves to the servicing of economic goals, the new element focuses on the fact that the current emphasis on justifying knowledge in terms of its performativity is geared to the transition from the capitalism of early twentieth centuries to a "civilization characterized by sign values, the mass production of culture and generalized communications technology" (Sandywell, 1995, p. 126; Edwards and Usher, 1997).

The main reason behind the change of modernist conception of university is the massive reductions in funding from increasingly weakened state like many other institutions such as national airline carries by neo-liberal economic policies. Universities, thus, has adopted an economic model for restructuring process in developed world. Asynchronous online programs designed by universities have been the new components of this economic restructuring. Asynchronous online learning, in this sense, have become a functional and intensive environments for realisation of the changing nature of higher education. Hammersley (1992) argues that an economic model of the university is increasingly prevalent: "often associated with an instrumentalist conception of knowledge, with a rejection of any concern about the truth of knowledge over and above its usefulness". By contrast, what he calls the new model challenges the political and cognitive neutrality of the liberal university.

On the other hand, two paradoxical trends have emerged. First, the criterion of optimising the efficient performance in the system come to the scene and related with that the usefulness of knowledge in economic activities has become the reference point which justifies it rather than its contribution to the progress of truth and humanity. In higher education, it is competencies rather than thoughts and ideals. As the universities have become more oriented to the needs of globalized capital, they are becoming more utilitarian and economically instrumental. The new utilitarian and economically instrumental university model has placed in the market with its special programs designed for professional development or human resource development. The improvements in market originated from globalisation have forced organisations a structural transformation in terms of their structures and human resources both in public and private sphere as the world has technologically become smaller and 'global'. Structural revisions, however, at organisational level aren't enough to be standing alive in the market. Human resources must also be trained to cope with the rapidly changing nature of the global market. Education has appeared as an inevitable process and instrument for every kind of organisation. Universities have taken this responsibility. In this sense, online education has become an opportunity for

universities which must engage revenue from non-governmental resources by selling so called their intellectual capital. It has produced two sided advantageous for both employers and employees. For employers, it's the unique solution to improve the qualities of human resources according to necessities of dynamics of global market and so it's also the critical path for profit maximisation. For employees, on the other hand, getting education seems to be a single way for getting promotion. However, cost of education is still a problem to be solved. Attending a training in-service program has brought about two kind of costs; cost of training program itself and cost of loss of labour power originated from the time spent in attending a training in-service program.

Within this framework, online learning programs as a new environment of distance education has emerged as a reasonable solution. Online learning is free from time and place restrictions and the restrictions of traditional education with their asynchronous features. For employers, this means that:

- online learning programs can be attended out of working hours and so can prevent the loss of labour power in attending a training in-service program;
- Since the cost of online programs is lower than traditional educational programs, it can be paid for the improvement of human resources. On the other hand, it has become an opportunity for employees who want to promote but have no finance and time for attending a traditional educational program. In human resource development, online learning programs have appeared as a global solution against the problems originated from global market.

On the other hand, in contrast to functional and reasonable necessities of attending online programs, these programs means as a way for constituting a meaningful life through consumption as the second side of the paradox mentioned above. That is, learning like consumption of other goods and services become neither simply an aspect of economic instrumentalism nor an assertion of enlightened humanism (Edwards and Usher, 1997). It has become an instrument with which personal identities are reconstituted. Preferences about the clothes we wear, the food we eat, the car we drive become a realisation of taste and taste is thought through the media and advertising as well as through different thinking in education and training. Identities are increasingly reconstituted around those lifestyle choices. The main reason of this is that consumption is no longer the mater of need, it is an image, sign or icon within the aestheticization of life. Online learning environments with their flexible structure enable consumers to choose courses from wide range sources or programs depending on their personal wishes.

Another consequences of the flexibility which emerge with online education programs has concentrated on the fact that individual preferences has begun to determine structure and curriculum educational programs as a matter of individual identity. It is also appropriate for new model of universities. As access to public monies decreased, universities have shifted the costs to the users of educational goods. This shift is affecting the expectation of those paying. Customers who consume educational goods and services are expecting choice, and demanding educational outcomes, high quality and specifically tailored to particular needs (Nunan, 2000; Edwards, 1995). In conclusion, education must be tailored according to needs, expectations and characteristics of individual learners rather than only transmission of pre-established canon of knowledge. Online learning with multi-media components, software and network facilities has provided those flexibility. So individualisation of learning process on the web as a demand of new type of customers of global world has been accomplished on the web with a great effectiveness.

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