



<http://www.ucalgary.ca/hic> • ISSN 1492-7810  
2010/11 • Vol. 9, No. 1

**Tara Brabazon, *The University of Google: Education in the (Post) Information Age*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2007. Pp. 234. £35.00 (cloth). ISBN: 978-0-7546-7097-1.**

**Reviewed by Georgia Gaden, University of Calgary**

In *The University of Google*, Tara Brabazon picks up the thread of her earlier work *Digital Hemlock*<sup>1</sup> to further critique the twin trends of “managerialism and technological determinism” in academia (2). Drawing heavily from her own experiences, the author describes an environment where buzzwords such as “flexibility” and “life-long learning,” and hype around (as well as reliance on) technologies such as email, iLectures, and PowerPoint, leave teaching staff overstretched and ineffective and students unmotivated and confused. The book “investigates the struggles, problems and responsibilities of learning, teaching and working in the contemporary education system” (8).

In her introduction, “Living (in the) post,” Brabazon sets the scene for her argument: a university environment where administrators use management-speak, inflating concepts such as “flexibility” and “diversity” and ploughing private money into quick-fix technologies. In the meantime, coffers run empty when it comes to supporting libraries and excellence in teaching. Brabazon is quick to insist — and is persistent in this claim throughout the book — that she does not blame the technology (the internet, computer applications, online teaching tools) itself. Rather, she locates the aim of her critique at the social structures — a post-9/11 culture characterized and dominated by neoliberal market agendas and neoconservative morality.

Brabazon opens the first section — “Literacy” — with observations of a drop in the quality of work from students. She connects this with the use of technology, specifically the Internet, in scholarship. Students are unfamiliar with research methods, even with the most basic use of library catalogues, and favour easy-access Internet sources over scholarly monographs. Plagiarism is rampant. The author details her growing realization that students are not simply lacking in intelligence; rather, they are clueless as to how to go about their scholarship. She also describes her response in adjusting her own teaching practices to address this shortfall along with the success that is reflected in both assignment that results and glowing reviews from her students (whose emails Brabazon reproduces throughout the book).

The next focus of the opening section is social order. In a chapter referencing H.G. Wells’ classes of Eloi and Morlocks, Brabazon argues that despite claims of empowerment and egalitarianism through the application of technology in education, inequalities are reproduced and reinforced rather than dismantled. Already-powerful Internet users are prioritized with faster connections in their homes and access to the best and the latest gadgets while the poor populate underfunded libraries. Brabazon points out that the diversification of the student body runs parallel with a decline in the quality of education of these same students. The most disadvantaged students remain excluded.

---

<sup>1</sup> Tara Brabazon, *Digital Hemlock: Internet Education and the Poisoning of Teaching* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2002).

In the second section of the book, Brabazon takes on three elements of “Culture” central to her discussion: the idea of “flexible” learning; the practice of i-Learning; and popular culture, both as a subject of academic study and as a context for educational practices. In her experience, the reality of “flexible” learning as envisioned by university administrations involves a constant stream of email communication with students who often do not come to class or have time for face-to-face meetings, and do not prioritize study as they struggle to fit their scholarly work around paid work. Instructors are exhausted from the barrage of communication and invisible administrative work. Blame for the “dumbing down” of university education is often directed towards the student body. Administrators advocate technology in light of inadequate student-performance with the assumption that providing access to course content and instructor communication in ways more “convenient” for students will address the problem. This “flexibility” of time means that students can squeeze learning in here and there but, as the author argues, this approach does nothing to motivate students or help them learn how to process the amount of information at their disposal. Meanwhile, instructors are exhausted from round-the-clock communication.

In the following chapter, Brabazon takes a closer look at the i-Lecture which is a method of recording and uploading classroom lectures for students to listen to online. In her often scathing critique of this teaching tool, she points out how the separation of voice from body makes the i-Lecture more akin to broadcasting than lecturing. The latter format requires relatively complex communication skills and presentation strategies on the part of the speaker. I-Lectures lose valuable elements of the classroom experience while also failing to harness the full potential of the recorded form. Poor quality recording and technical glitches often make listening a frustrating and uninspiring experience. Students cannot ask questions, and the ability of the lecturer to use multiple popular culture media as they would in a classroom — photography, video, music — to engage students is lost.

In the final chapter of the section, Brabazon considers how these forms of popular culture are not only extremely useful as illustrative teaching tools, but they also serve as subjects for meaningful critical analysis. Paying attention to the contexts within which popular culture texts — for example films, music, and television — are produced and used is valuable in terms of reaching students with diverse life experiences. Brabazon cautions that embracing popular culture in the classroom, however, must be done carefully, and educators need to “move beyond cultural tourism — getting hip with the kids — and actually contextualize and theorize the sphere of pop” (150).

The third and final section of the book, also in three chapters, outlines Brabazon’s critique. In “Exploiting Knowledge?,” the author returns to her central argument: the question of why, at a time when knowledge appears to be valued economically more than ever and buzzwords such as “life-long learning” abound, universities are being “guttled” (156) of their human resources. The environment she describes is one where we are encouraged to occasionally pursue a formal education, earning limited skills but losing any depth of intellectual development that is only possible with dedicated time and energy. While information and technologies proliferate in the university, students are not given the tools to contextualize or evaluate how best to use them in their learning.

In “Deglobalizing Education,” Brabazon continues to describe a World Wide Web that is actually quite narrow, an environment dominated by privileged mobile and affluent digitally-literate populations. “The information poor,” she writes, are left “invisible at the digital frontier, disconnected and irrelevant” (186) while “the information elite continue to talk to the information elite, but in more media” (187). In the university, Brabazon points to the importance of valuing and exploring students’ cultural diversity rather than merely trying to manage and corral it. The climate of the university has changed in other ways, she writes, and, in the final chapter of her critique, she pays particular attention to cultural changes following the 9/11 attacks in the United States. The cultural milieu of the late 1960s and early 1970s saw movements for social justice on many university campuses. This was eventually displaced by a

---

movement that Brabazon identifies as particular to both the corporatization of the university and a culture where the media are increasingly characterized by “us-and-them” stories of terrorism and other clichés. Production values are now rooted in speed and superficiality and the promotion of the free market system. Today, developing critical literacies in students rather than the most basic encoding and decoding skills is more vital than ever.

In a short conclusion, Brabazon weaves together the strands of her central argument that include the critique of the managerial trend ushered in by the right-wing agenda of corporatization. In universities, “educational revelation” is replaced by “technological competency.” She calls for a return practices of teaching where storytelling has value. In addition, she writes of the importance of experimentation (for which there is little room in the business efficiency model of education), and of learning “on the edge of knowledge” (217). Finally, the reader is reminded again that when it comes to technology, “access does not confirm use” (219).

Brabazon’s prose is accessible and *The University of Google* is most certainly an engaging read. In places, it is an extremely powerful polemic. Throughout, Brabazon draws on a vibrant mix of scholarly and media sources providing an important context for her argument for readers within academe and beyond. However, although the bridge between the university and a wider social and cultural milieu is at the core of the book, I found Brabazon’s argument to be at its most compelling when it deals with the university experience. Particularly in the first section of the book, the book offers a valuable and evocative peek into academic life. For this reader, still in the early stages of my academic career, this was especially useful and thought-provoking. Indeed, although *The University of Google* has a potentially wide appeal to anyone with an interest in higher education, I think it would of particular interest to those embarking on careers in higher education. Indeed, it could be a valuable addition to any graduate or education program reading list, as it successfully promotes reflection and consideration of our practices and the institutions within which we operate. As Brabazon argues throughout the book, in the current climate where government funding dwindles as faculties scramble for private investment, research, which brings in funding, is often privileged over teaching.

If the above recommendation has one caveat, it is the concern I felt at moments of a derisive tone to Brabazon’s critique and a rather broad sweep to her argument. I was especially disappointed by her implication that graduate students as instructors provide sub-standard education for undergraduates (though this could be defensiveness on my part). In her discussion of the woeful situation of university students, Brabazon remarks that as post-graduates increasingly teaching classes, students lose the opportunity to be inspired by “old-style intellectuals” (62). In my own experience, inspirational and engaging teaching, as well as that which is dull and ineffective, can come both from seasoned academics and emerging scholars.

Overall, though, Brabazon’s argument about the crisis in higher education is convincing and effective in conveying a sense of urgency. It makes *The University of Google* a “sticky” read — one that has persisted in the mind of this reader. Interestingly, the audience who the author finds to be in need of the greatest shift in mindset — university administrators — is also in the best position to implement some of the changes for which Brabazon advocates.