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How to cite:

Farrow, Robert and Moe, Rolin (2019). Rethinking the role of the academy: cognitive authority in the age of post-truth. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 24(3) pp. 272–287.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/13562517.2018.1558198>

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Journal:	<i>Teaching in Higher Education</i>
Manuscript ID	CTHE-2018-0244.R2
Manuscript Type:	Original
Keywords:	cognitive authority, post-truth, educational technology, public sphere

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Rethinking the role of the academy: cognitive authority in the age of post-truth

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Abstract: The concept of ‘post-truth’ is here explored within the context of education and educational technology. Contemporary political discourse is often characterised by a polarisation of political belief and scepticism about scientific and expert authority has become commonplace. We explore tensions between democratic and technocratic impulses in describing changes that are taking place in the way that authority typically operates in higher education. We analyse changing notions of academic authority to understand some of the implications for the practice of teaching, learning and administration. We argue that technocratic, administrative authority increasingly supplants cognitive authority and subject expertise. One result of increased emphasis on performative/administrative authority is the nature of authority both within the academy and the wider public sphere is changed. We examine the implications for pedagogy, curriculum and academic practice, suggesting that performative approaches to criticality, openness, truth and transparency offer potential routes to new constellations of cognitive authority.

1. Introduction: Post-truth, politics and technology

Do we value the concept of truth highly enough? The concept of ‘post-truth’ has its origins in post-structuralist discourse analyses (e.g. Foucault, 1981; Derrida, 1976) that emphasize the intimate connection between power and knowledge as well as Nietzsche’s perspectivism and relativism about ‘truth’. According to Constructivist accounts, all knowledge production (and hence truth) exists as a product of human activity and cognition which has no existence separate from human activity. This does not preclude the existence of experts nor the category of truth, but does problematise the notion of truth as it has operated in the history of philosophy and scientific inquiry. Kuhn’s (1970) influential theory of paradigm change in science has also helped to popularise the idea that what is accepted as ‘true’ scientific knowledge is ultimately contingent and relative to a particular set of assumptions. Discourse analysis grew out of a need to have a more critical and reflexive account of social science. In recent years, thinkers such as Barad (2007) have extended this reflexivity into the physical sciences.

The 1990s were the origin point for a lot of contemporary attitudes towards truth and ‘post-truth’. The rise of technocratic management; corporate branding; spin doctors; political triangulation and digital manipulation of images and video are reflective of a general tendency to see truth as a function of creativity and influence rather than as a feature of objective reality. An exhaustive account of ‘post-truth’ would take us beyond the remit of the

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3 present paper, but Angermuller (2018) offers a useful summary of what is at stake in the
4 debate:
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7 “According to critics, discourse theorists have gone too far in questioning reality since
8 the advent of mass media society (e.g., Flyverbom and Reinecke, 2017). Thus,
9 observers from within Discourse Studies, as well as from outside have denounced
10 French discourse theories as ‘postmodernist’ (Habermas, 1993; Eagleton, 1996), even
11 as a threat to Western democracy (Ferry and Renaut, 1988). Thus, for these critics,
12 ‘postmodernism’ supports the idea that anything goes in moral affairs, that truth is
13 nothing but an expression of power relationships and that an idea is true because
14 people want it to be true. And they blame postmodernists for discrediting the idea of
15 scientific truth.” Angermuller (2018)
16

17
18 In *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*, the author Ralph
19 Keyes (2004) first raised the claim that contemporary political life is characterised by a state
20 of ‘post-truth’; that voters have become inured to rational argument, preferring emotional
21 appeal; that political discourse is simply a matter of whose talking points are shouted the
22 loudest; that expertise is simply an expression of the interests of a particular (and often
23 dominant) social group; and there are no longer ‘facts’ and merely interpretations
24

25
26 In recent years there has been a surge in forms of political organisation that explicitly reject
27 expert knowledge and embrace a generalised scepticism with respect to progressive issues.
28 Pinpointing a turning point is difficult; but clear contemporary examples include the anti-
29 vaccination movement; the denial of climate change science; flat-earthers; criticism of
30 political correctness; belief in the ‘deep state’; and so on. Brexit and the Trump presidency
31 can be seen as the realization of post-truth as daily operation, the use of disproven or never-
32 existing content as a foundation of real-world political and economic decisions (Peters,
33 2017).
34

35
36 Technology has played a fundamental role in the post-truth phenomenon. The Internet
37 facilitated a process by which like-minded individuals could find each other, communicate
38 and organise. Social media improved this affordance dramatically, with platformisation
39 enabling mass communication across national borders with little or no technical
40 expertise. This has made it easier to have erroneous beliefs reinforced by social recognition.
41 Moe (2017) argues that the educational and political institutions positioned to identify and
42 disperse knowledge have acted less as arbiter and more as marketer, allowing technology to
43 catalyze the post-truth movement. Morozov (2017) goes a step further, noting that the
44 knowledge economy is designed to promote consumption over accuracy; the technological
45 affordance of measuring success by page views is evidence that the problem is not ‘fake
46 news’ but rather an ecosystem of content-consumption-as-knowledge-development.
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51 This paper analyses this transactional approach to teaching and learning and the implications
52 not only for the academy but on societal expectations of knowledge and wisdom in a market-
53 based ecosystem. We begin by describing the erosion of societal superstructures as
54 authorities, which results in a winnowing of recognized subject expertise. We argue that the
55 gap created by this phenomenon has been filled by market-based options bound up in
56 technology products and ideologies, explored here as a particular “EdTech” ideology. Our
57 analysis indicates a need for new forms of trust and cognitive authority appropriate to our
58 contemporary circumstances. We propose indicate a number of performative strategies to
59 build trust, such as curriculum reform; considering the balance between the civic and market
60

functions of higher education; building cultures that support justified cognitive authority; building stronger links to wider society through lifelong learning and outreach; and working with greater transparency and openness in operational processes.

2. Populism vs expert authority: The subordination of truth

The possible subordination of truth to political objectives has long been recognized in philosophy. A problematic tension between populist impulses and the subject knowledge of the expert was first identified by Plato. A noted traditional critique of the value of democratic knowledge is found in the *Republic* (Plato, 1937:543a-569c) where Socrates argues that the best form of government was to be found in the expert knowledge of the ‘Philosopher-King’ who reluctantly exercises their superior judgement for the collective good. Speaking (as usual) through the character of Socrates in the dialogue where several interlocutors challenge each other on the nature of justice in collective life, Plato considers several alternative forms of political organisation. Democracy, suggests Socrates, is the inevitable result of society organised for the benefit of an aristocracy which leads to massive inequality. Plato believed that democracies are fundamentally anarchic and this results in a lack of unity and coherence. This in turn creates resentments which can be manipulated by a demagogue, leading to a new form of tyranny. Socrates goes on to contrast this vision with that of a benevolent dictatorship of a ‘Philosopher-King’ who, it is proposed, represents the optimum combination of strong executive authority and the exercise of good governance - “those whom we now call our kings and rulers take to the pursuit of philosophy seriously and adequately, and there is a conjunction of these two things, political power and philosophic intelligence” (Plato, 1937:473d).

Thus, the Platonic ‘Philosopher-King’ derives their authority not from democratic legitimacy but solely on the basis of expert judgement and technical knowledge. Kallipolis (Καλλίπολις) - the hypothetical, utopian city state ruled in this way - is highly technocratic, with a strict division of labour into three basic types: industrial & agricultural labourers; administration, government & defence; and leadership. What distinguishes the technocratic ruling class is that they have taken the time to develop their love of wisdom through education and training. They are experts in reasoning who exercise good judgement in the interests of the whole.

A similar distinction is made in another Platonic dialogue: the *Gorgias*, a dialogue about rhetoric and persuasion. Gorgias, a character in the dialogue, is a famed rhetorician and sophist. Socrates expresses his contempt for such arts of persuasion on the grounds that they are directed towards pleasure and gratification rather than truth and well-being (Plato, 1952:463). This time the analogy is drawn between the physician and the cook. Socrates argues that medicine is characterised by an interest in the health of the individual, while cooking is focused primarily on the pleasures experienced by those that dine on the food. Similarly, gymnastics aims to improve the body while cosmetics are used to improve only appearance (*Ibid.* 464c–465d). For Plato/Socrates the true goal of dialectics should be truth and the role of the inquirer is to love truth, not the effect that any rhetoric has on a listener.

Gorgias comes to accept that his own rhetorical art is ultimately focused on the production and manipulation of opinion (*doxa*) rather than genuine knowledge (*epistēmē*). In a commentary on *Gorgias*, McComiskey (1992:86) notes that an alternative response is available to Gorgias: he can simply deny the possibility of *epistēmē* outright and claim that

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3 all knowledge is a matter of doxa: “for Gorgias the sophist, all ‘knowledge’ is opinion. There
4 can be no rational or irrational arguments because all human beliefs and communicative
5 situations are relative”. We can see clearly in this response the embryonic form of a post-
6 truth paradigm where truth is made subordinate to some other (typically political) objective.
7
8

9 Plato’s defence of the role of the expert has been highly influential. Plato’s critique endures
10 because it captures well the tension and incommensurability between democratic or populist
11 impulse and expert forms of knowledge production and transmission. Simply put, expertise
12 constitutes a form of authority, but one which is not necessarily recognised or understood by
13 non-experts: hence the technocratic approach endorsed by Plato’s Socrates. In what follows
14 we term this phenomenon of superior knowledge as ‘cognitive authority’ following Wilson
15 (1983; 1991) and Rieh (2005) and employ this concept as a lens on expertise in educational
16 practice.
17
18

21 3. Cognitive and administrative authority in higher education

22
23 Expertise and authority are core concepts in formal educational systems: didactic approaches
24 to pedagogy often amount to little more than an exercise in the recognition of
25 authority. Academics justify at least some of their activities through an implicit claim to
26 cognitive authority: they know more than the general population about a particular domain.
27 Wilson (1983) distinguishes first hand (experience) and second hand (reported/learned)
28 cognitive authority. Because individual experience and knowledge are limited by the ability
29 of a single human to understand the world and amass knowledge, we typically rely on the
30 cognitive authority of others for most of our knowledge. This is especially true in the case of
31 formal instruction, but it also held to be a general epistemic feature of human knowledge.
32 Second hand reporting not only provides most of our “knowledge” of the world: it also
33 shapes and structures the ways in which our first hand experiences are interpreted and
34 understood within wider frameworks of truth and validity.
35
36

37 Wilson (1991) describes the following features of authentic cognitive authority:

- 39 • *Reliability*: second person testimony is considered reliable when the witness is expert
- 40 • *Specificity*: a knowledge domain may be broad or narrow, but it must be discrete;
41 expertise in one area does not connote expertise in another
- 42 • *Normativity*: expert testimony is not just trusted by a particular individual but also
43 considered to be trustworthy and should be believed unless there is reason not to
- 44 • *Openness to challenge*: it is possible to question a claim to cognitive authority on
45 sceptical grounds or a competing knowledge claim
46
47

48 Cognitive authority is thus supported by social recognition: one can be recognised as an
49 expert by some but challenged by others. In this sense, cognitive authority is structurally
50 contingent but in practice those who are recognised as domain experts have had their
51 authority established through extensive processes of examination and peer review. There is
52 a hierarchical and dynamic element to this in that there are degrees of expertise. Some
53 experts are recognised as having superior knowledge to others, and who is recognised as an
54 expert can change over time. However, pedagogically speaking the educator is almost
55 always in the position of cognitive authority with respect to the learners they support. Wilson
56 further distinguishes two types of authority: cognitive authority and
57 performative/administrative authority. These are characterised by different forms of power
58 relation and consequent affordances.
59
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Cognitive authorities are authorities on something-e.g., insects or Buddhist logic. Administrative or performatory authorities are not authorities on anything; rather, they are authorized to do or command or forbid something, as the judge, “by virtue of the authority vested in me,” is able to perform a legal marriage ceremony. (Wilson, 1991:259-260)

Rieh (2005) similarly argues that cognitive authority is separate from administrative and organisational forms of power. Traditionally this is how higher education institutions were organised; the production of authority through knowledge was joined by the practice of authority through community and fellowship, shared governance and collective action related to knowledge diffusion. However, within academia cognitive authority is often made subordinate to institutional (performative) authority as decisions that would traditionally be taken by scholars and experts are deferred to technocrats, managers and chief executives.

On the technocratic side, Smyth (2017) proposes three categories of reform in higher education: commodification, marketisation and managerialism. The expansion of higher education since the 1960s is bound up with advances in education and communication technologies that have both expanded provision to new audiences and also changed the nature of pedagogical relationships. Ball (1995; 2011) writes that in the 1960s the sociology of education was dominated by a focus on social class and the role of formal education in effecting progressive social change. By the 1970s this had become tempered with a cynicism about the way that existing power relations were being perpetuated by educators. This in turn gave way to a suspicion of the role of liberal expertise in educational policy-making, and by the 1980s class analysis had been largely displaced by identity politics as the locus of progressive analytical perspectives in education research. Ball argues that, by the 1990s, many of these areas had been wholly integrated into a wider project of educational reform that took its main inspiration from management theories which “define human beings as subjects to be managed” (Ball, 1995).

4. Authority and knowledge in neoliberal higher education

The process of binding academic institutions to corporate methodologies has come alongside a shift in the purpose of institutional existence, away from a public good of knowledge diffusion and toward a series of commodities to be deployed in the purposes of profit generation. The historical research on this topic has addressed this movement as a shift to academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), defined as an educational paradigm shift away from learners engaged with curriculum to educational consumers. Much of the writing on academic capitalism engages with the concept of neoliberalism, a geopolitical movement towards free-market capitalism most commonly associated with the policies of 1980s Western democracies such as Margaret Thatcher’s United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan’s United States. In modern discourses, neoliberalism is used primarily as an evocative call; however, its academic context is as foundational state of being for educational institutions (Seal, 2018). Whereas academic capitalism signified a perspective of learners as customers, neoliberalism identifies a present state of higher education designed to perpetuate academia as a space of consumption before knowledge.

Neoliberal higher education cannot be measured in terms of Marx’s base and superstructure because the education superstructure functions based on the movements of the base. The

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2
3 ‘neoliberal’ academy is therefore a space focused on commodification and marketization of
4 the education service. This is evident in the increased use of managerialism as a guiding
5 principle for the division of labour and operations where the academy was traditionally a
6 community of shared governance and democratic procedure. Elements such as return on
7 investment and maximizing efficiency lead to the erosion and devaluation of education’s
8 stature in political economy and discourse.
9

10
11 The impact of neoliberalism in higher education is evident in the debate over what constitutes
12 knowledge. From the perspective of the educator or expert, knowledge is something which
13 must be constructed through shared interaction and discourse (Vygotsky, 1983), but within
14 the neoliberal academy knowledge exists as content and can be imported at lower cost from
15 already established vendors (Morrow, 2005). The quantifiability of technology-enhanced
16 imported contents lend themselves to the measurement apparatuses of educational institutions
17 while artifacts rendered through knowledge construction come at higher labor cost and no
18 standardized metrics for measurement, meaning the demands of accreditation position the
19 science of learning as counter to its higher education practice (Newfield, 2016).
20
21

22
23 Efforts at reform and institutional change are therefore most often perpetuations of the
24 neoliberal university, addressed as innovations and revolutions but in truth reinforcing class
25 systems and labor productions (de Sousa Santos, 2005). Moreover, the political acceptance
26 and agreement on reshaping the academy into an economic engine has created a space for
27 populism within teaching and learning by reframing the pedagogical relationship as a
28 marketplace transaction. An education system focused on learning as a means to an end not
29 only obfuscates the longitudinal and transformative potential of the academy, but the
30 transaction format erodes the relationships inherent to learning. A consumer-led approach to
31 higher education can be understood to undermine cognitive authority by upending the
32 traditional relationship of student and teacher. This populist reckoning, facilitated by a
33 consumerist approach to the organization of education, has led to a greater willingness among
34 students to challenge the content and delivery of their education (Morrow, 2005). The result
35 is a loss in the cognitive authority of the educator, who is implicitly challenged when learners
36 demand greater control over the curricula they are taught, or how they are taught it.
37
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39
40 Academic capitalism has eroded trust in the communal construction of knowledge in a space
41 of expertise and replaced it with privatized trust options: trust in the marketplace or trust in
42 data. Trusting the marketplace is closely linked with neoliberal movements, and while we
43 have discussed the effect of the student as a consumer from the instructional side of
44 relationship, the administrative perspective of the student-academy relationship results in
45 administrative decisions based on the assumed movements of a student’s desire rather than
46 longitudinal growth foundational to the historical purposes of education. This can be seen in
47 universities’ focus on programs aligned with the knowledge economy: hard sciences,
48 technology and programs aligned with entrepreneurial thinking. This also ties into a trust in
49 data, or specifically the aggregation of numerous information points to identify a solution to
50 be replicated and perfected as ‘best practice.’ Trusting the data is akin to Morozov’s theory of
51 solutionism, and in so the criticisms of technological bias in research and development color
52 the world we imagine when building the tools to solve the undefined problems (2015).
53 Within 21st Century education discourses on austerity as well as expansion, the data-driven
54 solutions focus on creating consistent experiences to provide scale to maximize economic
55 growth. As Coffield & Edward (2013) argue, the attempt to endlessly improve practice
56 through metrics that encourage the emulation of the success of others is often used as a route
57 to impose reform from above.
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4 It is important to identify that reform in and of itself is not necessarily negative. Technocratic
5 reform by pedagogical experts may not be a bad thing. Institutional reform by business
6 experts also may not be a bad thing. However, the extent to which decision makers in higher
7 education are experts in teaching and learning is typically overestimated: Kenedi &
8 Mountford-Zimdars (2018) found that educational expertise is rarely considered important in
9 university leadership, with fewer than 20% of current pro-vice chancellors in UK higher
10 education having a formal qualification in education. Too often “expert” reforms are used as
11 a smoke screen to conceal some other agenda, such as increased profit or return to
12 shareholders. As Ball (2018) has recently argued, this is particularly the case in the context
13 of neoliberal reforms of educational systems, since all reform is in some sense “disruptive”
14 and this brings with it the potential of new markets.
15
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17
18 In this section we have argued that cognitive authority - the domain and pedagogical
19 expertise of educators - has been systematically subordinated to other sources of performative
20 or administrative authority. As the research around academic capitalism has evolved into a
21 societal discussion about neoliberalism, the relationship of educators to institutions, students
22 and administrators has shifted from shared operations based around the academy as a
23 superstructure element of public good to piecemeal employ in response to desires of
24 constituents rather than their needs or the needs of society.
25
26

27 28 **5. Beyond the academy: cognitive authority in the “EdTech” public sphere**

29
30 One key assumption from the liberal tradition is that educational institutions should prepare
31 all interested individuals for political life and engagement in the public sphere. This has
32 shaped modern educational practice but is not an agreed-upon expectation or ideal; for more
33 than a century a dissenting view has existed questioning the value and effectiveness of
34 education as public engagement and sought to reframe the operation in economic or
35 workforce terms (e.g., Tunis, 1936). These criticisms are similar to 21st Century questions
36 about the value of education (e.g., Caplan, 2017) in questioning the economic incentive of
37 academic subsidy and full population accessibility.
38
39

40
41 An important distinction between 20th and 21st Century arguments against the academy
42 exists in terms of democracy. The rise of education’s ‘golden age’ in the mid 20th Century
43 was politically shaped as a democratization of knowledge and opportunity for all Western
44 people independent of economic status, race or gender (Thelin, 2004). More than two
45 generations of educational research, development and practice is defined by this societal
46 belief that education is a call to equity, justice and opportunity (Thelin, 2004).
47
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49
50 Arguing against the value of education in the 21st Century in purely 21st Century economic
51 terms obfuscates the history of education’s growth. Books arguing against the value of
52 higher education such as Bennett and Wilezol (2013) do not provide an historical review of
53 education’s progress and where democratization has failed to engage; rather, they utilize an
54 ahistorical approach to educational practice and invoke stereotype and straw men to bring
55 back an argument that was defeated more than 60 years ago. The public sphere as nurtured
56 through education’s golden age is omitted from recent historical debates about the purpose
57 and value of college (Doherty, 2007).
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3 It is this evolving public sphere, increasingly mediated by digital technologies, which is
4 under attack from algorithm manipulation, propaganda cyber farms, and other questionable
5 intelligence operations. The solution posed by these technological forces is to increase the
6 reliance on technology in formerly public sector superstructures, most notably in education
7 (Williamson, 2016). The irony here is rich; the companies responsible for the erosion are the
8 ones promising an ever greater investment in their products is the only way to reverse the
9 trend and stop the problem.
10
11

12 Morozov (2015) refers to this as ‘technological solutionism’ (2015) and no better
13 contemporary example exists than that of social media giant Facebook. After Brexit and the
14 election of Trump as president of the USA, a number of educational scholars and researchers
15 used their public access to Facebook to question the algorithmic choices the platform had
16 used in sharing content among its users (Vaidhyathan, 2018). Evidence from the user side
17 was overwhelming that Facebook’s controls and filters had resulted in the limiting of content
18 for users based on demographic information. In 2017 and 2018 research and undercover
19 operations regarding the internal workings of Facebook showed not only did the makeup of
20 their platform allow propagandistic techniques and psychological manipulation through use
21 of its targeted advertising features during Brexit and the 2016 US Presidential election but to
22 have aided propagandists in the targeting (Gibney, 2018). Faced with a significant media
23 backlash, Facebook went on a charm offensive, including the commission of educational
24 features regarding journalistic integrity and content literacies. The foundation of content
25 literacies such as information and digital literacy is an ability to negotiate the transmitted
26 information in order to understand its biases and verify its truth, so Facebook’s role in
27 obfuscating truth through its platform makes its place as heading a digital literacy rather
28 questionable. Despite this, 15 community colleges across the United States recently
29 partnered with Facebook in offering their internal curriculum around digital advertising and
30 media literacy (Smith, 2018).
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36 The microtracking technology used by Facebook (and later used by groups such as
37 Cambridge Analytics in developing propaganda campaigns) is at the foundation of most
38 contemporary technological solutions to disrupt education (Selwyn, 2016). Such operations
39 make use of extensive tracking technologies to inform decisions about whether learning is
40 taking place. These technologies track numerous aspects of a learner’s interaction with a
41 computer-mediated instructional program: the time spent on tasks, the gaps between
42 keystrokes, typing style, word choice, cursor movement, eye movement and more. By
43 collecting and analyzing this information, these companies profess their artificial
44 intelligences can identify the moment when attention wanes or learning stops and therefore
45 shape the learning of the students by offering remediation or intervention through different
46 exercises or modules. The pedagogical approach of offerings like personalized learning is
47 similar to that coming from historical educational practice (and seen in the digital in spaces
48 such as MOOCs): the “sage on the stage” (King, 1993) - an expert who acts as the face of a
49 learning programme and delivers content. However, removing the expert from the
50 personalized learning network upends the cognitive authority in the learning space; the expert
51 is not an academic with a verifiable CV/resume but a “disrupter” with effective and
52 headstrong public relations.
53
54
55

56 The amelioration of cognitive authority in personalized learning has a ripple effect on
57 research-backed, progressive educational practice. Consider assessment by peer review; a
58 strategy fully endorsing a democratic approach to an educational environment. Open
59 educational technologies like Wikipedia are increasingly used and trusted in classrooms and
60

1
2
3 learning spaces. In these examples the role of the expert is as a facilitator or as a member of
4 a community, evident not in lecture performance but in addressing knowledge gaps through
5 organizing approaches to peer review or editing Wikipedia entries. However, for the learner-
6 as-user there is not necessarily a pragmatic difference between the biometric EdTech
7 company using eye tracking to address attention and Wikipedia; they are consumers of
8 content seeking a learning objective in a landscape void of human expertise and tangible
9 cognitive authority.
10
11

12 Assessment by peers is an increasingly common feature of online learning programmes. This
13 approach takes advantage of massive scaling to deliver a low-cost form of learning and
14 assessment. This can lead to more fluid and open approaches to learning (Purser *et al.*, 2013)
15 and some learners seem to be well-suited to this approach while others do not benefit from it
16 (Meek *et al.*, 2017). Crucially, assessment by peers replaces assessment by expert and this
17 can lead to a situation in which no-one has the authority to accurately assess work or provide
18 useful feedback to a learner. Suen (2014) provides some illustrative quotes from learners
19 based on evaluations of this type of provision.
20
21

22
23 I hated the peer assessments as in some cases, their anonymity gave the
24 peers an excuse to say mean-spirited things.
25

26 Peer-to-peer evaluation can not replace the teaching by an expert. The
27 evaluations are not deep and rich enough.
28

29 Asking tens of thousands people to discuss online about anything is
30 stupid. Letting three random Internet trolls (also known as peers) to
31 decide whether one passes with distinction or not is moron[ic].
32
33

34 I really disliked the peer assessment. I worked very hard on my map and
35 out of the reviews only one offered constructive criticism. The others I
36 question if they even looked at my map rather than just the attached
37 image of it. The comments that were made didn't even make sense.
38

39 (Suen, 2014)
40
41

42 Poor peer assessment can obviously lead to undesirable educational outcomes. If the
43 cognitive authority of educators in online learning is increasingly codified into instructional
44 design and learning resources like MOOC we need to be aware that this removes a degree of
45 reflexive communication and lessens the ability of the expert to influence educational
46 outcomes.
47
48

49 At the same time, however, there is a real need for experts to create high quality educational
50 resources like OER and MOOC which are openly available; form part of an intellectual
51 commons; and reach out beyond the academy. If educators don't act to fill public space then
52 others will. 2017 saw the emergence of a loose collective of "iconoclastic thinkers, academic
53 renegades and media personalities" (Weiss, 2018) referring to themselves as the 'intellectual
54 dark web'. Little unites these thinkers other than an anti-establishment attitude, a willingness
55 to embrace controversy and scepticism about intellectual gatekeeping. Many of them
56 individually have large numbers of followers on social media for whom they act as an
57 unchecked authority espousing freedom of thought while stoking controversy.
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3 Openness and publicity thus have an ambivalent relation to the cognitive authority in the
4 technologically mediated public sphere. There is a need for experts to be present in digital
5 public spaces but this also recasts the nature of pedagogical relationships. There is a need for
6 a commons that can provide high quality learning resources and make them available widely
7 available, but such resources inevitably dwell in an increasingly disparate, cacophonous and
8 confusing public sphere (or spheres). In addition, such outreach is often pursued as part of the
9 corporate efforts of higher education institutions to manage and promote their presence in
10 public space. Consequently, it is often marketing and branding expertise that drives the
11 intervention rather than genuine pedagogical engagement.
12
13

14 15 16 **5. Rethinking academic practice for age of ‘post-truth’**

17
18 Our analysis has demonstrated the need for new concepts of cognitive authority and
19 (crucially) *trust* appropriate to the technologically mediated public sphere. In this section we
20 indicate a number of strategies to build trust, such as curriculum reform; considering the
21 balance between the civic and market functions of higher education; building cultures that
22 support justified cognitive authority; building stronger links to wider society through lifelong
23 learning and outreach; and working with greater transparency and openness in operational
24 processes. We are guided here by three key affordances: criticality, openness and effective
25 use of technology.
26
27

28
29 Jester (2018) argues that curriculum is a key locus of the struggle to recognise the
30 multidimensional and multivalent expression of power relations in higher education. Wilson
31 (1991) draws attention to the role of cognitive authority in selecting resources for study and
32 concludes that we need to exercise critical and sceptical faculties regularly, conveying as
33 fully as possible the processes of selection to faculty and learners. To the extent that it is
34 possible and reasonable, critical engagement with curriculum is one way to resolve the
35 question of whose authority determines what is to be learned. Shor (1996:ix) describes this
36 as “power-sharing, sometimes called negotiating the curriculum, shared authority or co-
37 governance - what Seth Kreisberg (1992) called ‘power with’ instead of ‘power over’”.
38
39

40
41 A more critical engagement with curriculum does not apply only to educators. Pierce (1991)
42 suggests that it is of particular importance that library and information professionals engage
43 critically with resources used in instruction since they can act as a bulwark against
44 complacency with respect to curriculum:
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47 Authority is legitimate only within the boundaries of the community (subject or
48 otherwise) in which it is based... Even when we are able to locate authoritative
49 sources with answers to questions, they tend to be less certain than they look, and
50 greater authority is no guarantee of quality. Authority tells us only that the creators of
51 the source have qualifications and institutional affiliations that match the expectations
52 of a given disciplinary community, not that the source is infallible, or even that its
53 disciplinary community is the best to pursue the information sought (Pierce, 1991:31).
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56 As interdisciplinarity becomes ever more common within technology-enhanced learning
57 (Conole *et al.*, 2010; Scanlon & Taylor, 2016) there will be an increasing demand for brokers
58 who can effectively negotiate the claims to cognitive authority that arise within difference
59 disciplines. The skills required to effectively assess the validity of claims from different
60 disciplines, or to engage critically with expert authorities are *epistemological* skills. More

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3 broadly, the need to equip learners with improved epistemological and critical tools, so that
4 they can independently assess the validity of a particular truth claim and the evidence
5 associated with it, can be framed in terms of prioritising epistemic approaches to teaching and
6 learning. Orienting in this way involves explicitly questioning assumptions; providing the
7 argumentative tools to analyse and evaluate claims, theories, evidence and data; emphasizing
8 the need for consistency of beliefs; encouraging reflection on one's own assumptions; and
9 promoting epistemic virtues like criticality, curiosity, open-mindedness, honesty and
10 circumspection. These are not new literacies - arguably they are very old ones first identified
11 by the Ancient Greeks - but they are sometimes de-prioritised in favour of other elements,
12 such as core content delivery.
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16 One strategy that could be used to promote epistemic skills is to provide supplementary
17 education and resources on open licences, or to offer recognition of prior learning to students
18 who can demonstrate that they have completed some form of epistemic education. As
19 Almeida (2017) notes, open educational resources and practices are not a panacea for
20 inequity and other issues in education. However, it has also been argued that the open
21 element can provide support for critical forms of pedagogy because of its greater
22 reflexiveness and its potential for inclusivity. The democratising force of OER can be a route
23 to empowering educators when it affords them greater control over the resources they use and
24 the way that they teach (Farrow, 2017). Offering professional recognition for expertise in
25 navigating the abundance of online resources is one way that institutions can support these
26 activities.
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30 Perspectives that emphasize the importance of epistemology can be adopted, but also require
31 at least a provisional defence of the notion of truth and its role in education. As Angemuller
32 (2018) notes, there is a need to consistently articulate a more nuanced account of the status of
33 truth within Constructivist approaches, and to moderate the extent to which a critique of truth
34 can be manipulated to serve the ends of populists who reject scientific claims that are
35 unaligned to their political agenda. 'Post-truth' is a signifier not for a world where truth
36 claims can no longer be made (or no longer matter) but a world where disregard for truth has
37 few negative consequences. The problems associated with 'post-truth' are much bigger than
38 can be solved by rethinking academic practice. A properly functioning deliberative liberal
39 democracy requires not just intellectuals in public space, but a public that is willing to engage
40 with them and debate ideas rationally.
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44 The philosopher and social theorist Jürgen Habermas has defended the Enlightenment notion
45 of the public sphere since the 1960s. He recently suggested that the infrastructure required to
46 support a flourishing public sphere has been degraded by a diminishing audience for complex
47 ideas and expresses scepticism about the possibility of rebuilding a functioning public sphere
48 as long as culture is made subordinate to economics (Hermoso, 2018). Ameliorating this
49 requires a fundamental rethink about the purpose and value of academic institutions and the
50 way that they relate to the public they serve. For instance, greater attentiveness could be paid
51 to traditional educational goals like citizenship rather than thinking of education purely in
52 terms of preparation for the jobs marketplace.
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56 The role of the academy in supporting a range of social actions is often reduced to an attempt
57 to demonstrate the economic 'impact' of research on wider society. As Manners (2018)
58 notes, this is typically much easier to frame than engaging with more abstract questions about
59 the purpose of education:
60

We need to clarify the outcomes we are striving for – fairness, social justice, civility and tolerance, health and wellbeing, lifelong learning perhaps – and why we believe human and environmental flourishing matters. (Manners, 2018)

Forging stronger links to many different elements of society through ‘engaged’ practice can also offer a route to epistemic justice (Holliman, 2017). Reframing the concept of the public intellectual so that it is aligned to the coordinates of a new, digital public sphere necessitates a rethinking of intellectual communication and scholarly activity along the lines of increased transparency and openness.

6. Conclusion

The postmodern vision of education as imagined by Lyotard (1979) consisted of learners engaging with knowledge-filled computer banks to consume information; students would identify a need and find the proper data to service that request. The idea was that learners would engage the agreed-upon knowledge from computer banks and apply the information in terms of context and localized truths. The computer banks would be in a constant state of tending and growth, data amended and information reshaped as knowledge grew. In this vision of the future the role of instructor was reducible to that of operator of the computer systems.

Nearly 40 years later, Lyotard’s postmodern condition is somewhat accurate from a dominant paradigm perspective on education: computers allow learners to engage with content as they see necessary, and the scalability of such operations has fueled the recent EdTech phenomenon (Veletsianos & Moe, 2017). Instructors are often deployed in operational and administrative tasks, their expertise muted in lieu of linking students to the content and ensuring the machines record the interactions. However, the agreed-upon knowledge integral to Lyotard’s concept of postmodernism has been upended; small and localized truths are under assault from “post-truth”. The authority present across multiple levels of historical academia has been replaced with brand recognition, pushing the pursuit of education towards economic goals and obfuscating the relationship of learning with transformation and behavior change.

In this paper we have proposed using the concept of cognitive authority as a way of understanding both the changing nature of power relations in the academy; and the evolving role of educators in supporting learning. It has not been our intention here to attempt to unproblematise the notion of truth, which should be understood as a product of human activity and always engaged with critically. Rather, our aim has been to analyze changing notions of academic authority both within and beyond the academy to understand some of the implications for the practice of teaching, learning and administration.

Cognitive authority is a critical component of teaching and learning. The practice of teaching and learning requires an expert presence, and while the specifics of that presence remain a space of debate, at the very least a learning environment must include individuals with superior knowledge in order to produce learning materials and/or deliver instruction. Knowledge construction, facilitation of problem-based learning opportunities and discipline mastery are practices which shift the focus of learning from delivered instruction to wisdom development. Despite the difference in appearance of these methodologies, their application

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3 is in deference to the democratic values of education in the public sphere, understanding
4 content and context together in shared and unique environments.
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7 Because of the overt politicism of ‘post-truth,’ support of these methodologies must
8 acknowledge the political elements of constructive learning as foundational to the practice of
9 education as well as encourage this manifestation. Examples of this resistance abound.
10 Distributed networks throughout social media have used hashtags, memes and other virtual
11 phenomena to both speak out against historical oppressive forces but also to celebrate
12 expertise and accomplishment. In the summer of 2018 the #immodestwoman hashtag was
13 used on social media by female experts who changed their handles to reflect their
14 professional titles, reclaiming public space and setting out a claim to cognitive authority and
15 domain expertise. This kind of “performativity” (Butler, 1993) can be contrasted with the
16 passivity of “knowing” and merely being an authority. By enacting the authority of educators
17 and experts across teaching, learning, administration and public space a coordinated attempt
18 can be made to reclaim the centrality of the concept of truth.
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