

Underutilizing the ultimate technology during COVID—the human imagination

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—S. Craig Watkins

As COVID-19 began spreading across the United States, many schools made the decision to close down and transition to remote or online learning. Instantly, concerns that disparate access to technology among students would only widen the achievement gaps in education emerged. These concerns are valid, but they also overlook the deeper structural conditions that drive the racial achievement gaps in education. My colleagues and I discuss some of these conditions in our book, [The Digital Edge](#).

In recent years there has been increased emphasis by schools and the popular press on what is often referred to as the “digital divide.” But the real threat to education is what can be called the “learning divide.” This is a reference to the disparities students face regarding the opportunities to access opportunities for classroom learning experiences that foster creativity, problem-solving, and critical thinking. We know from several studies that students from resource-constrained communities simply do not have access to the same learning opportunities as their counterparts from resource-rich communities. Students in resource limited settings are much more likely to attend schools that are “technology rich, but curriculum poor.” This essential, but overlooked tension is on full display in the national move to online learning.

Four weeks into the transition to remote learning, the [New York Times reports](#) that many school districts around the nation are expressing concerns about the high rate of absenteeism for their online classes. Based on our year and half long study of a high school in the Austin metropolitan area, rampant absenteeism is not surprising at all. In fact, our research predicted it.

The real barrier that students face in schools today is not technological; rather, it is instructional. Students struggled to sustain an interest in school in large part because what counts as learning—memorization of facts, filling out worksheets, and just showing up—is uninspiring. Schools struggle with attendance under normal circumstances. The idea that students are rejecting these rigid and lifeless approaches to learning from their own homes should not come as a surprise.

Many students seek a form of learning that is not available to them offline or online. Most schools simply do not offer learning opportunities that are relevant and keyed to our modern society and economy. Many of the students that we got to know through our research understood this. Deep down they knew that school was ill-suited to prepare them for the kinds of creative careers many coveted. Most of the students were not high achievers in the conventional sense. In fact, the majority of the students we write about were not enrolled in advance classes or on track for college. Still, they came to school regularly and practiced what we term “social hacking.” This is a reference to the creative ways in which these students re-engineered school to fit their own creative aspirations.

Students, for example, snuck into the game development lab and loaded Minecraft on the classroom computers. Further, students conducted peer-to-peer tutorials on how to use the gaming platform for educational and creative purposes. Some students invented their own extracurricular activities like the Digital Media Club and the Digital Arts Project that relied heavily on access to the school’s Wi-Fi, computers, and software to pursue their aspirations as designers, graphic artists, and filmmakers. In short, these students engaged in a collective enterprise that turned school into their very own innovation lab, making some of their technology classes and much of the time spent in school during the after school hours a much more rewarding, engaging, and we argue educational experience.

Even as the COVID-19 outbreak reminds us that many students struggle with the digital divide, the learning divide makes the educational challenges they face even more severe. What are not adequately addressed in the ensuing debate about school disruptions are the kinds of online learning opportunities that students are invited to participate in. Even if many of the students who experience alienation in school had access to robust and reliable technology many would likely conclude that what and how they are asked to learn, offline or online, is simply not worth connecting to.

This is a failure of human imagination, not a lack of access to technology.



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