

Customised Diversity? Education, capitalism and diversity in the digital present. An Editorial

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Keywords: Knowledge Production, Datafication, Digital Capitalism, Digital Infrastructures,
Optimisation, Inequality

The notion of diversity is widely accepted as a positive value in Europe and beyond. Corresponding discussions can be differentiated from heterogeneous theoretical and empirical perspectives. Generally, diversity refers to meanings clustered around variety, assortment, mixture, range, and multiplicity, as well as difference, segregation and inequality, and these are applied to a wide range of phenomena. Diversity can also be seen as a marker and driver for societal and cultural change but this is not always the case, it can lead to a standstill situation or even regression. This understanding of diversity foregrounds socio-political categories of differentiation such as ethnicity, disability, gender or sexuality. However, in the context of current capitalist relations in general, diversity has long since developed into a marketable slogan and, in the form of “diversity management”, has been customised as a technology of corporate management (Krell 2015). In the political arena, such a logic of diversity, compatible with capital structures and utilising capitalist relations, corresponds to a dominant liberal anti-racism that – cynically speaking – resigns itself to the equal exploitation of all (Roldán Mendívil & Sarbo 2022: 34).

Under the formula “customised diversity?”, this special issue addresses a core ambivalence of capitalist markets. On the one hand, they promise a diversity of product range and thus a customised, identity-awarding consumption experience. This is contrasted with capitalism’s tendency toward monopolisation and thus a collapse of diversity among market participants on the other hand. This movement is abundantly clear in the global market of large tech corporations: a very small number of corporations respond to the external diversity of the market by transforming it into an internal “diversity” by buying up start-ups and competing companies or by creating enclosed “proprietary markets” themselves (Staab 2019).

In this regard, the educational context is particularly interesting as Big Tech and for-profit educational industries are pushing into the ed tech (educational technology) sector, seeking to install mono-cultures of digital infrastructures of teaching and learning (Dander, Hug, Sander & Shanks 2021). They promise their products – learning applications, platforms, environments etc. – to be adaptive to individual learners, or even to be “learning” themselves. Systems like these are claimed as “instruments” or “tools” that can contribute to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in learning. At the same time, these values have become more controversial than before, if we look at how the current political landscape is affecting US education and research institutions.

Ed tech tools are proclaimed to offer learners a wide diversity of educational materials and media. In this manner the socio-political dimension of “doing diversity” is rendered invisible (Stoltenhoff 2022). At the same time, the attributed difference of learners is not only being naturalised and individualised, it is also a reductive understanding of learning that is being hard-wired within the systems and mostly represents instrumental concepts of learning and educational technology (e.g. Seemann et al. 2022). Similarly, educational policy making, funding structures, and uncritical research in the field of educational technology largely follow such concepts that are, at best, ignorant of capitalist instrumentalisations (Braun et al. 2021).

In varying forms, the connection between the contributions gathered here becomes apparent along (at least) two lines: (1) the involvement of tech companies in the context of education; and (2) the question of knowledge and its re-production. While the “provision” of learning tools might appear negligible at first glance, it, nonetheless, addresses an aspect already highlighted by Shoshana Zuboff (2019) in her widely cited study on surveillance capitalism: the accumulation of knowledge and knowers as well as the concentration of know how in a handful of companies. This

weighs heavily in the educational context in that “schools and teachers, rather than having a feast at a digital banquet, find their menus reduced. Their ability to choose the best tools replaced by resourcefulness, the most competent making the best of what is available” (McLaughlin & Shanks 2023). Timewise the education sector is lagging behind, while capital, technical know-how, marketing know-how, and data are rapidly accumulating and things are moving fast and breaking quickly.

Regarding knowledge and its re-production, it becomes apparent that technological optimism often leads to the increasing knowledge about users, learners and teachers being viewed as a means of meeting individual needs. This, however, reveals a reduction of education that is based on ideas of measurability and evidence that can by no means only be located in the here and now. Although algorithmicity, and the practices prefigured by it, turn out to be new phenomena in the digital age, from the perspective of the history of media, education, and technology, we can already see a certain orientation towards data following, for example, the formalisation of education and learning. Even in pre-digital times, data was collected, evaluated, and used (see among others Krämer 2022; Aronova et al. 2017) – and even then, such quantification of the social was based on ideas of optimisability. Historical research thus shows us that data-based quantification has not only been associated with the idea of optimisable learning or optimisable learners in the digitised present, and this reminds us of the fact that the history of education always touches the now (see, among others, Westberg 2021; Depaepe 2010).

Against this backdrop, pressing questions arise that we aim to address in this special issue, from theoretical and empirical perspectives:

- How are today’s globalised assemblages of capitalism in educational contexts relevant to issues of diversity?
- What kind of ideas and values are underpinning “customised diversities” and concepts of personalised and/or adaptive learning, and where do they come from?
- Which goals, methods, and forms of critical media education are important to strengthen democratic and sustainable development paths in media development, in the use and design of digital media?
- In what ways and to what extent are practices of theorising and the research of and in media education shaped by digital capitalist infra/structures and logics? What “other”, alternative, subversive, critical, utopian practices can be developed – and how?
- What is the role of media education research for designing knowledge diversity and viable futures of education facing capitalist reasoning in the digital age?

Theoretical Perspectives

In “**The Education-Industrial Complex Going Global**,” **Anthony G. Picciano** provides an exemplary dissection of the growth of the education industrial complex into schools through various educational technologies and mechanisms. This has been achieved through the introduction of hardware and software, curriculum changes and assessments, as well as the involvement of billionaire philanthropists and for-profit companies. As Picciano points out the COVID-19 pandemic

afforded a truly golden opportunity to these companies for extra profit. The article provides food for thought with an analysis of future prospects with the use of AI in education.

With **“Knowledge diversity in higher education? A critical analysis of changing post-digital knowledge ecologies using examples from Germany, Italy and Austria,”** Barbara Gross, Theo Hug, and Ulrike Stadler-Altmann present another topical subject, namely the transformation of higher education as a result of various technological developments including AI. In their article they compare university structures in the field of education in Germany, Italy, and Austria. In analysing these three cases, they consider how evolving (digital) knowledge ecologies influence both the internationalisation and epistemic diversity of higher education in the three countries and the inherent opportunities and contradictions therein. This provides us with many insights into how higher education knowledge is understood in these countries and the challenges of digitisation alongside a growing trend for higher education publications (like this one) to be in English.

In their theory-based paper **“Capitalism and Digital Inequality: Implications for Inclusive Education,”** Jan-René Schluchter and Anselm Böhmer are investigating the relations between inclusion, exclusion, social and digital inequality, capitalism, and (inclusive) education. The authors provide readers with an overview of the interrelations between the aforementioned concepts and dig deeper into multi-layered notions, such as exclusion / inclusion, in particular with regards to societal structures and digital capitalist conditions. They especially aim at reflecting on the (broad) notion of inclusion as an educational as well as a political and epistemic project. In respect of the “inclusive” character of capitalism – all is being integrated into the production of surplus value – they conclude by asking: “What kind of inclusion, and how?”

Critique of Progress and Optimisation

In his article **“Contradictions of Progress: Perspectives of an Educational Criticism of Digital Capitalism,”** Christian Leineweber reflects upon the intricate relationship between education and digital capitalism, emphasising how economic interests deeply shape educational goals and practices. It critiques the pervasive influence of digital technologies, which both empower and constrain individuals by fostering self-optimisation, competition, and societal pressures. Using the method of immanent critique, it examines contradictions in digital capitalism, such as the individualisation of learning, disenchantment of educational institutions, and the erosion of agency. Ultimately, the author advocates for a nuanced media-pedagogical critique that addresses these contradictions to develop equitable educational practices.

The debate on the hegemonic power and ubiquity of IT monopolies and their implications in the context of (media) education is mainly framed from the perspective of the Global North. Nina Grünberger questions this perspective in her contribution **“From Colonialism to Code. Decolonialising (media) education within digital capitalist structures”**. The paper, with a theoretical approach, outlines phenomena of digital capitalist power and domination in the context of education from a global, decolonising perspective. Although the article does not conclude with direct recommendations for action, it does invite readers to reflect on their involvement in technological theories (which mainly emanate from the Global North).

In her paper **“Knowing what’s normal. The Production and Conveyance of Knowledge via Menstrual Tracking Apps and what that has to do with Capitalism,”** Lilli Riettiens explores menstrual tracking apps as part of broader lifelogging and (self-)datafication trends. Using the example of the app *Flo*, the article theorises two levels of (self-)discipline, linking questions of user customisation to digital capitalism. It shows how human and algorithmic optimisation converge in economically structured processes, revealing how health, technology, and capitalism intertwine in shaping modes of subjection in the digital present.

Critical Media Literacy, or What's next?

In her paper **“The Relevance of the *Frankfurt Triangle* for Critical Media Literacy and Digital Citizenship,”** Petra Missomelius focuses on a clarifying definition of what could be understood by digital citizenship, based on critical media literacy. As a conceptual basis, she introduces the “Frankfurt Triangle” (2019). This model was created to mediate between perspectives of media education, media culture studies, informatics and computer science and is widely used by German-speaking media education scholars. Missomelius, then, discusses educational implications of digital capitalism, perils of IT monocultures and its promise of diverse digital literacy experiences.

Valentin Dander examines how young people in various educational contexts can be methodically encouraged to engage critically with digital capitalism. Alongside an in-depth theoretical discussion of digital capitalism and the positionality of critical media education, the article **“Educational approaches beyond digital capitalism. Final interim results of a practice-based research project on methods in media education”** presents the project *Critical Data Literacies*. Dander outlines pedagogical approaches and empirical insights that inform both educational practice and future research in this field.

This collection of articles brings together different traces of capitalism in the digital age through all types of education and media and across several European countries. We hope that you find this diversity of scholarship and the collection of research on the past and present alongside suggestions for the future of capitalism of interest.

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