Confronting Platform Capitalism in Education

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The Core Argument

In this paper, I will argue that the infrastructure of commercial learning platforms, driven by the logic of *platform capitalism*, systematically subvert active learning pedagogies by prioritizing datafication and automation over the fostering of student agency and critical thought (Williamson, 2020). I will explore this conflict by examining (1) how platform architecture reshapes teaching and learning relationships, (2) how it creates a *false scaffold* that can hinder learning and worsen inequality, and (3) how it overlooks the development of student identity and critical thinking (*subjectification*). Finally, I propose that educators can counter these effects by being given the skills to act as intentional *designers* of learning experiences who champion transformational—not merely transactional—digital learning.

Introduction: Tools Are Not Neutral

The rapid adoption of digital learning platforms is often presented as a neutral and necessary change, especially after the experience of emergency remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research shows that platforms like Google Classroom were widely adopted because they were seen as useful and easy to use during a crisis (Alotumi, 2022). However, it is a mistake to see these tools as passive. As Perrotta et al. (2021) explain, bringing platforms into the classroom means bringing in *platform capitalism*—an economic system built on "data extraction, network effects, and automated control" (p. 14).

This paper asserts that the design of these platforms clashes with collaborative, active, and dialogic teaching methods, as well as the core principles of andragogy in adult learning. While

efficient for managing tasks, they can reduce the complex, relational work of learning to a series of standardized transactions (Perrotta et al., 2021). The solution, therefore, is for educators to move from being passive users of technology to becoming active designers who can shape these tools to serve sound pedagogical and andragogical goals. This aligns with the ISTE Standards for Educators, which call for using a design process to create innovative, engaging, and personalized learning experiences that foster student agency, problem-solving, and creativity (ISTE, 2016). This standard emphasizes leveraging technology not for mere consumption, but as a tool to design authentic activities and build solutions that cater to diverse learner needs.

How Platform Design Shapes Pedagogy

Platforms influence learning through their built-in architecture. It is important to acknowledge why they are popular: studies confirm that their ease of use is a major factor in their adoption (Alotumi, 2022). This efficiency, however, comes with a hidden cost.

These platforms are built around rules known as an Application Programming Interface (API). As Perrotta et al. (2021) note, "APIs are a central integrative mechanism for platforms" (p. 18). This technical framework is designed for specific, measurable actions like posting assignments, turning them in, and issuing grades. It alone cannot handle complex, spontaneous interactions it wasn't programmed for.

This is particularly damaging from an andragogical perspective, which tells us that adult learning is most effective when it is self-directed, experiential, and grounded in the learners' own needs and motivations. A platform's architecture systematically undermines these core principles by limiting self-directed exploration in favor of confining learners to pre-defined pathways, while gamification mechanics substitute intrinsic motivation with external rewards, contradicting the

andragogical assumption that adults are internally motivated. Maybe most important, homogenization of content fails to account for the diverse lived experiences that adults bring to the classroom, treating them as data points rather than unique individuals.

In these instances, adults may instead find ways not to interact with the content, but still obtain the reward, such as a certificate, by letting a video lecture play in the background to completion of a corporate platform or only do the minimum work on a platform geared to giving points for posting and responding.

The idea of an algorithm with strict structures also creates a direct conflict with active learning. For example, a teacher might want to use a *Fishbowl* debate, a method shown to build "motivation to learn, increase interest and critical thinking" (Karim & Hassan, 2021, p. 24). But the live dialogue and non-verbal cues essential to this method are impossible if on a platform built for text-based, asynchronous posts. The teacher is forced to simplify the rich activity into a basic discussion board assignment. This eliminates some of the constructivist gains of this process. It still works for learning, but not at the same level. This isn't a failure of the teacher; it's a case of *pedagogical compromise* (Perrotta et al., 2021), where the platform's inflexible design limits pedagogical possibilities.

The Problem of the False Scaffold and Hidden Curriculum

When looking at learning approaches, many often involve *scaffolding*—providing structured, temporary, adaptive support to help students as they learn new skills or concepts. It is a design strategy working at a metacognitive and cognitive level.

Platforms, in contrast, create what might be called a *false scaffold*. They offer a rigid sequence of tasks, automated quizzes, and completion checkmarks. While this looks like support, it is

really designed for administrative tracking, not for cognitive development (Williamson, 2017). This system cannot provide the feedback that students need.

This approach can often work against how people learn best. It minimizes the processes necessary for long-term retention. By focusing on the final grade and completion, it discourages revision, the active process of reviewing and re-examining previously learned material to solidify knowledge for long-term retention and understanding. Most importantly, it can lead to *metacognitive erosion*; the platform consistently tell students what to do next, preventing them from learning to plan and monitor their own learning. Something that leads to problems in executive functioning skills. A teacher uses scaffolding to build independence, while the platform's structure is designed to manage workflow.

Platforms enact a powerful *hidden curriculum*—the unintended, often unstated, lessons learned through the structure and culture of schooling. While the *explicit curriculum* might teach critical thinking and collaboration, the platform's *hidden curriculum* teaches something else entirely: that learning is a series of discrete, individualized tasks to be completed; that efficiency and speed are valued over deep thought; that external metrics and gamified rewards are the true purpose of education; and that authority ultimately resides in the algorithm. Every time a student clicks "turn in" to receive an automated grade, they are learning to comply with a system that values completion over understanding. This hidden curriculum directly undermines the stated goals of fostering creativity, curiosity, and agency, training students instead for a future of managed work (Perrotta et al., 2021; Williamson, 2020).

The Deeper Costs: Data, Markets, and Student Agency

The "free" price tag of many platforms is misleading. As Perrotta et al. (2021) point out, "Google Classroom... are offered free of charge, but this does not mean a precise business strategy is absent" (p. 16). The strategy is market capture and data extraction.

This creates a tiered system. Under-resourced schools may only have access to basic, automated "free" tools. Wealthier institutions can afford to supplement them with high-cost, high-touch models or invest in extensive training and support for their teachers (Veletsianos & Houlden, 2023). The digital divide is now about resources: which schools can afford the human expertise that makes technology meaningful, and which are left with the automated, data-extracting shell. If a school cannot provide a platform designed to foster culturally responsive digital learning environments, the students are the ones affected.

Students become the product. Their data and behaviors are mined as raw material. Large companies like Pearson have "pivoted to digital education products and services in its pursuit of new market opportunities" (Williamson, 2020, p. 58). Education risks shifting from a public good to a private commodity.

Overlooking What Matters: Identity and Critical Thinking

A significant casualty of this system is *subjectification*—the development of a student's personal voice, agency, and critical perspective. Research has found that this crucial domain is often completely neglected in online environments, as everyone is trapped by the platform's designed demands.

Platforms promote hyper-individualization, pushing a model of the "self-responsibilized, self-determining learner." This assumes all students have the same agency and support, which

is simply not true. It sidelines the collaborative development of identity and critical thought that is central to active learning.

Therefore, a fundamental task must be to develop *critical digital literacy*. This means going beyond teaching how to use a platform to teaching how to *critique* it. What data is this collecting, and why? How does its design shape interaction? What values are built into it? This transforms passive users into critical thinkers about the technology.

A Way Forward: The Teacher as Designer

Resisting these architectural design problems requires an actionable approach. Educators must be supported in the role of *designer*. This means making pedagogical goals the top priority, not platform convenience. This involves creative adaptation, such as using platform tools in unintended ways—for instance, structuring a quiz to spark debate instead of just testing facts or creating an interactive module using software that embraces active participation and learning checks. It also requires designing for agency by creating assignments that emphasize diverse perspectives and collective knowledge-building. It is teaching critique by integrating discussions about data privacy and platform design directly into the curriculum. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it means championing human interaction by prioritizing personalized video or audio feedback over automated grades to reclaim the essential mentoring relationship between teacher and student.

Conclusion

Commercial learning platforms are not neutral. Their design, rooted in *platform capitalism*, often undermines relational, critical pedagogy by prioritizing efficiency and datafication. This leads to

a *false scaffold* for learning, a lack of cognitive and metacognitive critical thinking skills, removes social-based learning, worsens inequity, and neglects student agency.

However, this outcome is not inevitable but confronting this requires more than awareness; it requires redesigned preparation for educators. Training programs must better equip teachers to act as critical designers of digital environments—a shift aligned with the ISTE Standard for Educators (ISTE, 2017). This isn't about rejecting technology, but about reclaiming intentionality: helping educators repurpose platform tools toward collaborative, authentic, and self-directed learning.

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