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DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN EDUCATION

Digital labour meets the classroom

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Digital technologies are associated with various societal trends, including the changing nature of work and employment. While some high-status professionals (such as accountants, solicitors and GPs) now face the digital automation of their traditional day-to-day work, new forms of technologically enabled work are also emerging that would have been unimaginable 10 years ago. Indeed, while most *RI* readers might now be familiar with the likes of Uber, Deliveroo and Amazon Mechanical Turk, similar forms of 'digital labour' are also beginning to encroach into schools and teaching. This is certainly an area of 'educational technology' that now merits close attention.

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EMERGING FORMS OF DIGITAL LABOUR IN SCHOOLS

Perhaps the most recognisable form of digital labour is 'gig work' — most commonly associated with taxi rides and food delivery, but encompassing any form of digitally co-ordinated freelancing in which individuals are contracted to carry out specific tasks as required. Teachers can now participate in various education-related 'gigs', including virtual tutoring, online marking, exam coaching and even shadow assignment writing. There is also a growing contingent workforce of remote educators who can work in online learning environments (or even be 'beamed into' physical classrooms) when and where required (for example, Proximity Learning, 2020).

Alongside this are forms of digital labour that might appear less organised, but are no less transactional. For example, numerous online platforms help teachers sell their self-produced resources (such as lesson plans, worksheets and class resources) to others. Large communities of teachers work as online vendors on general marketplaces such as Etsy, as well as on education-specific platforms, such as Teachers Pay Teachers, Amazon Ignite and LessonPlanned, that specifically host the resale of classroom resources.

Another form of everyday digital labour involves social media users gathering sufficiently large audiences to monetise their content. Many school teachers now use social media to showcase their classrooms to wider online audiences – the most successful achieve 'micro-celebrity' or 'teacher influencer' status among niche '#EduTwitter' and teacher-Instagram audiences. Prominent 'edu-famous' teachers now run their own sideline consultancies, juggle lucrative speaking gigs, write books and make media appearances.

A CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION OR CONCERN?

Digital technologies are clearly expanding the types of work that teachers can take on, as well as increasing the range of people who are working in quasi-teacher roles. Perhaps, then, there is much to be welcomed here. After all, this appears to be work that many people undertake by choice, allowing them to work flexibly, to supplement 'downtime' from regular school employment and perhaps even enjoy. Teachers have always taken on supplementary piecemeal work such as tutoring and external examination marking. Moreover, these forms of digital work undoubtedly fit the contemporary logic of flexible, hybrid types of employment – having a 'side hustle' or maintaining 'plural careers'. Many teachers might welcome the chance to join in these modern ways of working.

Looking beyond these enthusiasms, however, there are obvious questions of whether these 'new' forms of labour constitute the exploitation (rather than empowerment) of education workers. On the face of it, these are underpaid forms of employment that are often subordinated to large commercial platform providers with little interest in worker rights or public education. This work contributes to a growing sense of education as an individualised and commodified process. Perhaps most concerning is the propensity for these types of work to increase teachers' overwork and role intensification – as Trebor Scholz (2012, p. 2) puts it, these are activities that do not 'feel, look, or smell like labor at all'. Social media and e-commerce websites are effective ways of lulling us into feeling that we are not taking on additional 'work'... even when we plainly are.

MOVING FORWARD

There are certainly two sides to these educational forms of digital labour. This work might be individually enriching, but it is also collectively devaluing the idea of education as a common social good. As such, these trends clearly merit close scrutiny by education researchers. To date, studies in the area of educational technology have often appeared preoccupied with encouraging teachers to make better pedagogical use of digital technologies. Academic discussions of digital education therefore need to better acknowledge teachers as workers, the internet as a place of work, and the power dynamics therein.

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Yet, the rise of digital labour is not simply of academic interest. These digital activities place responsibility and risk directly onto individual workers rather than employers, with many platform businesses refusing to recognise themselves as employers at all. Any sense of work being undertaken in collective or collegial ways is obscured. There is little concern for workers' collective rights and protections, alongside a diminished dignity of labour (Fish & Srinivasan, 2012). The rise of digital labour therefore presents a challenge to education unions and organised labour. There is a danger that digital labour erodes the idea of an education 'profession' that is unionised and can act collectively. If teaching work can be performed by anyone in any location, then this clearly disrupts the mutual reliance that traditionally gives a set of workers power with their managers (Ajunwa & Greene, 2019).

However, perhaps these forms of digital labour have the potential to reinvigorate organised labour in education. Perhaps teaching unions can recognise and represent the collective rights of educational digital labourers – mirroring recent efforts by the UK GMB trade union to negotiate on behalf of online delivery workers. In light of recent attempts to establish organised labour collectives for gig workers and YouTubers, educational digital labourers might also begin to self-organise. In this reconstituted world of education work, the whole notion of what it means to be employed as a teacher merits some serious rethinking.

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