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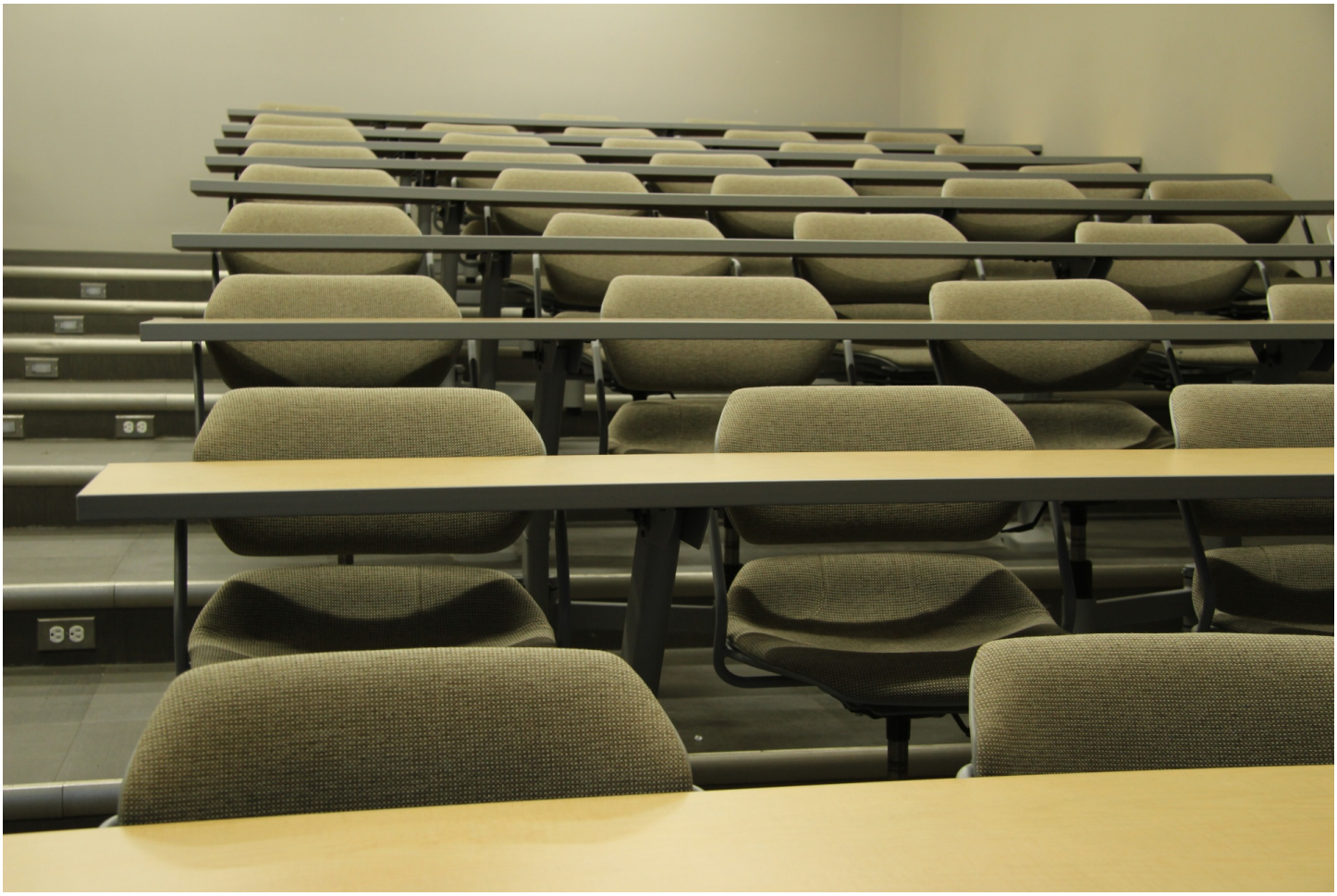
Distributed Learning

The other day, Matt Mullenweg (chief executive of Automatic, which owns the WordPress blogging platform) stated: “This is not how I imagined envisioned the distributed work revolution taking hold.”[1] Perhaps, but he is not complaining either! In fact, in the age of COVID-19, educators now have to grapple with the distinct possibility that the idea of “distributed work” is being taken as the model for “distributed learning.” This shift comes, of course, on the coattails of the digitalization of knowledge that is now a solid decade in the making. University education has already readily adapted to the digital turn, especially in the realm of print media, but education in that broader, say, human sense, for the most part did not have to significantly change. The verdict is still out on whether online classes are better or worse than more traditional classes.[2] Regardless, a resilient, multi-discipline-oriented, online education that aims for a broad spectrum of students is still a long way in the making. One can only hope that old-fashioned classrooms are not going to be completely phased out in some Mullenwegian utopia, but the indications are not positive. In these pandemic times, special discussion sessions—online, of course—are being held across academia for faculty who are nervous about these changes to address “the psychological/emotional barriers to the adoption of online teaching.”[3] But what if some of the “barriers” might not be just “psychological” or “emotional”?

The conventional language that supports “distributed learning,” to quote one promoter, sounds like this: “This learning solution eliminates high cost and inconvenience associated with having students travel to one location for a day of instruction.”[4] The promise of convenience and the lure of saving money are very real in the ears of administrators, especially when compounded by the desire by institutions to be up-to-date in the technical domain. However, hidden behind that optimistic sounding phrase “learning solution” is a vast array of interlocked and hopefully *functioning* equipment and software that, when bought and installed, ostensibly prove that the institution is investing in the future. And once the infrastructure for mass-usage-teaching is in play (kickstarted by a good dose of disaster capitalism), it might become hard to disentangle teaching from new types of expectations and requirements. Larger universities on tight budgets—and especially universities in big cities—might begin to use the campus only as a site for labs, meetings, seminars, and conferences.

Textbooks have already been slowly phased out by large publishing houses and replaced by the mix-and-match availabilities of digital offerings. As one news headline explained: “The world's largest education publisher has taken the first step towards phasing out print books by making all its learning resources ‘digital first.’” The going argument for making textbooks digital is that they “can be updated responsively.”[5] This argument is, having written a textbook myself, mostly hot air. One of the main advantages of “going digital” is that the cost of having an



iPad or a laptop with all its software up to date is shouldered by users. A book lasts hundreds of years, while my old iPad had to be replaced last year in order to accommodate the latest version of Kindle. There is no such thing as "digital" without "digital capitalism" and its unique techniques of control and manipulation.

Furthermore, the production cost of good quality educational material—be it digital or not—is so high that it makes no sense to have numerous variations of subject matter available. Videos will be recycled endlessly. As Sal Khan, founder of the online education platform Khan Academy, stated: "This content will never grow old."[6] The illusion, if not teleology, of permanent availability will mean that teachers no longer need to learn the material themselves, but merely monitor the digital efforts between disembodied learners and disembodied experts. This will create an ever-widening gap between received knowledge—which will become ever more "received"—and produced knowledge—which will become ever rarer.

The Global Architectural History Teaching Collaborative (GAHTC) was designed to offset this widening gap in the field of architectural history between received and produced knowledge.[7] As a teacher-to-teacher environment, it aims to help teachers learn material within an increasingly expanding disciplinary horizon. In this sense, GAHTC places the onus of learning on the teacher more so than on the student. It is not anti-digital, but as opposed to the Kahn Academy's aim to "free [teachers] from traditional lectures" and help students learn in the "intimacy of their own room,"[8] GAHTC argues that nothing can replace the classroom lecture as a pedagogical tool.

Universities have always been places where bodies are compressed within the spatial geography of the campus, classrooms, labs, corridors, and dining halls. MIT, like many campuses, even has its own area code. But if the university is now the center of distributed learning, the campus experience might become endangered by the increased demand for "distribution." If incoming students have already "taken" Physics 101 "in the privacy of their room," why even bother with freshmen year? High school students have long taken college level courses, but once these systems proliferate online and leak out in to the world of the normative even further, what strange tangle of expectations might this lead to? Stanford University already offers an Online High School that caters to "intellectually passionate students,"[9] while at MIT there have been quiet conversations about offering a three-year undergraduate degree.

The idea that distributed/digital learning makes things available that were otherwise closed off, and that with some guidance can all be managed in low-cost, custom-tailored, online environments, speaks to the general dismemberment of community in contemporary culture. The new era of "distributed learning"—sited at the intersection of digital capitalism and disaster capitalism—will only weaken the communitarian value of learning as it moves down from professional education to the university, high school, and eventually grade school. It will not open the world to new possibilities, but reformat it—as the basic relationship between knowledge and power has always done—around those with more privileged access and those with less. Distributed learning might make learning even less distributed than ever before.

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See https://ma.tt/.

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See https://onlinehighschool.stanford.edu/#virtualcampus .