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Towards platform pedagogies: why thinking about digital platforms as pedagogic devices might be useful

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ABSTRACT
In a context where current forms of governance and polity across many societies are engaging with ‘platformisation’, the paper argues that the utility and consequences of using a theory of pedagogy can provide a different way to explain how digital technology might ‘determine’ subjectivity. This paper describes the key process of how platforms work when considered as a ‘pedagogic device’: paying particular attention to how users ‘learn’ or are ‘subjected’ to norms and behaviours. It outlines three key dimensions of pedagogicisation, textualisation, templatisation and trainability arguing that digital platforms suggest an eternal process of school enrolment – a classroom we can never leave, a form of certification to which we aspire. To rework Plantin, J. C., Lagoze, C., Edwards, P., & Sandvig, C. [(2018). Infrastructure studies meet platform studies in the age of Google and Facebook. New Media and Society, 20(1), 293–310.] formulation, it articulates a platformisation of pedagogy as much as a pedagogicisation of platforms thus concluding how the process of platformisation itself is part of a wider inscription into forms of pedagogic authority.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to explore the different ways that theories of pedagogy, especially those relating to the pedagogicisation of everyday life, provide a useful lens to analyse how people engage and interact with digital platforms. It argues that the utility and consequences of using a theory of pedagogy offers a helpful way to engage with the politics of ‘platformisation’ – the spread and influence of digital platforms as technologies of control into virtually every aspect of contemporary social life.

The focus of much discussion around platforms tends to explicate their function and role as wider social and political determinants. There is intense interest in how they influence (and indeed constitute) the relationship between datafication, surveillance, rights, and privacy, and how such power can be opposed. What then can theories of pedagogy bring to this discussion? In what ways do theories deriving from scholarship about teaching and learning apply to the social and economic study of platforms? This paper first attempts to define the field of platforms and the processes of platformisation, and explores what we might mean by pedagogy, especially revisiting relatively recent
debates around pedagogicisation. It then attempts to open up the process of how platforms work when considered as a pedagogic process, paying particular attention to how users ‘learn’ or are ‘subjected’ to norms and behaviours as they ‘read and write’ their actions on digital platforms. The paper suggests that not only do theories of pedagogy offer more nuanced accounts of human digital actions, but they also help us understand how the process of platformisation itself is part of a wider inscription into forms of pedagogic authority.

Platforms and platformisation

Following a series of recent studies of platform or surveillance capitalism (Srnicek, 2016; Zuboff, 2019), the focus here was stimulated by the current interest in how nearly every way that we use digital technology starts from and is framed by enrolment on a platform. But what is a platform?

The idea of platform emerged as a way of trying to define the seemingly immaterial nature of digital interactions in terms of more formal structures. Scholarship has investigated the different levels or layers of platforms from the structure of the Internet, to the computer or mobile operating systems, to the significant terrains offered by tech giants like Google, Facebook, or Amazon (Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards, & Sandvig, 2018) arguing that conceptual distinctions between infrastructure and platform have blurred so much so that the hitherto categorical differences between hardware and software now need to be understood in terms of vertically integrated layers of user interaction (Bratton, 2016). What counts now is not so much which programme or technology we use so much as the ways that our interactions are traced, tracked and possibly used or commodified by quite a small range of (seemingly unaccountable) state and commercial actors (Gillespie, 2010). Platforms package and control these interactions, sometimes via a computer operating system (e.g. Mac iOS), sometimes via discrete software (e.g. Facebook), sometimes via institutional database (e.g. myGov), and so on – and are defined thus by their structural relations with users as much as by their modes or means of access. Montfort and Bogost (2009) describe a series of interoperable layers, but today a platform is more than just a way of describing component features of hardware, software and cloud-based services as it also includes a set of governance and regulation relationships as Zittrain (2008) argued. They also depend on forms of standardisation as Salter and Murray (2014) demonstrate in their study of ‘Flash’ which yokes together questions of aesthetics, markets, interoperability and commercialisation.

van Dijck (2013) expands some of Gillespie’s (2010) historical reflection on the development of the term not just to make the case that it is a word we now use to describe a different kind of phenomenon but that historically and etymologically, the term has evolved to cover a range of different purposes. Bratton (2016) tries to sum this up pithily, ‘Platforms are what platforms do’ (p. 153), but that doesn’t quite account for the embedded infrastructural nature of platforms. Ann Helmond (2015) better describes platforms as a set of relationships, determinants, state and market positioning all mediated through digital technologies, which we access, and which monitor us, so much of the time, every day.
Platforms aren’t just self-contained entities or processes: they also exert an influence in the domains they work by appearing to platformise their fields. Helmond (2015) thus argues that the term ‘platformisation’ now refers to the rise of the platform as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web and the consequences of the expansion of social media platforms into other spaces online. (p. 5)

One example of platformisation can be found in the Kumar, Vitak, Chetty, and Clegg (2019) discussion of the spread of platforms in schools showing how ‘tracking student learning’ and ‘keeping students on task’ has changed the way that teachers view students as the aggregate of their data and thus support the development of teachers as what they call ‘surveillant consumers’. By contrast, Nieborg and Poell (2018) explore the process of platformisation in the cultural industries, by examining the relationship between cultural producers and platform governance and the increasing role that datafied user feedback plays in determining creative production practices. In both cases structural change in both sectors is attributed to the transformative power of platforms showing how labour, content and outputs are now being shaped by how digital platforms now appear to manage and control institutions and practices.

This moment in time is characterised by a growth in the critical scholarship drawing attention to the social, economic and political inequalities that are brought into being as the globe submits to the empire of platforms (Couldry & Mejias, 2018). The power of these platforms to influence democracies (as in the role of Facebook in 2016 elections in the UK and the US) or enforce authoritarian regimes (as in the Chinese social credit system (Liang, Das, Kostyuk, & Hussain, 2018) seems almost taken for granted. Even within nations, the range of large institutions that comprise the major sectors within most societies – health, education, welfare and so forth are significantly becoming platformised. In education, for example, Moodle, Blackboard, Google Classroom and Pearsons are all likely to be brand names and platforms familiar to readers as they frequently underpin activities within the schools, universities and government departments.

**Pedagogy, pedagogicisation and subjectivity**

As part of the new audience studies in the 1980s, David Lusted (1986) attempted to apply theories of pedagogy to the relationship between text and audience, sketching out a model of the teacher as a theorist, the learner as a reader, and knowledge as theory (p. 3). This formulation aimed to address a challenge raised by Judith Williamson (1981) in discussions about critical pedagogy. In the face of ‘dominant ideology theory’ – at that time, the language used to frame the ways that meaning was understood to influence action – Williamson identified the grey area of ‘how’ people come to take on ideological positions as being one with which critical pedagogues seemed unwilling to engage. Nearly 20 years later the principles of a more interactional structuration were used to animate a use of pedagogical theory applied to children’s use of Pokémon (Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 2004) focusing on how we might characterise the pleasures and purposes, limits and constraints of (in this instance) children’s agency in the face of the seemingly fixed and over-determining positions made available by forms of culture. By asking the question of how people learn to take up, identify or adopt certain positions
in respect of the consumption of popular culture, the pedagogic theory seemed to make sense of the mechanisms by which social control and social reproduction occur through everyday interactions.

Key sociologists of pedagogy, Basil Bernstein (1973, 1990, 2000) and Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) engaged with the processes, the ‘how’ of the ways in which people learn to adopt, think with and believe in (or with) wider social values. For Bernstein, it was the way that language was coded, used, deployed and controlled leading to key insights into the way that knowledge was classified and framed, that counted. Bourdieu was interested in the sets of dispositions, structures of feeling, and the assemblage of values, feelings, forms, classifications and material objects that form part of an individual’s habitus. Both theorists identified pedagogy as a key mechanism of power and subjectification pointing to the ways that schooling is a near universal social institution in late modernity. They both identified forms of both visible and invisible (to use Bernstein’s phrasing, 1990, pp. 61–62) pedagogies that created social stratification as well as ensuring dominant ways of thinking and feeling. The ways that knowledge was structured by schooling, the role of schools and the credentialing of different epistemologies, as well as classical understanding of bodily control in social institutions – deriving from older sociologies – all make pedagogy a sophisticated, complex and multi-leveled kind of social theory.

Yet, despite these general applications, pedagogy is rarely used in contexts outside of the field of education. Even there, it competes with theories of learning, didactics, instruction and/or transmission as terms of explanation (Hamilton & Zufiaurre, 2013). It is as if the term cannot travel beyond its category association with schools. Where schooling is studied outside of the discipline of education, such as in neo-institutionalist sociology (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997), it is analysed as the keystone institution of modernity, and their pedagogicisation occupies centre stage as the key mechanism of social formation (Baker, 2014). Yet the implications of what Bernstein termed the ‘totally pedagogic society’ (Bernstein, 2000) still do not seem as mainstream as other ‘turns’ in cultural theory. David Buckingham has described the ‘curricularisation of leisure’ (Buckingham & Scanlon, 2002); the notion of ‘educationalisation’ has been coined (Davies & Mehta, 2013), referring to how forms of accreditation drive explanations of social change, and there are even cases of ‘schoolification’ as a heuristic term. All of these terms suggest that such regimes cannot only be defined as particular to school-based modes of discipline (see, Ladwig & Sefton-Green, 2018) but draw attention to how forms of discipline have travelled out and away from their original institutional base into other social activities.

As developed by Bernstein (1973, 1990), pedagogy describes a form of power above and beyond pedagogical theories which relate more narrowly to the relationship between how teachers teach and how pupils learn. Pedagogical power extends beyond the classroom to describe how knowledge is framed, validated and legitimated (Maton, 2014). Historically it constructs teaching and learning in social rather than psychological terms although theories of pedagogy can both draw, and critically reflect, on the development of theories of mind to explain how power is performed and enacted. Over the course of the twentieth century, differing theories and fashions in pedagogical theory have been promulgated in relation to developing theories of mind. Thus, the principles of behaviourism developed at the turn of the twentieth century with their emphasis on stimulus – operant – response gave rise to forms of pedagogical practices to support
such theories of learning especially utilising measurement through testing. Similarly, and perhaps relevant to the argument here the growth of cybernetic theory (Gleick, 2011; Turner, 2008) emphasising self-contained nonhuman systems constantly modified by feedback loops imply whole system understandings of the relationship between teaching and learning beyond techniques calculated to affect the reason of an individual mind. The principles of pedagogicisation suggest how subjects, forms of knowledge, forms of communication, other forms of nonhuman actors and tools, all combine with forms of discipline derived from schooling to contribute to a pedagogical regime through which various kinds of power are sustained and enacted.

It is not that learning in and of itself is especially interesting – it seems as banal a fact of what it means to be human as breathing – but it is how learning is structured, organised, withheld, offered, validated and valued as a cultural process that gives insight into the meaning of what it is to be educated in particular times and places (Levinson, Foley, & Holland, 1996). Pedagogicisation alerts us to an increasing interest in, and language about, the more explicit place of education in our society.

Platforms as pedagogic devices

As noted in the section on Platforms above, current scholarship focuses on the ways that platforms datafy users and that this fundamentally is what underpins critical understanding of platforms. However, like the variety of different teaching and learning situations, it is not true to say that user experience on each and every platform is the same, let alone experiences across different platforms. Computer programmers, programming and programming education are increasingly standardised even if user experience pushes back against such tendencies. If there is thus to be a utility in thinking of the user-platform relationship in terms of pedagogy, we need to find a way to reconceptualise the term so that it can promote both theoretical insight and progressive social interventions.

A key marker of a pedagogic regime in all user interactions/relationships with or on platforms is the way that human actions are validated by an authority that understands them in terms of either correct or incorrect, amounting to a mode of binarism. The fact that actions and interactions are completed/approved through a process of online actions, described in terms of ‘textualisation’ below, serves to reinforce the ways that digital acts mimic or perform ‘according to’ or ‘in order to meet’ pedagogic authorisation. There are many ways that being online can be characterised in terms of monitoring and surveillance, but attention to the ways that so much activity on platforms is in some ways akin to progress in a classroom reveals how much users have learnt to behave in such a fashion and why they continue to do so.

In one of the surprisingly few attempts to theorise the nature of the human agency involved in being online, Isin and Ruppert (2015) use speech act theory as a way of conceptualising the nature of digital action. By focusing on categories of digital activity (as users connect, share and participate) they emphasise the qualities of agency to think through the acts of making meaning through online interaction. The current focus on the modalities of surveillance capitalism tends to focus more on the structuring work done by the platform – through the consequences of datafication – thus subsuming the agency of people, their acts, choices, pronouncements and assertions within the determinism of the platform. The notion of speech acts, however, structures digital
actions as a language – or at least in a linguistic paradigm – and of course, it is precisely at the level of control over language that lies at the heart of most theories of pedagogic power (Bernstein, 1973, 1990). The struggle over correct uses of language can be thus applied to digital acts, concomitantly drawing attention to the ways that digital/speech acts are enabled, allowed, legitimated or disqualified by the platform.

Whilst the teaching and learning relationship is in and of itself, highly surveillant, it is frequently clear where authority lies. By contrast, platforms tend to disguise their power (Gillespie, 2010) echoing Bernstein’s (1990) suggestion that, ‘what is absent from pedagogic discourse is its own voice’ (p. 143). The exercise of power is disguised through a series of naturalised legitimation discourses:

The rules constituting pedagogic discourse are not derived from the rules regulating the internal characteristics of the competences to be transmitted. In an important sense, pedagogic discourse, from this point of view, is a discourse without a specific discourse. It has no discourse of its own. (p. 159)

This kind of analysis of the way that pedagogic power works in practice – the mechanics of pedagogicisation – seems a productive way to examine how human actions, what Isin and Ruppert (2015) call ‘digital acts’, work as a way of framing human activity so that it can then be transformed into data susceptible to extraction, colonisation and commodification processes (Coudry & Mejias, 2018; Zuboff, 2019). Bernstein further proposed what he calls a ‘pedagogic device … a symbolic ruler of consciousness in its selective creation, positioning, and oppositioning of pedagogic subjects’ (1990, p. 163). Bernstein argued that the pedagogic device is a social mechanism consisting of the exercise of symbolic power and that it always exists ‘between power and knowledge, and knowledge and forms of consciousness’ (p. 156). I am proposing that platforms are precisely these kinds of social mechanisms and that a theory of pedagogy, derived from Bernstein’s ideas about pedagogic devices, facilitates insight into how platforms exert power and how users are schooled into compliance. My argument focuses on three key dimensions; textualisation, templatisation and trainability.

Much analysis of enrolment on platforms has focused on legal aspects of contractual obligations especially around the asymmetrical imposition of terms and conditions (Pangrazio, 2018). This attention has frequently translated into the discussion of rights and their enforcement. While forms of platform participation legally, implicitly or explicitly, position users within these frames (in the way that we trust significant amounts of personal data and information which are, in the case of banks, for example, safeguarded) we could also characterise these terms of trust and care rather than simple liability. This is perhaps not dissimilar from the ways that teaching roles carry within them some version of a ‘duty of care’ given that many forms of schooling propose an equally benevolent authority masked as control. Indeed, the way that terms and conditions administered by platforms understand the operators’ duty of care suggests a different regime of responsibility than these other ethical traditions.

In the treatment of pedagogic dimensions below, the argument is drawn from a range of general cases. Clearly, not all classroom interactions follow exactly the same scripts and we live in a world characterised by a range of pedagogic relationships. Nevertheless, the central argument here is that just as platforms, for all their definitional elasticity, share
significant common structures, so the pedagogicisation of everyday life demonstrates common modes and patterns.

**From the textualisation of experience to the pedagogy of literacy**

Zuboff (2019) notes that the process of datafication involves the transformation of experience into an ‘electronic text’ (Ch. 9), understood here as the notations produced by our digital actions on the back end of platforms. These invisible-to-users records can then be assembled as data for exploitation. This process of turning experience into text – which in this instance is only readable by the platform – shadows the primarily mark-making nature of our initial actions in the first place. Whether we are completing online forms, playing games, shopping – even just moving the cursor as we read or as we press links – we are engaging in some form of literate behaviour. Some scholars have argued that reading and interacting with digital texts may not primarily depend on the use of print literacy – for example, playing games (Gee, 2004) and instead depend on fluency in other kinds of multimodal literacies. However, this distinction is not pertinent to the argument which is that digital platforms require users to have achieved a certain competence in literacy.

As described in the section on trainability below, platforms themselves inculcate a mode of progressive skill acquisition but in the first instance, it is difficult not to see the spread of platforms as part of an increasing spread of literacy into everyday life. There is significant scholarship around digital literacy (Buckingham, 2019; Livingstone, 2004) describing a wide range of processes and actions. Frequently simply taken to describe competence or capability online, the phrase can also include the acquisition and development of creative and critical capabilities developing civic, artistic practices and skills across software and platforms. Early studies of digital literacy focused on the development of social norms, ‘netiquette’ (Snyder, 1998) while contemporary studies are now interested in the development of ‘affinity groups’, especially those coalescing around participation in interest-driven networks as well as political ghettos (Ito et al., 2018). Digital literacy has thus become yet another normative construct around which there is a significant ideological dispute between advocates of functional instrumentalism and critics for whom the concept opens up the possibility of challenging dominant power relations.

There is no doubt that there is a theoretical connection between participation on platforms through a process of textualising experience (both in the sense of how ‘digital acts’ are forms of literacy actions and the ways that platforms create an electronic text as a record of our acts) and these debates about digital literacy. In other words, without the preconditions of modes of literacy coming about as a result of the penetration of schooling into society, it is impossible to imagine how platforms might have ended up taking over the world. By the same token, digital technologies have contributed to, perhaps even driven, the processes of pedagogicisation, thus legitimating the spread of school-knowledge regimes into everyday life.

And as a final note, there is not, as yet, literature exploring ‘platform literacy’ where the issue of progression within and across platforms is described as both a life-wide and a life-long process of development or capability. It is possible to interpret studies like Taina Bucher’s (2018) analysis of the relationship we have with platforms from this perspective
showing how familiarity and experience on one particular platform do lead to a deepening sense of the ways that we learn to behave and game our actions as users seek to exert control over their participation. There are also, for example, stories about the ways that within a healthcare regime, patients learn to game data use on health apps or on mandated Insurance apps in order to circumvent restrictions imposed by authorities. Both examples have not, to date, been approached within a developmental theory of literacy progression, but the proposition here is that they model themselves in this way.

**Templates: variation, reward and progression and the I.R.E./F. structure**

A key feature of pedagogic discourse is the way that talk is regulated and controlled in any pedagogic setting. Frequently abbreviated to I.R.E. (or I.R.F.) – standing for *initiation, response and evaluation* or *feedback* – analysis of talk in many classrooms has been shown to follow a particular order and hierarchy. It is initiated by a teacher and students learn from an early age the allotted roles for their responses (Edwards & Mercer, 1987). The model has not been without its critics in terms of its generalisability as well as the extent to which contemporary and evolving forms of discourse have eaten away at its fundamental power structures (e.g. Walsh, 2011). Nevertheless, there is support for such a model being a reasonably common way to describe school-based classroom interaction.

The implications of this mode of discourse are socially significant in a number of ways on account of the way that individual voice is silenced in favour of the teacher’s authority; the limiting of dialogue; and how the capacity for exploration, collaboration is set aside in favour of the transmission of seemingly ‘correct’ answers (Edwards & Mercer, 1987). In this paper’s context of our discussion of platforms the suggestion is that the role of templates and drop-down menus suggests an equivalent form of closed and limited discourse in the digital realm – given there are very few platforms that actually have a completely open form of discourse.

Indeed, there is a tradition of scholarship investigating the role of templates within the study of writing pedagogy examining how their affordances mediate communication. For example, John Gallagher (2019) has described what he calls interactive participatory internet (IPI) templates and which he analyses very much in terms of closed programmed options available across many platforms, give rise to ‘a procedural rhetoric which depends on what and how users fill in these templates as much as the designs of the template’ (p. 42). He then explores four features of digital composition – repetition, time-space compression, ambient affordances, and standardisation – not just making the point that templates are a pervasive cultural form (citing the ‘Like’, ‘friend’ and ‘Status’ features of Facebook, e.g. p. 39), but arguing that the template itself exerts considerable influence on the form and mode of expression available to the user. This is an inevitable consequence of the asymmetrical power relationship between platform and individual as much as how formal opportunities for expression are determined by the template itself.

A significant amount of our activity on platforms draws on various forms of template completion where it is impossible to progress without the correct answer. We are all familiar with the everyday frustration of having to return to a page online where failure to put an entry into every box means we cannot progress. Users have become accustomed to a process of completing requirements rather than simply expressing their wishes even if it is only a question of ticking the ‘I’m not a robot’, or terms and conditions acceptance. As part
of their structural code, many platforms are built as forms of template which necessarily positions the user significantly as a respondent to the frame on offer and where progress can only be achieved through evaluation/feedback. This, I suggest is a structure of discourse familiar from the school where the teacher initiates and rewards the correct response.

The second feature of the spread of IRE/F talk into platforms comes from the discourse structure of threads and threading where highly ritualised forms of turn-taking determine participation in the discourse. For example, many interactions on Facebook take the form of an initial post followed by forms of response in terms of ‘like’ or ‘heart’, etc., and even where more open talk occurs in terms of commentary and opinion the turn-taking nature of the written discourse follows a particular structure and organisation so that beginning/initiating provokes responses and then forms of feedback. Many of these coded responses (like’s etc.) are of course, in this sense, genres of evaluative feedback.

In pedagogic discourse, I.R.E./F. is frequently linked to forms of measurement, progression or validation by an acknowledged authority (the teacher). Whilst many transactions and platforms – purchasing goods, requests to banks, tax offices and so forth, clearly structure users in a supplicant or client relationship to a commercial or state authority so that it would not be unexpected that our tax submissions, shopping, etc., have to be approved before progressing, our capacity to participate in such modes of interaction can only take place because of the ways in which users have been schooled through the kinds of discourse structure just described. In general, many platforms require dutiful completion of a proscribed fashion of pre-set answers much as classroom discourse is modelled on the appearance of an open invitation/question, but the reward goes to the answer that the teacher has defined as correct (Edwards & Mercer, 1987). Here, the way that some of our practices on platforms have become habituated so as to become almost unconscious suggests that we have become ‘trained’ just as we have learnt to behave and perform in classroom situations.

**Pedagogic relationships and trainability**

There are self-evidently a number of general ways that being on some platforms encourages being part of a learning community. Sometimes this is explicit, and part of the membership offer – for example, in online games. However, part of membership on a range of platforms involves sharing a wide range of tactical advice from explaining to family members where to find various settings (e.g. from Amazon to healthcare provider) to being walked through the options by online banking systems or explaining to friends how to set up phone settings, etc. In all these kinds of examples, we all spend a considerable amount of time giving, receiving and relaying advice on how to follow instructions.

Sharing frustration, ameliorating our friends and family awkwardness, bringing everybody up to speed are all forms of compliant behaviour we adapt to support each other rather than challenging the nature of the authority itself. In some kinds of the platform (e.g. MyGov) the use of drop-down menus et cetera can be extraordinarily restrictive suggesting frequently when it comes to, for example, entering one’s telephone number, that there is only one kind of ‘correct answer’. The ‘gender’ tab on Facebook is yet another example of defining complexity as a choice between pre-determined variables. The notion of there being a right or wrong answer, almost as a binary, is not just
evocative of a kind of classroom test it absolutely carries with it the same pleasures and pains of being pedagogicised. The way we might help each other is like chatting sotto voce to one’s neighbour on the next desk in a classroom or being a member of a revision group for tomorrow’s test. Indeed, the notion of a ‘test’ to find the right or wrong answer underpins a range of platform interactions. Misspelling, failing to set the exact search parameters can give you the wrong answer (even though, we know now that machine learning is working hard to take an inclusive attitude to common errors through the application of ‘fuzzy logic’). While it is posited that such developments may make more human to computer interactions less like human to machine ones, and more like human to human (Andrejevic, 2019), much everyday experience, dealing with utility companies, consumer interactions and especially government services still can appear oppressively binary (correct/incorrect) requiring knowledge of a seemingly difficult-to-master code to ensure the correct completion of online forms.

But is this kind of analysis any more than an analogy? Can we really make the case that the relationship between the user and the platform has encoded the relationship between pedagogic authority and the good student? The analogy may simply be plausible because of the ways that we are already pedagogicised. We are all familiar with the experience of trying again and again with a huge range of online forms because we know that there is a correct answer which will allow us to submit even if it is frequently returned to us as requiring correction. In many platforms, users are framed as compliant students who can progress when everything is ‘correct’.

Platforms, however, are often keen to keep users/students on their toes and attentive for as long as possible. Wendy Chun (2016) has described the idea of ‘updating to remain the same’, and we are all familiar with the churn of new software, the acceptance of even more impossible to understand terms and conditions, that seemingly endless process of entering passwords, logging on common filling in extraordinary amounts of meaningless detail to allow progression. The huge spikes in online debate when popular platforms are redesigned are testimony to the ways that not only do we have to learn and perform ‘upgrading’, ‘updating’, but indeed without such ‘trainability’ – one of the key features of Bernstein’s pedagogic control mechanisms signifying the de-contextualised, empty, capacity to be trained (Bernstein, 2001) – our continued participation could not be taken for granted. Participation in so many platforms is absolutely reliant on our being trained, and of course than continuing to train ourselves, to behave as pedagogic subjects in relation to the authority of the platform itself.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper has been to set the terms for exploring the usefulness of pedagogy as a theoretical concept to make sense of the relationship between users and digital platforms in the context of the seemingly overwhelming power of platforms as they restructure contemporary forms of capitalism. Pedagogy, I have argued, captures a more nuanced account of human agency within a larger process of control and re-conceptualisation. Central to my argument has been the idea that the work users do on platforms derives from the same set of structural relationships especially in relationship to validation, credentialisation and stratification by a central authority, set by the ways that schooling now pedagogicises everyday life. In this sense, the approach here is to
frame platforms as what Basil Bernstein (1990) called a ‘pedagogic device’ (p. 163). I have adapted principles of the ways that platforms textualise, templatise and train, and am thus suggesting they exert power through ‘distributive, re-contextualising and evaluating rules for specialising forms of consciousness’ (p. 156).

It should also be noted that although platforms are clearly closed technologies, people nevertheless find a number of ways of ‘obeying’ through playful actions, thus creating forms of resistance (a kind of hidden curriculum to pursue the analogy of my analysis) in order to mediate authority. In the introduction to this paper, the phrase ‘enrolment’ was used to describe the process of joining a platform. This term, of course, is not only more commonly used with reference to courses or college but describes a process of joining and registration. The dialogue between agency and control is well summed up in this language. The emergence of digital platforms as a pre-eminent mode of economic, social and political control is intricately related to the ways that schooling works across populations. In some ways I am also proposing that digital platforms suggest an eternal process of school enrolment – a classroom we can never leave, a form of certification to which we all continuously aspire – to re-work Plantin et al.’s (2018) formulation: a platformisation of pedagogy as much as a pedagogicisation of platforms.

If this argument is persuasive, that a turn to pedagogy can help us make some headway through a sense of hopelessness that some of the writing about surveillance capitalism engenders; it might help frame progressive research and practice agendas. Empirically we need to know more about the ‘how’ in how platforms work, what discursive repertoires, what interactional tactics users deploy to make sense of their experience and what possibilities for forms of negotiation and resistance are at play in everyday life online? Ontologically, we need to continue to investigate the new forms of life, embodied and habituated practices that seem to be eating away at inherited assumptions about subjectivity, ‘free will’ and identity. Ideologically, we can ask if theories of pedagogy help us reframe questions of power and control and the processes of subjectification? How do they help shed light on understanding the changing role of capital, and the way that the nation-state as well as the market determine and influence authority and behaviour? And, normatively, we need both progressive forms of education that give rein to subaltern and resistant pedagogies as much as we need modes of governance and regulation to ensure that the asymmetry of platform disciplines is not both unfair and inequitable. This suggests a programme of practical reform in addition to any shifts in public discourse that the concept of pedagogy can, through its historical perspective on digital change, help academic analyses make sense of our current condition.

Notes

1. See for example, The Great Hack, Netflix, 2019
2. See, for example: https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/11/what-are-your-digital-rights-explainer/#

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