The University of Google by Tara Brabazon

Reviewed by Bruce White

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Tara Brabazon's vigorous polemic against the role of new learning technologies in tertiary education in *The University of Google* (Brabazon, 2007) will strike manychords with both librarians and teachers in our universities and polytechnics; students who believe that attendance at lectures is unnecessary and that Google has superseded research of the published literature, administrators and politicians who believe in the cost-saving potential of the technological silver bullet, as well as the difficulties experienced in extending the benefits of advanced education beyond the confines of the socially and economically privileged, these are all too familiar daily issues for many of us.

Brabazon's core argument is that the arrival of digital technologies, at a time of increasing student rolls, declining comparative funding and increasing pressure on universities to make themselves socially and economically relevant, has lead administrators to impose digital technology on the academic community in the name of flexible learning . This has been at the expense of traditional teaching and learning practices that gave students the guidance, encouragement and inspiration to develop into educated citizens and independent thinkers. Nowhere, argues Brabazon, were these values more in evidence than in the face-to-face lecture, and its downgrading and even disappearance are seen as a root cause of the decline of quality education in countries that have embraced the new computer-based paradigms.

The book is divided into three sections based around the themes of Literacy, Culture and Critique. Part One, *Literacy*, examines the erosion of information literacy that has resulted from over-reliance on Internet sources and the impact of the digital culture on students' approach to study and scholarship, as well as the potential for the new environment to exacerbate social inequalities in access to education and learning. Brabazon outlines her critique of flexible learning which she sees as offering a second-best and second-rate alternative to full-time face-toface tuition. Part Two, *Culture*, develops these themes into a detailed critique of the effects of flexible learning on the educational environment with particular emphasis on the digitized lecture and the over-dependence of universities and students on virtual learning environments such as Blackboard and WebCT. Part Three, *Critique*, further extends these ideas into an examination of the university's role in providing students with the ability to engage fully with the world through the development of critical literacy that enables them to see beyond the worldviews presented to them by politicians, the media and other opinion-shapers. The book ends with a consideration of the importance of critical literacy in the "post-9/11world" and indeed its whole structure is underpinned by an awareness of social and political factors and their interaction with tertiary education.

There is undoubtedly a good book waiting to be written on these topics but unfortunately *The University of Google* is not it. Brabazon is a powerful advocate of information, cultural and critical literacy but her book falls short of exemplifying these values ; its consistent flaw is to *assume* the rightness of her argument rather than to *prove* it and to ignore the possibility of

credible alternative positions. Almost any piece of evidence seems to count in favour of Brabazon's anti-digital thesis while the case against it scarcely seems to exist. Her critique of Google is a typical rather than an extreme example:

"Google, and its naturalized mode of searching, encourages bad behaviour. When confronted by an open search engine, most of us will enact the ultimate of vain acts: inserting our own name into the blinking cursor. This process now has a name: *googling*. This is a self-absorbed action, rather than outward and reflexive process. It is not a search of the World Wide Web, but the construction of an individual Narrow Portal."

The clumsy segue that supports this negative characterisation of the search engine by the attribution of a universal moral failing in its users (via the highly questionable definition of a word) would be simply laughable had Brabazon not used the word *Google* in the title of her book and employed such headline-ready soundbites as "Google is white bread for the mind". The reader waits in vain for the killer punch, the clinching argument that Google has had a negative effect on students beyond what we already know; that there is a lot of silly stuff on the Internet that they need to be warned about if they don't know it already. In a book rich in anecdote Brabazon is well able to adduce examples of students with naïve and mistaken beliefs but it is perhaps here that the argument is at its weakest. If the main evidence that information literacy is in crisis is to be found in the jejune statements of the young then we need at the very least some indication that earlier generations possessed notably superior skills and understanding. This necessity does not seem to have occurred to Brabazon and instead in a rare excursion into the past (page 71) she is able to cite an example of gross information illiteracy from the 1970s that would seem to undermine her whole argument that the Internet has made things dramatically worse. There is very little, indeed nothing, in the form of hard comparative research to support this conclusion.

None of this would matter too much had Brabazon not taken a topic of some importance and subjected it to an unrelentingly one-sided treatment. In particular, flexible learning and distance education merited a considerably more nuanced treatment. Writing of podcasts (page 87) she states that "once more, a technological change in learning is justified through flexibility and convenience, so that it does not disrupt students' 'social obligations'." The quotes around 'social obligations' say it all. Do these trivial 'social obligations' include not living in the city where your course is taught, work and family ties or any of a host of reasons that might preclude taking a face-to-face course? Modern society has a critical need for lifelong learning opportunities; distance education and flexible learning are serious undertakings by teachers and researchers who address the problems that Brabazon is content merely to identify. The heartwarming anecdote on page 88 about a disadvantaged student who attended lectures and wrote her honours dissertation on her family's kitchen table could have been, but was not, balanced by any number of similar stories of distance students who did something much the same. Similarly, a central book about the use of new technologies in tertiary education, Diana Laurillard's highly-regarded *Rethinking university teaching* (2002), is not mentioned by Brabazon despite dealing in considerable detail with the same issues.

Given that she finds it so wrong-headed the widespread adoption of digital innovation in tertiary education would not be easy for Brabazon to explain were it not for the existence of a conspiracy made up of all the people she dislikes, from the humble administrator who misdirected her photocopying up to Tony Blair and George W. Bush. Her targets are not hard to dislike – neoliberalism, managerialism, university managers, politicians, budget cuts and stroppy students – but the possibility that academics themselves have played a major role in the digital revolution is not addressed. There are undoubtedly many points of truth in this account, many cases of ill-considered innovations and botched implementations , but the overall picture of the academic community as lacking in agency stretches our credulity beyond breaking point. Linking educational changes to political and social phenomena is an important explanatory tool but surely any measurement of causality so finely calibrated as to detect the impacts of the December 2004 Asian tsunami on the regulatory policies and curricula of British universities in 2006 needs more explication than it is afforded on page 11. At other times she is content to grasp at almost any evidence that can be used to wrong-foot opponents, so that a report in the *Guardian* on student contracts is faulted for appearing on the front page on the fifth anniversary of 9/11. Bristling of this sort pervades the book and the cumulative effect is to make one feel as if one is being browbeaten into agreement. Allowed to stand on its own her argument might have been more convincing.

To accuse Brabazon of lacking all nuance would do her something of an injustice. Any account of this length is bound to present many aspects of its subject and this book contains a lot of interesting material albeit that it is not well integrated into the central line of argument; it undoubtedly raises some important issues and draws attention to the need for retaining traditional educational and scholarly values within the new environment. Unfortunately, however, its excessively personal nature and overall lack of balance make it a less than reliable guide to a topic of great current and future importance.

References

Brabazon, Tara. 2007. *The University of Google: Education in the (post) information age*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Laurillard, Diana. 2002. *Rethinking university teaching: A conversational framework for the effective use of learning technologies*. 2nd ed. London RoutledgeFalmer.