



Resource Review

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Review:

This is a determinedly polemical book from an author who believes firmly in the possibilities of contemporary higher education. Tara Brabazon, an Australian academic, is Director of the Popular Culture Collective and has been Professor of Media at the University of Brighton since 2006, where she teaches a variety of courses on popular culture and media studies. In *The University of Google* she offers a sustained critique of many current approaches to teaching and learning, with a particular emphasis on the problems inherent in using some digital technologies as a substitute for the high quality education she advocates. The book is ordered in three sections: *Literacy*, where Brabazon sets out ideas about creating an information scaffold; *Culture*, where she interrogates the idea of flexible learning in relation to the use of new technologies and *Critique*, which analyses educational change in a wider political context. The work draws upon Brabazon's own teaching experiences, and is therefore focused upon media/cultural studies in its exemplars, but it has a much wider relevance. It could usefully be used by the majority of lecturers and those working in learning support in the art, design and media subject areas, in order to prompt reflection and provoke debate upon the educational practices and tools with which we work. She explicitly states that, unlike her earlier book *Digital Hemlock*, which diagnosed similar problems, she now wants to offer potential solutions in addition to her critique.

As a reading experience I found *The University of Google* to be simultaneously invigorating and irritating. It is a thoroughly researched and clearly argued work, written with passion and commitment, but there is ultimately something wearying about Brabazon's tone. She is supremely confident in identifying her own talents (including her performance in the lecture theatre and her voice on the radio) and includes several letters/emails that serve as glowing testimonials from her students. I suspect I am being terribly English about this, having come from a culture where self-

deprecation has become the norm, but I found myself squirming a little as I read. Brabazon displays a more than admirable commitment to her work, rising daily at 3am to work on her lectures: although she is making a point about the unsustainable workload of those employed in higher education, there is something self-congratulatory about her admission, which worked to irritate rather than convince. That said, when it comes to the substance of the book, I found myself in general agreement with her diagnoses of the problems currently afflicting higher education, and the inadequacy of many solutions proposed hitherto.

She begins the book with a plea that we must transform a societal 'fetish for information into a desire for argument, debate and knowledge', and that we should therefore find 'an alternate refrain to the Pied Pipers that have called our tune long enough'. She is determined to suggest such alternatives, and rightly asserts that in order to effect change, pedagogic writing needs to improve upon much of what is currently produced, which frequently parrots the dull managerial language of academic meetings. Her critique is for the most part levelled at governmental policymakers and the higher managers in our universities, who have failed to fund education appropriately (not simply funding too little, but directing money at the wrong things) but she also recognises that the educational approaches of teachers are at issue. She acknowledges that as teachers, we need to be much more explicit about what we require from our students and should challenge the assumptions we may have developed about university education. She says that 'hoping that students will magically read widely without building a research framework is a pedagogic relic of an earlier age' and that in teaching, we must start where students are, not where we want them to be.

The first part of the book is, therefore, suggestive of how a research framework might be created: it offers examples from Brabazon's teaching, involving a staged series of tasks designed to slow down the students' 'smash and grab' approach to research into a more reflexive engagement with ideas and arguments. These incremental developments are designed to guide students through the work required and to skill them in evaluating the information they encounter. Whilst these strategies should surely be already familiar to many of us teaching in the sector, I welcome the honesty in offering concrete examples of her own practice. Brabazon's suggested method is initially very controlling of students at the start of their studies, as she is of the opinion that before they can learn independently, they must be taught dependently: to this end they are initially expected to use only the reading list with which they are provided and which therefore allows the opportunity to explore and analyse refereed academic material considered appropriate for HE, rather than the commercial/fan sites turned up by Google searches, to which her students of popular culture tend to turn first. I can understand the logic of her argument, and can see its efficacy in relation to many students who now arrive at university from an educational culture in which they are more likely to have been 'spoon fed' information, but students need to understand how Brabazon's model differs from 'teaching to the test' (which I do not believe to be her intention at all – she is palpably interested in developing her students' critical abilities). From my own perspective, teaching art and design students, I am less focused upon a body of knowledge that has gone through an academic refereeing process, given that the professional discourse in which my students need to participate is not always represented in such material. I am less convinced than Brabazon by the relevance/quality of certain academic debate, and would have some misgivings at being so narrowly proscriptive in my own teaching.

Brabazon also argues against generic skills competencies, in favour of subject-specific knowledge, but in effect the tasks students are set in her model develop research and analytical skills that could easily be transferred elsewhere. Her argument in this respect seems somewhat redundant as I can't imagine lecturers ever teaching from a *purely* generic perspective, even though we might be aware that

part of our agenda is the development of generic skills; I have certainly never encountered such an approach amongst colleagues in the institutions in which I have worked and can only conclude that perhaps Brabazon's argument is with the Australian system. In my own field, art and design theory and practice are becoming increasingly interdisciplinary, and as lecturers we have to 'train' students to cope with finding and analysing information in diverse and changing ways, so that subject specificity itself is always at issue.

The book goes on to consider the idea of independent and flexible learning, and it is here that Brabazon's critique really gets going. She makes it clear that, just as in her yoga practice, flexibility in learning can only be built on discipline, concentration and commitment. For her, flexibility is not achieved through trying to offer alternative modes of learning to her timetabled lectures, seminars and tutorials. She is clear that there is nothing more flexible than face-to-face contact, where diverse issues and ideas may be explored as necessary and suggests that online lectures and the like, accessed whenever the student finds convenient are unable to deliver the same quality of learning, especially because the student is not party to class debate and the collective aspects of learning. Brabazon understands that some students make poor choices, privileging social lives or employment over scheduled classes, (and that these are rarely the mature students whose commitment to study ensures that they usually manage to negotiate the complexities of their lives without missing classes). She argues that it is not the role of the teacher to compensate by being constantly on-call by email and other means for those students who have effectively chosen not to engage. Brabazon suggests that by emphasising a certain kind of consumer-driven education, available 'on demand', students are individualised in a problematic way, which then decides failure is an individual issue and absolves the institution of blame; it is easier to blame the students than the methods... I have a good deal of sympathy with this view.

As the title suggests, *The University of Google* tackles the problems and possibilities of the online and digital realm. Brabazon is not a Luddite, and understands that such media and spaces have potential for higher education: the fault is not with the media *per se*, but how or why it might be used. She is highly sceptical at many of the claims made by software developers and university managers, believing that all too often virtual learning environments, streamed lectures and so forth are simply a cheaper alternative to properly funding adequate teaching. Brabazon investigates at first hand a variety of electronic tools including the iLecture format, and finds most of them wanting, failing to deliver a quality experience for students, assuming a level of internet literacy, relying upon students having access to broadband and/or adequately specified computers (funded at the student's expense) and also that the applications tend to standardise learning at a time when the student body is becoming increasingly diverse. She also points out that whilst students may be able to pause/rewind a lecture online in order to review an idea, they are unable to ask questions as they might in a real time encounter with their lecturer. At the very least, the multiple literacies necessary for teachers to use these methods effectively are not sufficiently developed through training and through a critical and reflexive engagement from lecturers and learning support staff. She asserts that money has been thrown at technology in education, but not education in technology.

The book concludes with a sustained engagement with the wider political and social issues affecting education. For Brabazon, governments and policy makers seem to be highly reactive to changing situations, without a longer-term focus (she terms it 'panic education') and that this situation is also not helped by senior academics and managers being so removed from daily contact with students where they might encounter a different reality. She claims that research agendas are shaped by short-term goals, and that there is a failure to recognise that teaching (an activity downgraded in many universities, fobbed off onto ill-equipped postgraduate students)

should in fact emerge out of research and scholarship. She is rightly critical of the culture which privileges the publishing of text-books of extant material in preference to works deriving from new knowledge. Her laudable aim is the creation of 'an environment of inquiry, questioning and critical thinking rather than acceptance, denial or compliance', but Brabazon has high expectations of a profession whose time is already under so much pressure. Perhaps it is for those policymakers further up the academic pecking order that *The University of Google* would make the most interesting reading, as ultimately it is their decisions that affect those of us at the chalk-face. The ambition of Brabazon's book is that we don't sit back waiting for this change: she asserts that 'academics must become proactive and experienced teachers, trained in pedagogy, curriculum and action research to ensure reflexive development and academic standards'. Quite when we find the time and funding to do this remains open to question.