

# Online Higher Education and Axel Honneth's Social Freedom

Benjamin Selznick & David Schafer

## *Abstract*

*This paper considers online higher education in the context of Axel Honneth's social philosophy. To begin we provide an overview of current trends in, and challenges presented by, online education. In our pivot toward philosophical approaches, we review phenomenological and systems-theoretic accounts of online education. We then consider Honneth's project and orientation toward normative functionalism as forwarded in *Freedom's Right*, positioning his work in dialogue with existing topic perspectives. We close with an interdisciplinary discussion and advance the idea that social freedom, as proposed by Honneth, is critical to the long-term success of any educational enterprise.*

**Keywords:** *online education, connectivity, Habermas, Honneth*

The dramatic expansion of web-based technologies is having an undeniable impact on postsecondary education. Providing evidence of growth, a series of annual reports (Allen & Seaman, 2008, 2016) have tracked the emergence of online learning as a modality for pursuing higher education. Their recent report found that 5.8 million students in the United States took at least one online course during the fall 2014 semester (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Turning to administrative perspectives of offering postsecondary education online, this study also found a shift in attitudes towards prioritizing online education within the academy: whereas in 2002 less than half of all chief academic officers believed that online education was critical to the long-term strategy of their institution, the figure now stands at 63.3% (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Clearly, online education is here to stay.

As the spread of online learning continues, new questions and lines of research inquiry must emerge in order to understand the nuanced aspects of this important educational shift. Specifically, key questions remain as to where the emphasis of such inquiry should be placed. For example: should studies examine the extent to which online and face-to-face education are somehow equivalent? Are traditional outcomes of student success (e.g., course completion, educational persistence, grades) still relevant given the increasing plurality of course types and student motivations? To what extent do specific online pedagogies exist and how can they be improved? These and other questions are timely and have received significant attention across the literature (e.g., Banna, Lin, Stewart, & Fialkowski, 2015; Evans, Baker, & Dee, 2016; Perna et al., 2014). In this article we argue that while important, these questions examine the manifestations of online education without fully considering its underlying purposes, ideals and goals.

An interdisciplinary effort between higher education and philosophy research, the purpose of this paper is to apply a continental philosophical perspective to certain conceptual challenges presented by the spread of online education (Allen & Seaman, 2016). To effectively engage this work, this paper will progress through three sections. First, we will provide a brief overview of the current state of online education discourse, suggesting current research is framed by two primary currents: a predominant narrative of student success and an emergent narrative of how digital learning can effectively establish connectivity and build community.

The paper will then introduce philosophical inquiry aimed at understanding the normative foundations of online higher education. This section will begin with phenomenological and systems-theoretical accounts, specifically as offered by Dreyfus (1999) and Habermas (1984/1987). Next, we introduce insights from Andrew Feenberg (2002; Hamilton & Feenberg, 2012), who provides a more constructivist perspective of online education and its historical trajectory. Finally, we discuss in detail ideas developed in Axel Honneth's (2014) recent work—*Freedom's Right* (FR)—that speak to the dynamic intersections of technology, education, and society. Through this discourse, we hope to introduce a framework for considering online higher education in the context of what Honneth terms *social freedom*. We close by discussing how our research might inform future investigations.

## Literature Review

Moving beyond overarching descriptive information, education researchers have explored online postsecondary education and its effects on students, faculty and institutions (e.g., Cochran, Campbell, Baker, & Leeds, 2014; Fontenot, Mathisen, Carley, & Stuart, 2015; Picciano, 2006). After conducting a review of the empirical literature, we recognized two primary currents in this research: a dominant current focused on student success (e.g., student persistence, learning) and an emergent current focused on understanding the extent to which online learning can build communities and promote social interaction. Crucially, while we understand that forms of involvement have been historically and empirically linked to success across educational outcomes (e.g., Kuh Schuh, & Whitt, 1991; Mayhew, Rockenbach, Bowman, Seifert, & Wolniak, 2016), we consider the interpersonal connection aspect separately due to the unique contours (e.g., non place-based, potentially asynchronous, not necessarily degree granting) of online postsecondary learning and our identification of this distinction in the literature base.

### Student Success in Online Learning

Given its centrality to higher education research and practice, a large number of studies considered the extent to which forms of student success were associated with online learning as an educational modality. Such studies typically engaged questions along three themes: persistence, learning, and measurement.

One set of studies, spurred on by the emergence of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and their notable drop-out rates relative to place-based courses (see Cochran et al., 2014; Evans et al., 2016; Hachey, Wladis, & Conway, 2012; Jordan, 2014; Perna et al., 2014), focused on predictors associated with student persistence. For example, in their comprehensive study of 44 MOOCs covering 2.1 million observations over 2,900 lectures, Evans et al. (2016)

found evidence that patterns of persistence existed in these iterations of online education. Specifically, there tended to be large enrollment drop-offs in the initial week with a subsequent leveling out; longer courses had lower rates of persistence and completion; and certain additional design features (e.g., titling videos to appear more accessible, taking a pre-course survey) could significantly and positively influence student persistence.

With respect to connections between persistence and leaning, literature also investigated questions concerning the extent to which students completed a course more as function of the content or the platform (Wang & Baker, 2015) and factors that contributed to making a MOOC “sticky” (Oakley, Poole, & Nestor, 2016). In tandem with studies exploring differences in learning outcomes as a function of course format (e.g., Fonolahi, Khan, & Jokhan, 2014; Jones & Long, 2013), the weight of the evidence suggests that learning modality (e.g., face-to-face vs. online) made less difference than anticipated when evaluated against traditional success metrics, with students often learning at similar levels across platforms (Fonolahi et al., 2014). Such research also found that persistence and success were at least partially attributable to those pre-course attributes (e.g., self-efficacy to complete, academic preparation; see Wang & Baker, 2015) and experiences with quality teaching (Cole & Timmerman, 2015; Oakley et al., 2015) that have been repeatedly demonstrated to influence persistence and achievement across post-secondary settings (e.g., Mayhew et al., 2016).

An important set of challenges appearing in the success-orientated literature—especially with regard to MOOCs—were those associated with determining appropriate sampling frames and outcome measures. On the sampling front, debate persisted regarding who should be considered a student (e.g., a registrant or a starter; Perna et al., 2014) and the extent to which individuals’ intentions for pursuing the coursework (e.g., certificate, professional credential, curiosity; see Evans et al., 2016; Koller, Ng, Do, & Chen, 2013) could be effectively considered with regard to persistence patterns. An additional set of measurement concerns existed in terms of student outcomes, suggesting a need for new and/or improved metrics capable of effectively demonstrating forms of engagement (Dixson, 2015; Ruby, Perna, Boruch, & Wang, 2015) and learning (Perna et al., 2014) in these digital spaces. Succinctly summarizing this set of challenges, the authors of one study noted: “User interaction with curricular resources happens at different times, in different sequences, and at different rates. In addition, conventional measures of achievement seem to be disconnected from what many users intend to achieve” (DeBoer, Ho, Stump, & Breslow, 2014, p. 82).

From our interdisciplinary perspective, we observe an important tension between the project of studying student success patterns and the difficulty of establishing accurate metrics. Namely: if the measures are disconnected from the intent, what are such measures actually reflecting? Can they truly measure forms of student success? Or learning? Furthermore, if such measures are used to establish an evidence base that eventually deems online education “unsuccessful”, how might that process reinforce long-standing concerns in the eyes of students and faculty that online learning is a lesser form of postsecondary education?

To explore an alternative empirical avenue, we reviewed an emergent current in the literature that emphasized how online educational environments might be utilized to build communities of learners and educators.

## Establishing Connectivity in Online Learning

New research attempts to focus attention away from standard indicators of success (e.g., course completion, test scores) toward a different set of outcomes: those prioritizing learning with others and promoting mutual recognition (Baasanjav, 2013; Banna, et al., 2015; McDaniels, Pfund, & Barnicle, 2016; Lee & Bonk, 2016; Schroeder, Baker, Terras, Mahar, & Chiasson, 2016). A primary example of this effort is found in a recent study by Schroeder et al. (2016), who sought to understand factors that influenced connectivity—“conceptualized as students’ feelings of community and involvement, not their level of access to the Internet”—among students enrolled in an online course (p. 244). This study found that feeling recognized as a valued member of the online learning community was positively and significantly associated with looking forward to interacting with other students in the class, making one’s presence known in the course, and knowing students in the course on a personal level. On the other hand, experiencing connectivity was negatively and significantly correlated with feeling as though one was an isolated learner or had not formed a bond with other students. This study demonstrates initial evidence not only that what Schroeder et al. term “connectivity” can be formed through online learning, but that connectivity can and should be studied as vital to the online learning enterprise (p. 244).

Additional studies focusing on community building have pursued similar empirical avenues, seeking to demonstrate online education as a learning modality that can support and encourage students’ feelings of belonging (Baasanjav, 2013); identify structures that support learning communities (McDaniels et al., 2016) or hinder positive learner-learner interactions (Phirangee, 2016); and emphasize the importance of high quality student-faculty interaction in the online space (Joyner, Fuller, Holzweiss, Henderson, & Young, 2014). With respect to faculty practices, research has further endeavored to understand how high quality (Crews, Wilkinson, & Neill, 2015) and culturally-responsive (Heitner & Jennings, 2016) teaching practices that encourage identity development and create an environment of cooperative, active learning can benefit students pursuing online coursework. Providing an additional perspective, one qualitative study of faculty tasked with online teaching (Terosky & Heasley, 2015) found that instructors themselves “want[ed] a greater sense of community and collegiality around online teaching,” and were challenged to “grapple with the value of online education and their role in this medium of teaching prior to addressing other concerns” through interaction with a supportive community of peers (pp. 155-156).

Findings across studies suggest powerful, if intermediate, conclusions: not only can online education support community building and engage mechanisms that encourage community development among peers, faculty members and advisors can prove central to learning in the online context. Furthermore, connectivity might be considered both a contributor to forms of student success *as well as* an important area of inquiry in its own right that might lead to the establishment of alternative metrics and expanded definitions of success in contemporary higher education.

### Summary

The literature reviewed on student success and connectivity provided a valuable understanding of the state of this discourse and initial findings into the nature and operation of online

learning. However, we recognized through this review that the majority of inquiry into this topic does little to consider the purposes and goals of online education from a conceptual perspective. This is problematic as, without first establishing the ideals underlying online education, this work can only serve to *describe* the effectiveness of educational practices rather than *evaluate* future directions for online learning. Given this gap in the literature, we turn to inquiry that can better help establish this necessary foundation.

### **Philosophical Perspectives of Online Education**

Since the first development of educational software and online courses, critics and enthusiasts have debated the pedagogical merits and drawbacks of what many initially took to be an inevitable future for higher education: the “virtual university” in which the traditional, physical university is entirely replaced by Internet-based learning (Hamilton & Feenberg, 2012). Thirty years into the development of online education, a more sober perspective has emerged. The inevitable virtual university appears to be no longer quite so inevitable, and the traditional university appears more resilient than early commentators of online education believed. Nevertheless, as the literature review illustrated, the significance of the Internet for the future of post-secondary education is still very much an open question as online courses and large MOOCs have become increasingly prevalent.

The range of critical debate on such technological advances is extraordinarily vast, and includes questions over pedagogical quality, their impact on the social relationships between university faculty and administration, the influence of commercialization on content design and programming, and the democratic potential online courses harbor for broadening educational access, (e.g., Hamilton & Feenberg, 2012; Levidow, 2002). It is not our intention here to do anything like a comprehensive accounting of such debates or to weigh-in with any decisive stance on the meaning of online tools in higher education. Instead, our more modest purpose will be to illustrate the ways in which Honneth’s social philosophy can open needed space between two major perspectives on online education: a phenomenological perspective and a Critical Theory perspective in the spirit of Jürgen Habermas. As we shall see, Honneth’s basic framework is at once able to account for useful and pathological developments in online education technology, while avoiding the limitations of the phenomenological and functionalist alternatives that currently dominate critical discussions of online education.

### **Phenomenological and Systems-Theoretic Accounts of Online Education**

Entering the discussion from a phenomenological approach, for Hubert Dreyfus, the main concern about online education has to do with the quality of education itself. According to Dreyfus (1999), quality is determined by the extent to which educational experiences help students gain mastery of any discipline. Achieving mastery requires immersing oneself in study, resolving completely upon a subject and therefore necessarily resolving to not study other, unrelated subjects. But to negate possible life-projects in this way is necessarily risky: the material may prove too difficult or uninteresting, the career trajectory resulting from this line of study hopeless. Ultimately, then, the crucial requirement for committed learning is a leap of faith in the resolved-upon area of study.

But on Dreyfus's (1999) view, online education only impedes our readiness for such a leap. Given the universe of information instantly available to them, Dreyfus is concerned that online students will never commit to a particular field, dabbling here and there, researching the *value* of the subject matter rather than the subject matter itself, and likely backing out of courses the instant they cease to stimulate. For Dreyfus (1999), this problem is indeed a *necessary* aspect of online education. "As far as I can see, learning...can work *only* in the nearness of the classroom and laboratory; *never* in cyberspace" (Dreyfus, p. 20, emphasis added). Dreyfus is thus advocating for what might be considered a opposite of this remote style of education provided online: a return to an apprenticeship model of education, in which knowledge is transmitted directly from teacher to student. The Internet, for Dreyfus, can only be a source of nihilism in education, and the solution is for students to resolve on a personalized, interactive and ultimately face-to-face relationship with a mentor.

Alternatively, the problem with online education from the Habermasian perspective is not a concern about nihilism *per se*, but rather a risk of a colonization of the crucial lifeworld sphere of the school by market forces.<sup>1</sup> Thus Timo Jütten, an established Habermas scholar, has identified online education as situated in a recent historical trajectory in which public funding for universities has decreased and caused universities to compete for students and research funding (Jütten, 2013, p. 598). On one hand, reduced public funding means that students must privately finance their education. Given that higher education is increasingly requisite for high-earning jobs, an "education apartheid" has emerged between wealthy and poor in the competition for such jobs (p. 597). On the other hand, the quality of education is threatened, as the demands on professors to compete for research funding begins to overshadow teaching responsibilities. And though Jütten says little explicitly about the impact of online media specifically on these trends toward commodification, from this general perspective, as long as technology can be employed in the service of increasing university revenue and decreasing costs, a marketized education system will promote online education wherever it can (see also Noble, 1998). Indeed, the prospects for such a future seem promising. *Prima facie*, the Internet appears to offer the potential to exacerbate already existent trends toward the commodification of education in the way that consumer goods were commodified in the industrial revolution (Noble, 2001, p. 3), while the move online serves as another opportunity to adjunctify the faculty workforce and reduce its independence (e.g., Winner, 1998).

To broadly frame these quasi-historical materialist accounts of online education, Habermas's basic systems-theoretic model of social functioning is useful. Like Habermas, they all conceive of education as a holistic process that is essentially dependent on communicative interaction between teachers and students, and significantly, all tend to portray the technological medium as foreign to this lifeworld sphere of education. On this view, technology deterministically transforms personalized student-teacher relations into impersonal market transactions. Conceived in this way, it makes sense that, also like Habermas, they discuss possibilities for

---

1. In speaking of "lifeworld" here, we refer to Habermas's sense from TCA (Habermas, 1984/1987) of an existing stock of taken for granted assumptions which are drawn upon whenever so-called "validity claims" are problematized and "redeemed" (i.e., affirmed or denied). Habermas there is taking the term "*lebenswelt*" from Husserl's later work, even though Habermas's notion differs from Husserl's in important ways (Ion, 2015). A discussion of these differences is beyond the scope this project as, in arguing in favor of Honneth's basic *approach* as a "middle way" between functionalism and phenomenological accounts, we need only consider the latter in their formal aspects, and so may abstract from debates about the proper interpretations of substantive notions like "system," "lifeworld," etc.

social resistance basically in terms of resisting the intrusion of technology in universities. According to this Habermasian view, such resistance will be made inevitable whenever institutions (like the university) that are functionally necessary for continued societal reproduction become threatened by the colonizing effects of technology (Jütten, 2013, p. 599).

But there are important problems with the solutions offered by both phenomenological and systems-theoretic perspectives. Dreyfus's (1999) endorsement of traditional apprenticeships—which *a priori* seems rather antiquated—is not made any less unrealistic by the fact that his argument unfolds without any consideration of the social context and market imperatives that bear down on the choice of one's education. The Habermasian view, by contrast, suffers from lack of evidence to support its claim that resistance to technological colonization of higher education will be inevitable. Whereas the trends toward commodification identified by these theorists appear to be universal in scope, resistance to them has been scattered and relatively minimal (Jütten, 2013, p. 599).

One way to account for this lack of evidence for the colonization thesis might be to claim that neo-liberal ideologies have become so entrenched by average social participants that the new realities for students and faculty ushered in by digital technology<sup>2</sup> have simply been accepted as normal. Thus, as some suggest, students may not protest rising tuitions, nor faculty the increasing research and teaching burdens, to the extent that both groups are taken in by ideologies that attribute their struggles to poor individual performance rather than to systemic disadvantages (e.g., Jütten, 2013; Winner, 1998). No doubt, such problems of false consciousness have indeed set in, given the otherwise highly irrational current economic situation faced by most university faculty and students. Nevertheless, another alternative explanation would be that the technology is no "intrusion" on higher education, but rather has been adapted to suit the needs and desires of students and faculty. Such a view would problematize the determinist perspective on the technology given above in favor of a constructivist view: the development of the technology is a highly contingent process that is constantly in flux. If this much could be shown, then the supposed opposition between technology and education assumed by the above perspectives would be put into question. Online technology would no longer be an intrusive "outside" to education, but would, in principle at any rate, harbor the potential to develop meaningful relationships between students and teachers. It is just such a perspective that is suggested by the constructivism of Andrew Feenberg.

### **Feenberg's Technological Constructivism**

According to Hamilton and Feenberg (2012), the origins of online education ultimately trace to the development of Computer Assisted Instruction (CAI) software in the 1960s and 1970s. On the model of CAI, educational material was programmed into computer mainframes, and information was retrieved with relatively few interactive features. Students could access information that had been stored and assessments generally took the form of pre-programmed tests of the material. It is really on the model of CAI that the concerns about commodified education expressed above find their purest form. As Feenberg and Hamilton (2012) describe this quasi-Taylorized educational model: "at the heart of this approach is an analysis of teaching

---

2. Especially the two trends noted above of increasing financial burdens on students coupled with decreasing quality of education, as faculty must focus more and more on research rather than teaching.

as a set of performances which can be isolated, described, broken down, and rationalized in to simple functions” (p. 50). To be sure, such “teaching machines” brought with them certain advantages, which Hamilton and Feenberg are careful to note. Most importantly, of course, they promised to reduce education costs by replacing human instructors with programmed materials (p. 49). But they also held out the promise of increasing educational access and flexibility (p. 51).

Nevertheless, there was significant enough criticism of the CAI model, particularly on the part of educators, that those within academia began to seek alternative ways of utilizing computers for the purposes of education. The burgeoning academic and private use of the Internet during this time provided the key for the movement away from the CAI model. Thus, the emergence in the late 1980s and early 1990s of programs such as the management courses offered by the Western Behavioral Sciences Institute, which were run on forerunners to the Internet like the Electronic Information Exchange System. These programs were much more interactive than their CAI predecessors, and aimed at facilitating computer conferencing among students and between students and teachers. According to Feenberg (2002), the results of these proto-online courses, as they have continued to develop with the emergence of the Internet, have been the very opposite of automated, teacher-less education:

The Internet can now do more than merely improve the materials available in the traditional correspondence course; it can also add human contact to an educational model that has always been relatively impersonal. Using email and discussion forums, groups of students can be assembled in online communities where they can participate in classroom discussion with teachers on a regular basis. (p. 127)

Marking a shift from the viewpoints of Dreyfus and Habermas, the crucial point in Feenberg’s view is that there is nothing in the online technology *per se* that means that the classroom experience *must* cease to be a location of personal interaction between students and teachers. The problem with Feenberg’s account, however, is that it fails to clarify its own normative foundations: what, ultimately, is the problem with a directionality for online education that emphasizes isolated individual achievement as opposed to community development? Ultimately Feenberg has no answer to important questions such as this, which suggests the need for deeper philosophical justification. In the next section, we argue that Axel Honneth’s recent social philosophy can be of use for this task.

### **Honneth and Online Education**

*Freedom’s Right* is a groundbreaking text of recent critical theory, not only because it marks a significant shift in Honneth’s own thought—away from a focus on philosophical anthropology and toward more concrete investigations of existing forms of ethical life—but also because of its place within the history of the development of Frankfurt School thought broadly. Honneth’s basic philosophical aim in this text is to establish a basis for social criticism adequate to the demands of post-metaphysical society: i.e., one capable of avoiding unacceptable metaphysical assumptions about human nature at the root of orthodox Marxist forms of criticism on one hand, while not abandoning the project of critique altogether on the model of descriptivist social science. But whereas Habermas had also tried to navigate this philosophical middle-

ground in his own landmark *The Theory of Communicative Action*, his view ultimately cedes too much to the side of descriptivist systems theory. In particular, in criticizing the colonization of lifeworld by system, Habermas commits himself to a problematic view of the latter as “norm-free,” and thereby leaves himself with no way to criticize objectifying forms of social interaction that may occur *within* so-called normal (non-pathological) systems functioning. *Freedom’s Right*, in effect, marks Honneth’s renewed attempt to negotiate a compromise between metaphysical critique and uncritical descriptivism, without relying on what he rightly perceives as highly problematic assumptions of systems-theory.

While *Freedom’s Right* (2014) has little explicitly to say about the nature and social significance of technology, and even less to say about developments in education, we demonstrate in this section that the basic critical framework Honneth develops in *Freedom’s Right* suggests an approach for diagnosing social pathologies<sup>3</sup> that can make sense of the possible advantages and dangers of online education. The basic argument of *Freedom’s Right* is built from three crucial premises: (1), that modern institutions cannot continue to function if they are not perceived by participants as securing for them some form of freedom; (2), that there are three different paradigms of freedom, namely, negative freedom, reflexive freedom and so-called “social” freedom; and (3), that the first two forms of freedom are both conceptually and historically derivative of the third.

Premise (1) is an expression of Honneth’s normative functionalism. According to this view, social institutions require, for their continued functioning, that all participants be able to view the norms they embody as legitimate—i.e., as intrinsically valuable and for which submitting to the institution holds worth. According to Honneth, institutions, then, are legitimate if and only if they are seen by members as securing the basic conditions for freedom. In the absence of this basic condition for legitimation, social institutions will cease to function normally: i.e., social disturbances will arise in the form of protests, demonstrations, etc.

Premise (2) disambiguates the meaning of freedom. *Negative freedom* is Honneth’s term for the freedom we experience as bearers of legal rights in modern democracies: a freedom *from* interference by others within the confines of our legally established private lives. *Reflexive freedom* is the freedom we experience as rational autonomous agents, not merely beholden to our subjective desires but capable of a positive vision of how things ought to be which we at once freely create and submit to as our reason commands. Finally, Honneth’s innovative idea of *social freedom* is the freedom we experience as part of a social world of autonomous beings like ourselves. Social freedom is the freedom that comes from finding oneself in the other; from recognizing oneself and being recognized by others as part of a community that both co-determine (i.e., institutionalized forms of mutual recognition).

---

3. Though distancing himself importantly from Habermas’s systems-functionalism, Honneth’s own “normative functionalism” remains tied to a basic functionalist critical framework, according to which social institutions may be criticized to the extent that they represent basically unsustainable forms of practice. On Honneth’s normative functionalism, such dysfunction results from the failure by particular institutions to adequately realize their own immanent ideals. In this sense Honneth is able to distinguish normal (sustainable) institutional activity from social pathologies, the latter defined as “any social development that significantly impairs the ability to take part rationally in important forms of social cooperation” (Honneth, 2014, p. 86). In thus adopting the language of social pathologies, Honneth follows Habermas in identifying some form of functionalism as the only meaningful avenue between the overly metaphysical criticism of Marx, Lukács, and early Frankfurt School theory on one hand, and the insufficiently critical accounts of society from descriptivist social science and systems theory on the other.

Much of the argument of *Freedom's Right* comes in defense of premise (3), which establishes the priority of social freedom over the other forms. According to Honneth, both negative and reflexive forms of freedom need to assume a social context from which they can only emerge as a kind of interruption. The basic idea is that both legal and moral versions of freedom assume a monologically self-contained subject and build theories of sociality on that basis, but Honneth convincingly argues that before we can come to any such sense of fully formed autonomous selfhood, we must always exist within a prior lifeworld context in which we are recognized as the agents we become. Honneth is therefore able to portray institutions of legal and moral freedom as affording us mere 'possibilities' of freedom—i.e., momentary interruptions of our lifeworld interactions that may be useful in gaining critical perspective on them—and contrasts these to the "reality" of social freedom, which he understands as the social context itself to which we are always inevitably beholden. For instance, individual property rights, *qua* institution of negative freedom, provide us a space in which we may experiment and form critical opinions of different ways of living. Nevertheless, in order to even conceive of the various life-goals with which we might experiment in our individual private spheres in the first place, we must at some point emerge from the latter and interact/exchange ideas with others. Furthermore, according to Honneth, if we are to fulfill our individual projects, we will inevitably need to engage in the lifeworld context out of which our sphere of property rights has been established. Thus, to put this in Honneth's language, social freedom must always undergird the negative (and reflexive) forms of freedom.

With this basic argument established, Honneth is able to identify social pathologies as resulting from systematic misunderstandings of the norms embodied in particular social institutions. Institutions come into crisis when they lose sight of the essential priority of social freedom by their overemphasis on one of the other derivative forms of freedom. The empirical burden on this account is not in finding evidence for a theory developed in abstraction, however, but rather in deriving an understanding of the norms that govern social institutions by careful historical analysis of those institutions. Honneth calls this the task of normative reconstruction. A normative reconstruction of the sphere of education clearly establishes it as a sphere of so-called social freedom.

On the view we are proposing, learning spaces are social communities where all members see themselves and are seen by others as co-constituting members of a communal *we*. This idealized educational experience is in large measure where we "learn in the course of [our] 'upbringing' to develop desires and goals that can only be satisfied through the complementary actions of others" (Honneth, 2014, p. 49). For Honneth, school is where we learn to be ourselves as much as we learn anything else.

From this perspective, pathologies result when social forces push us to lose sight of this communal nature of the school by an overemphasis on one of the other forms of individual freedom (i.e., negative or reflexive freedom). Thus, for instance, when an exclusive focus on our individual interests takes over—grades, standardized test scores, class standing etc.—to the neglect of our role in a greater academic community. The question for empirical study from Honneth's social freedom orientation is whether, *from the perspective of participants*, online education fosters a greater sense of community or whether the new frontier in education is rather one of increasing isolation and anomie. If Feenberg's sociological thesis is correct, there is no reason to suppose that either direction is impossible for online education technology. If Honneth's philosophical thesis is correct, however, the problem with the latter direction for online

education is that it will ultimately cause social disturbances by prioritizing individual freedom over social freedom.

## Discussion

If Honneth is correct that engagement in institutional practices is an expression of a desire for freedom, and if individualistic forms of freedom are ultimately derivative of social freedom, it follows that any social institution must prioritize the latter if it is to continue. How social freedom is to be optimally emphasized in the design of online courses, education software, the integration of online media into traditional classrooms etc., are questions that will certainly be answered and re-answered over time. Our claim here is more modest, and only seeks to offer Honneth's groundbreaking social philosophy as a more robust philosophical foundation for thinking about online education research and practice. With this said, we might consider initial strategies regarding how to operationalize our argument to the benefit of students, educators, and the social contexts in which both exist. To these ends, we conclude with a brief discussion.

Current higher education research has sent a resounding and clear message: leaving key aspects of learning (e.g., community building) to chance, rather than designing specific curricular environments that provide students with the challenges and supports required to productively learn and develop, simply does not work (see Mayhew et al., 2016). Given its structural potential to anonymize and isolate, those charged with designing online education must do more than hope that offering learning experiences will somehow result in the communal experiences required to sustain such learning. Adopting this mindset may at best not promote learning and at worse actually undermine attempts by individuals to effectively engage in meaningful and substantive educational experiences. Furthermore, as stressed at the outset, adopting the orientation that online is not a learning space conducive to building community could ultimately serve to reinforce this problematic narrative and lend credence to the notion that online is a dilution of traditional higher education.

One example of how such community building might be effectively accomplished is through considering the unique ability of digitally mediated spaces to incorporate a level of transparency into learning that is practically impossible in more traditional environments (Dalsgaard & Paulsen, 2009). As the authors of one study describe: "transparency enable[d] students and teachers to see and follow the work of fellow students and teachers within a learning environment and in that sense to make participants available to each other as resources for their learning" (p. 1). In other words, online postsecondary education holds potential to facilitate learning that is inherently collaborative, cooperative, and socially reinforcing. Rather than bemoan what is lost in the online space, or even assume that the digital environment could or should proceed in more-or-less the same way as the traditional one, incorporating pedagogical strategies that could not possibly occur in a traditional classroom recognizes the critical imperative of leveraging the technology of the medium *to the advantage of* fostering social freedom.

We also consider the importance of entering online education environments with the correct measures of desired outcomes and more clearly defining what is meant by "student success" in this arena. In general agreement with DeBoer et al. (2015), we believe it is inappropriate to exclusively migrate measures that show effectiveness in traditional learning and assume they will be able to effectively capture all the nuance and purposes of the online environment. We

instead highlight the importance of examining the extent to which individuals are not only learning course material, but also gaining opportunities to interact in meaningful ways with others. The work of Schroeder et al. (2016) provides a helpful pathway forward in considering an effective theoretical and empirical strategy for conducting this research by seeing connectivity (i.e., social engagement) as an outcome in its own right. We might further consider how future narratives of success or achievement in the online space will hinge on the extent to which such forms of education help individuals learn while also securing social freedom—as we have seen numerous times in the new decade, one without the other is unsustainable in the long-term (Fain, 2015).

Addressing the concerns offered through the lenses of Dreyfus and Habermas and leveraging the insights of Feenberg, we suggest that a future possibility exists in which online education comes not to be associated with forms of adjunctification or commodification through introducing a simple idea: much as quality in-person faculty teaching is, at least nominally, valued by institutions and students alike due to its demonstrated benefits across many higher education outcomes (see Mayhew et al., 2016), so too might the ability to provide high quality educational experiences *online* that promote student learning and social freedom come to be similarly valued and properly evaluated. While such a standard might not immediately apply to MOOCs due to their open-access structure and diversity of motivations (see Evans et al., 2016), it could well apply to the integration of online learning into educational curricula ranging from the community college to the graduate school level. Imagine the possibilities for high quality education, research, teaching and learning should online education be understood, supported, valued and institutionally recognized not as being “a lesser form of” or even a “different modality toward” providing educational experiences, but rather a vehicle for explicitly promoting *as quality education* an orientation toward social interaction.

Finally, we propose that the philosophical arguments presented in this paper can offer educators and other postsecondary stakeholders helpful claims in defense of supporting the necessity of positioning social freedom as integral to online education. First, Dreyfus’s suggestion of a return to the apprenticeship model strikes us as outmoded, offering very little to support social freedom, especially when one considers the extraordinary potential for access to such opportunities to rely on existing social capital. To the Habermasian view, that online education ultimately and inevitably reduces postsecondary learning to an impersonal transaction, we present the perhaps more pragmatic alternative that almost nothing about applying new technology in the context of education can ever really be considered inevitable. To provide a counterpoint to the Habermasian claim: new technologies utilizing video conferencing in classrooms especially designed to facilitate this learning modality can lead to increased digitally-mediated communicative interactions between students and faculty members (see Smith, 2017).

Perhaps most powerfully, we have shown that Honneth’s recent social philosophy provides the philosophical resources needed to explain why approaches in higher education that emphasize individual achievement at the expense of intersubjective engagement may become socially problematic. Furthermore, given this basic normative orientation, it follows that technology will undermine the aims of students and instructors to the extent that it is designed and institutionalized in ways that cause students to become isolated from each other and from instructors. Nevertheless, we also oppose the view from systems theory and phenomenology that suggests such any such trajectory for technology must be inevitable. As we observe in literatures

connected to MOOCs, experiencing high quality communication with faculty and TAs is possible, and in fact encourages students to stay in MOOCs (Oakley et al., 2016); experiencing the educational environment in isolation, however, is more closely associated with the persistent dropout rates we see in such courses. We again wish to express that students leaving a course is not necessarily an adverse outcome; we merely offer evidence that environments that intentionally connect students to instructors and other learners are closely associated with promoting engaged forms of higher education. This issue does become somewhat more pressing, however, when considering the rapid growth of online learning as a state-level postsecondary education solution (see Smith, 2017) and the extent to which policymakers and other stakeholders must make choices regarding how much (or little) attention and resources are devoted to building educational communities online that ultimately reinforce learning, while helping their participants secure social freedom.

### Conclusion

Honneth's social philosophy considers both how historical choices have generated existing environments and how environments can promote or impede the achievement of social freedom. From this perspective, we encourage educators and educational researchers to engage in more fundamental conversations about contemporary higher learning: Can education that does not actively strive to promote a sense of community, or what Honneth terms social freedom, ultimately sustain itself? Does the move online threaten (or, alternatively, promote) personal relations among students and between students and teachers that are of more primordial importance to learning than even the curriculum itself? While we do not have immediate answers to these questions, we believe that this research may provide future scholars across disciplines with better frameworks for defending a community-oriented direction for online education.

### References

- Allen, I. E. & Seaman, J. (2008). *Staying the course: Online education in the United States*. Needham, MA: The Sloan Consortium.
- Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2016). *Online report card: Tracking online education in the United States*. Babson Park, MA: Babson Survey Research Group and Quahog Research Group, LLC.
- Baasanjav, U. (2013). Incorporating the experiential learning cycle into online classes. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 9(4), 575-589.
- Banna, J., Lin, M-F. G., Stewart, M., & Fialkowski, M. K. (2015). Interaction matters: Strategies to promote engaged learning in an online introductory nutrition course. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 11(2), 249-261.
- Cochran, J. D., Campbell, S. M., Baker, H. M., & Leeds, E. M. (2014). The role of student characteristics in predicting retention in online courses. *Research in Higher Education*, 55(1), 27-48.
- Cole, A. W., & Timmerman, C. E. (2015). What do current college students think about MOOCs? *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 11(2), 188-201.
- Crews, T. B., Wilkinson, K., & Neill, J. K. (2015). Principles for good practice in undergraduate

- education: Effective online course design to assist students' success. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 11(1), 87-103.
- Dalsgaard, C., & Paulsen, M. F. (2009). Transparency in cooperative online education. *The Institutional Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 10(3), 1-13.
- DeBoer, J., Ho, A. D., Stump, G. S., & Breslow, L. (2014). Changing "course": Reconceptualizing educational variables for massive open online courses. *Educational Researcher*, 43, 74-84.
- Dixson, M. D. (2015). Measuring student engagement in the online course: The online student engagement scale (OSE). *Online Learning*, 19(4), 143-157.
- Dreyfus, H. L. (1999). Anonymity versus commitment: The dangers of education on the Internet. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 1, 15-21.
- Evans, B. J., Baker, R. B., & Dee, T. S. (2016). Persistence patterns in massive open online courses (MOOCs). *The Journal of Higher Education*, 87(2), 206-242.
- Fain, P. (2015, May 7). Vanishing profit, and campuses. *Inside Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/05/07/profit-chains-announce-new-wave-closures-and-sell-offs>.
- Feenberg, Andrew (2002). *Transforming technology: A critical theory revisited*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fonolahi, A. V., Khan, M.G.M., & Jokhan, A. (2014). Are students studying in the online mode faring as well as student studying in the face-to-face mode? Has equivalence in learning been achieved? *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 10(4), 598-609.
- Fontenot, R. J., Mathisen, R. E., Carley, S. S., & Stuart, R. S. (2015). Predictors of enrolling in online courses: An exploratory study of students in undergrad marketing courses. *Journal of Educators Online*, 12(1), 116-139.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1984/1987). *The theory of communicative action*. Trans. Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Hachey, A. C., Wladis, C. W., & Conway, K. M. (2012). Is the second time the charm? Investigating trends in online re-enrollment, retention and success. *Journal of Educators Online*, 9(1), n1.
- Hamilton, E., & Feenberg, A. (2012). Alternative rationalizations and ambivalent futures: A critical history of online education. In A. Feenberg & N. Friesen (Eds.), *(Re)Inventing the internet: Critical case studies*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Heitner, K. L., & Jennings, M. (2016). Culturally responsive teaching knowledge and practices of online faculty. *Online Learning*, 20(4), 54-78.
- Honneth, A. (2014). *Freedom's right: The social foundations of democratic life*. Trans. Joseph Ganahl. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ion, C. G. (2015). Husserl, Habermas, and the lifeworld as the overall horizon within which individuals act. *Linguistic and Philosophical Investigations*, 14, 115.
- Jones, S. J., & Long, V. M. (2013). Learning equity between online and on-site mathematics courses. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 9(1), 1-12.
- Jordan, K. (2014). Initial trends in enrollment and completion of massive open online courses. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 15, 133-160.
- Joyner, S. A., Fuller, M. B., Holzweiss, P. C., Henderson, S., & Young, R. (2014). The importance of student-instructor connections in graduate level online courses. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 10(3), 436-445.

- Jütten, T. (2013). Habermas and markets. *Constellations*, 20(4), 587-603.
- Koller, D., Ng, A., Do, C., & Chen, Z. (2013). Retention and intention in massive open online courses: In depth. *Educause Review*, 48, 62-63.
- Kuh, G. D., Schuh, J. H., & Whitt, E. J. (1991). *Involving colleges: Successful approaches to fostering student learning and personal development outside the classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lee, J., & Bonk, C. J. (2016). Social network analysis of peer relationships and online interactions in a blended class using blogs. *Internet and Higher Education*, 28, 35-44.
- Levidow, L. (2002). Marketizing higher education: Neoliberal strategies and counter-strategies. In: K. Robins & F. Webster (Eds.), *The virtual university: Knowledge, markets and management* (pp. 227-248). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mayhew, M. J., Rockenbach, A. N., Bowman, N. A., Seifert, T. A., & Wolniak, G. C. (2016). *How college affects students: 21<sup>st</sup> century evidence that higher education works (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- McDaniels, M., Pfund, C., & Barnicle, K. (2016). Creating dynamic learning communities in synchronous online courses: One approach from the center for the integration of research, teaching and learning (CIRTL). *Online Learning*, 20(1), 1-20.
- Noble, D. F. (1998). Digital diploma mills: The automation of higher education. *Science as culture*, 7(3), 355-368.
- Noble, D. F. (2001). *Digital diploma mills: The automation of higher education*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Oakley, B., Poole, D., & Nestor, M. A. (2016). Creating a sticky MOOC. *Online Learning*, 20(1), 1-12.
- Perna, L. W., Ruby, A., Boruch, R. F., Wang, N., Scull, J., Ahmad, S., & Evans, C. (2014). Moving Through MOOCs Understanding the Progression of Users in Massive Open Online Courses. *Educational Researcher*, 43(9), 421-432.
- Phirangee, K. (2016). Students' perceptions of learner-learner interactions that weaken a sense of community in an online learning environment. *Online Learning*, 20(4), 13-33.
- Picciano, A. G. (2006). Online learning: Implications for higher education pedagogy and policy. *Journal of Thought*, 41(1), 75-94.
- Ruby, A., Perna, L., Boruch, R., & Wang, N. (2015). *Online Learning*, 19(5), 159-170.
- Schroeder, S., Baker, M., Terras, K., Mahar, P., & Chiasson, K. (2016). Students' desired and experienced levels of connectivity to an asynchronous, online, distance degree program. *Online Learning*, 20(3), 244-263.
- Smith, A. A. (2017, June 27). New models for community colleges. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/06/27/california-and-pennsylvania-create-new-alternative-community-colleges>.
- Terosky, A. L., & Heasley, C. (2015). Supporting online faculty through a sense of community and collegiality. *Online Learning*, 19(3), 147-161.
- Wang, Y., & Baker, R. (2015). Content or platform: Why do students complete MOOCs? *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 11(1), 17-30.
- Winner, L. (1998). Report from the digital diploma mills conference. *Science as Culture*, 7(3), 369-377.