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Hope, Promises, and Disenfranchisement: Examining the Impact of Computer-Assisted Instruction in Alternative Schooling

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Abstract

In the following study, the author explores the role that computer-assisted instruction (CAI) plays in the cycle of disenfranchisement experienced by alternative school students. Students in alternative education are often trapped in the vicious cycle of disenfranchisement, and the high school diploma is heralded as a method for disrupting this cycle. CAI is viewed as a tool for rapidly progressing students towards graduation. The author found that in the CAI classroom, efficiency was rewarded over meaningful and equitable learning that could effectively lead to change. This leads the author to question whether alternative education is another method for maintaining the status quo.

Introduction

When I met Ben, he was a new student at Tall Pines Alternative High School (all names are pseudonyms). It was mid-way through the first semester. Ben had recently transferred from a traditional high school in the same school district. He struggled both academically and behaviorally at his former school, but now at Tall Pines, Ben was feeling hopeful and encouraged. The alternative school was his second chance at earning a high school diploma. It was a fresh start in a new environment that he described as “safer.” He was developing healthy relationships with teachers and students, and as Ben said, “I haven’t yelled at any teachers yet, so that’s pretty good.”

In many ways, Ben was a typical alternative school student. He had a history of failing grades, poor attendance and problem behaviors (Lehr, Tans, & Ysseldyke, 2009). He was behind on high school credits, so his education at Tall Pines was focused on regaining these credits at a heightened pace. For this reason, Ben spent half his day, two out of the four 90-minute class periods, in the computer lab working on courses delivered through computer-assisted instruction (CAI). This was not Ben’s first experience with CAI. At his previous school, he also spent half his day completing CAI coursework, so he was familiar with the structure and expectations of the program.

Now at Tall Pines, Ben was enrolled in eleven CAI classes: four English, three science, two history, one math and one health elective. He closely monitored his progress in each of the courses. In his wallet, he carried a list on notebook paper containing the names of his CAI classes and his percentage of completion in each. He shared the list with me.

I just have to finish two math tests, and I have to do that semester test. And I’m done with that. But for my Earth and Space science, I’m way below that. I’m at like 40 something percent. I had it in my wallet here ‘cause I wrote it down yesterday, and I haven’t done it. Um, I’m a hundred percent on Geometry. I’m 40 percent on US History A. I’m 30 percent on US History B. I’m at 44 on Earth and Space science. I’m a 100 in English 11. Ninety-five on English 12. That’s pretty good. Forty on English 12 B, which is not good. One hundred percent on Health. Ninety-five on Life Science A, and 88 on Life Science B. So, the life sciences I could finish. My English 12 A, I could finish. Um, that would be like really finished. But then I’d have a 40 percent, a 44, 30, 42. So, yeah.

Ben’s goal of graduation motivated this intense awareness of his progress. He was focused on finishing school, and CAI was an important part of this process. In theory, CAI could allow him to finish his high school classes in less time than it would take in the traditional classroom. For Ben, graduation would mean an end to his troublesome relationship with school, but he was also looking forward to new opportunities and the chance to change his life and disrupt the cycle of disenfranchisement.

In the following text, I draw upon the voices and experiences of Ben, his classmates and members of the staff at Tall Pines Alternative School to explore the role that CAI plays in the cycle of disenfranchisement. Students in alternative education often face a variety of social and academic challenges and are left feeling powerless and voiceless. At Tall Pines, the students had high hopes for changing their lives. These hopes were often tied to high school completion, and CAI was a key component in

progressing towards graduation. Despite the ambitions of the students, results in the CAI classroom varied. Some students rapidly progressed through the curriculum by developing tactics and methods for completion, while others struggled, disengaged and practically disappeared in the classroom. In the end, CAI contributed to the perpetuation of the cycle of disenfranchisement by rewarding efficiency over meaningful learning or critical knowledge (Habermas, 1971) that could disrupt the cycle.

Background of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the role that CAI plays in the cycle of disenfranchisement often experienced by alternative school students. Alternative education is sometimes conflated with progressive forms of education (Conley, 2002; Goodman, 1999; Neumann, 2003). Even the name “alternative” suggests something new or different. However, researchers contend that alternative schools are often far from progressive and sometimes provide a lower quality of education than traditional schools (Aron, 2006; Kim & Taylor, 2008). Concerns such as fast-paced credit recovery and getting students “back on track” for graduation overshadow concerns about the type or quality of learning that is taking place. This is my concern with CAI. While literature boasts that it is a successful method to move students towards graduation (Akiba, 2002; Chalker & Stelsel, 2009; D’Angelo & Zemanick, 2009), it is also found to lack qualities of democratic education (Miller, 2013) and emphasize fast-paced credit recovery over learning and the development of emancipatory knowledge (Kim & Taylor, 2008).

Methods

This discussion draws upon data I collected between September 2012 and December 2012 at Tall Pines Alternative School. Tall Pines was designed to accommodate students who were unsuccessful in either of the two traditional high schools in the district. The school used full-class, traditional instruction for courses in English, math, social studies, art and physical education. The school had approximately 80 high school students, and one teacher for each of the traditionally run classes. The school had two administrators: a principal and a guidance counselor. Tall Pines maintained one computer lab, which was primarily devoted to CAI using the curriculum PLATO Online. This lab was staffed by a full-time instructional assistant.

I used case study methodology (Stake, 2000), and methods included semi-structured interviews (Esterberg, 2002) with seven students, two teachers, the instructional assistant and two administrators as well as CAI classroom and school-wide observations. All students interviewed were enrolled in CAI courses at the time of the study. I also reviewed documentation from the CAI curriculum developers and Tall Pines Alternative School.

Opportunity and Computer-Assisted Instruction

In itself, alternative education comes with many promises. Like Ben, for many students it is a second chance to earn a high school diploma, and for others, it may seem like a last chance after being expelled or previously dropping out. At Tall Pines, students were hopeful, and teachers and administrators wanted them to succeed. There was a shared mission of completion that was driven by a strong belief in the opportunities that

came with a high school diploma. This mission of completion solidified the students' and staff's commitment to CAI.

Several of the students in the CAI courses shared with me their motivation for finishing high school. Their hopes stemmed from their experiences with poverty and hardship. The goals were rooted in changing their life situations, as they envisioned moving out of poverty, having options, and helping their own families to struggle a little less. The diploma was viewed as the piece of paper that would break the cycle.

Hailey told me how she wanted a life that was different than her family's. She wanted to be financially stable and not have to depend on government assistance.

I look at the way my family is living and that my dad doesn't have a really good stable career because he didn't go to college. And if he did, then we would be a lot better off. But he didn't. So like, I do plan on having a family later in life, so I want to be able to provide for them if I'm on my own. I want to be able to know that I'm gonna have a job at the end of the day. And not have to worry about where the rent gonna come from or food or anything. And I don't want to have to depend on food stamps.

Ben wanted to become a truck driver. He said that he wanted to see the world and have financial security. His classmate, Jose, was looking forward to becoming a manager at a local processing plant. He shared, "I can get a lot more hours in and help my family out with bills and what not and save up for a house." The students held a strong belief in meritocracy (McNamee & Miller, 2013). If they worked hard enough, they could change their lives.

Commitment to Computer-Assisted Instruction

This mission of completion fed a commitment to CAI. CAI was viewed as a tool that could help students move closer to graduation. Billy said, "It's kind of, it's definitely hard, but I feel like it's still worth it to finish it. I mean it gets you credits really fast. Like you can get two credits in one quarter." Billy struggled in his CAI courses, and he left school before the end of the semester.

The principal and school counselor shared that CAI played an important role in graduating students quickly. The principal stated,

We do have PLATO, which they can move through. I had a young man last quarter that went through it very quickly. I think he did five classes, so he got two and a half credits. So, he'll be graduating in December. So, he's actually graduating ahead of his schedule.

Students, teachers and administrators all confided that they saw problems with CAI. The principal felt that a classroom teacher was superior and that the curriculum lacked hands-on learning experiences. The teachers thought CAI was teaching a curriculum of compliance and a "poor excuse for education." The students said that CAI was not a real class and that they were not learning much content. CAI student Hailey described the classes by saying, "You can, like, cheat like really easily. Like they're easy. They're not really, they're not real classes. But they get the job done. They get you credits, which is good." Despite the transparency of these problems, CAI's deficiencies were continually ignored because the curriculum had the potential to progress students towards graduation and therefore ultimately contributing to their success.

Efficiency Over Learning

In the CAI classroom, I found that efficiency was rewarded and learning the content slowed down the students' progress. I identified three groups of students based on their academic performance in the CAI classroom: *hopeful*, *defeated* and *achieving*. These groups were non-exclusive, and students would transition from one to another.

The *hopeful* students were the smallest group. They attempted to learn and master the material. These students read the content, did their best on the tests and quizzes, and sometimes even took notes. New students at Tall Pines often fell into this category, as they were eager and determined to make up their missing high school credits. This is where Ben fell his first few weeks at the school. In his coursework, he was slow and methodical. He read the material and looked at the diagrams. He attempted and reattempted to pass the tests and quizzes at the end of the modules. While a few of the students were successful, most became noticeably frustrated.

The second group, *achieving*, was by far the most successful in completing courses. These were the students who developed elaborate tactics for approaching the curriculum. They copied and pasted answers into word documents to be used on posttests. They knew the best websites to get quiz answers. They enrolled in the easiest courses to complete in the shortest amount of time and clicked through the modules without reading anything. Entering into this group took practice, technological skills and often insider knowledge. Students who had previous experience with the curriculum were able to inform novice students about the easiest classes to take, the parts that could be skipped and the pieces that needed attention.

The students in *defeated* group were resigned to losing the educational game. This group made up a large number of students in the classroom, many of whom had expressed to me their desire for high school completion. However, instead of moving closer to a diploma, they were progressing further and further away. They would often end up in this group after unsuccessfully struggling to master the content and not being privy to the tactics of the *achieving* group. They spent their time looking at images and listening to music online. Their presence in the classroom was sporadic, as they would slip in and out and find numerous reasons to leave. When Ben left the *hopeful* group, he joined the *defeated* group. He began to leave class on restroom and hall passes for extended periods of time. He put his head on the desk frequently and spent more time surfing the Internet.

In the end, the *hopeful* and *defeated* students were not completing courses or earning credits. The students in the *achieving* group were rapidly earning high school credits without engaging with the content. None of the groups were receiving a meaningful education.

Deceit and the Promise of Change

When I met Ben, he was hopeful and committed to working hard in the CAI classroom, but he was unsuccessful in his courses and struggled to learn the material. He did not develop the technical tactics and methods for moving through the curriculum quickly. He studied the modules, read the materials, and struggled through posttests and quizzes. He became increasingly frustrated and found reasons to leave class regularly. Discourses of meritocracy (McNamee & Miller, 2013) and individualism (McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007) contributed to Ben feeling the full weight of his struggle and failure in

school. He believed that if he could just work harder, he would succeed. What Ben didn't know was that the system was not set up for his success.

At the same time, some of his classmates progressed towards a diploma that represented an empty education. Specifically the classroom was void of critical knowledge (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Habermas, 1971), and it is critical knowledge that can lead to emancipation and potentially disrupt the cycle of disenfranchisement. While it could be argued that the students were using critical knowledge to develop their tactics and methods for completion, it was efficiency that was primarily being rewarded. The goal was to finish courses quickly, and learning material simply slowed or halted progress. In the end, the high school diploma represented a student's ability to efficiently complete tasks with as little effort as possible. In this sense, the students were being prepared to enter the workforce in low-level positions (Anyon, 1980; MacLeod, 2009).

As Maxine Greene (1985) suggests, "Surely it is an obligation of education in a democracy to empower the young to become members of the public, to participate, and play articulate roles in the public spaces" (p. 4). But this was not the framework for education at Tall Pines. The opportunity to break the cycle of disenfranchisement was connected to a piece of paper – the high school diploma. The education behind that diploma was much less of a concern than simply getting the diploma into the students' hands. I conclude that Tall Pines was full of false promises regarding opportunities for change. Instead of disrupting the cycle of disenfranchisement, CAI contributed to perpetuating the cycle and maintaining the status quo.

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