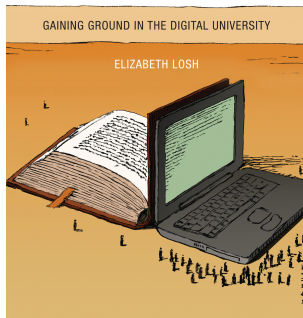


THE WAR ON LEARNING



The War on Learning: Gaining Ground in the Digital University

Losh, Elizabeth
MIT Press, 2014

Book Review

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The War on Learning is an important contribution to public debate on new instructional technologies and the future of the university. A scholar of media history and digital rhetoric, Elizabeth Losh clarifies charged issues with her knowledge of historical context and a talent for cutting through publicity to identify the most important facts.

In her first chapter, Losh describes how *Good Morning America* hoped to use her as “a voice of moral outrage” in response to online videos showcasing techniques for cheating on exams (19). To their disappointment, Losh was unwilling to paint an uncomplicated “us versus them” picture of how professors and students use technology. Losh’s thesis is that both sides are engaged in an “incredibly destructive war on learning itself by emphasizing competition and conflict rather than cooperation” (26).

In her second chapter, Losh uses her teaching experiences to illuminate the “rhetoric of crisis” around the status of education in our culture (46). As a literature review which explains key moments in a conflict that is wide enough to include policing of student Internet activity and calls for the end of universities as we know them, it is here that Losh’s thesis is at its most persuasive. In the third chapter, “On Camera,” Losh explains how the online sharing of lectures turned one professor into a beloved celebrity and another into an object of ridicule. The war on learning is a costly distraction from the “digital literacy and competence in digital rhetoric” that is professionally important for both professors and students (89).

The pedagogy of distance learning is reviewed in chapter 4 with the salient observation that the online lecture “often is more likely to resemble a traffic school tutorial rather than a

compelling professorial performance” (109). Chapter 5 discusses “The Rhetoric of the Open Courseware Movement” with a critique of the optimism around platforms like Coursera and edX that is nevertheless respectful of their potential. Chapter 6 examines the technological struggle over plagiarism and the rise of Turnitin as a somewhat ethically ambiguous policing tool. Chapters 7 and 8 consider the merits of gadget distribution (for example, iPods and iPads) and efforts to create educational video games respectively.

In the ninth chapter, Losh lays out six clear suggestions for making the digital university “more inclusive, generative, just, and constructive” based on “two decades in the trenches” (224). Losh argues that knowledge of the history of instructional technology and reflection on learning as process rather than product should precede elaborate plans for the digital university.

This is not a book for professors seeking a step-by-step guide for bringing technology into their classrooms. Losh, in fact, mentions that she wrote this volume with college presidents in mind (14). I recommend it to anyone wanting a broader picture of how technology might impact the future of university education. With well-chosen case studies Losh provides a crash course on the history of instructional technologies and deep reflection on their implications.

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