On the "university of the future": A critical analysis of cohort-based course platform Maven

Dr. George Veletsianos

Dr. Shandell Houlden

The educational technology industry includes numerous learning providers and platforms offering cohort-based courses. In this paper, we examine, analyse, and critique one such platform called Maven. We focus our analysis on Maven because this specific platform describes itself as building "the university of the future" and has recently received significant attention and funding, making it a compelling case study to better understand the potential roles and risks associated with education platforms operating outside of and alongside more traditional higher education institutions today and into the future. We highlight specific concerns about cohort-based platforms like Maven, including lack of transparency, risk of surveillance, lack of adequate financial support for learners, and over-reliance on social media networks as signifiers of educator/instructor qualification. Suggested benefits include adaptability, suitability to changing skills needs, and responsiveness to changing environmental scenarios.

Keywords: platform capitalism; cohort-based learning platforms; education futures; Maven

Introduction

The future of education has perhaps rarely been as open and contested as it is today in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects of the rapid transition to emergency remote learning in 2020, which relied heavily on both established and new education technology. As part of this contestation, digital learning platforms have increasingly come under the critical gaze of scholars seeking to understand not just their effectiveness for teaching and learning, but also the political economy and their long-term socio-cultural implications on education. We contribute to that growing body of literature with a unique focus on cohort-based course (CBC) platforms. We focus our analysis on the Maven CBC platform because this specific platform describes itself as building "the university of the future" and has recently received significant attention and funding (Maven 2022a, 2022b). This analysis is important because the claims made by CBC platforms raise salient questions not just about digital learning platforms, but also about the future of education and learning. The paper unfolds as follows: First, after a brief literature review, we describe the context of our study, by describing CBCs and Maven. Next, we outline the key elements of the analytic framework we are using. We then apply the framework to Maven to better determine the degree to which its claims, and the claims of companies like it, serve public interests with respect to learning. In doing so, we explore the narrow conceptions of framing cohort-based course platforms as "the university of the future."

Digital education platforms

While critical research on digital education platforms is increasing, writing for a Special Issue of *Critical Studies in Education* Decuypere, Grimaldi, and Landry (2021) note an urgent need for more work on the topic of digital education platforms, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, they urge researchers to adopt innovative methods and a "critical platform gaze," which is a mode of analysis

that recognizes that platforms are not neutral and have a hand in co-shaping and transforming the structures of the education sector. The articles in the Special Issue take this critical stance while focusing on education platforms already integrated into more conventional public educational, like K-12 (e.g., Google Classroom (Perotta et al., 2021)) and higher education (e.g., Pearson (Williamson, 2021)). Absent from this discussion is analysis of external for-profit learning platforms unaffiliated or not yet integrated into conventional public education and higher education, such as the CBC platform Maven we discuss in this paper.

Much research on digital education platforms topic exists beyond this special issue. Some examples of recent research that uses the types of innovative methods and critical platform gaze described by Decuypere, Grimaldi, and Landry place large emphasis on understanding the political economy of education platforms. Komljenovic (2021) examines the ways in which proprietary digital products and platforms already are and are likely to change higher education operations, likening the "rents for access" structure of learning platforms to subscriptions for academic journals. At risk in such an economic relationship is increasing costs should such platforms become monopolies, and the impact this has on education as a democratic project. Elsewhere, Hillman et al. (2019), have used speculative methods to consider the ways in which increasing platformization in Swedish schools throughout the next decade may result in unintended consequences. As our paper also does in later sections, these authors connect the risk of platforms in education to the operation of platform capitalism, making quite clear that the role of platforms in education, whether now or into the future, is and will be influenced in problematic ways by economic factors.

The value of this critical trajectory on research on education platforms is significant, especially now as education systems at all levels integrate with more

technology. By critically engaging with CBCs, this paper addresses an understudied area of concern which highlights the diversity of ways in which digital education platforms already are and might further influence the future of education. It's no longer enough to consider how such platforms are being integrated into already established education systems, but also to consider how external private platforms may or may not shape the future of education, as we do here with Maven. Thus, this analysis contributes to the ongoing emergence of this growing body of critical work by broadening the scope of inquiry to include influences beyond already established public-private partnerships in education in order to think about what might happen as private companies accumulate more power and influence over the future of education, and as they come to imagine themselves as representing the future of education as Maven does.

What is a cohort-based course platform?

CBC platforms host online courses built around cohorts of learners that participate in live and synchronous learning experiences. Means, Bakia, and Murphy (2014) note that online learning experiences can be designed according to nine dimensions: modality, pacing, student-instructor ratio, pedagogy, instructor role online, student role online, online communication synchrony, role of online assessments, and source of feedback. Using these dimensions, cohort-based courses are typically fully online (modality), class-paced (pacing), consisting of up to approximately 35 students per instructor – though in some instances larger cohorts of up to 100 students are possible – (student-instructor ratio), use a combination of expository, practice, and collaborative pedagogical approaches (pedagogy), and use online assessment to provide student or instructor with information about learning state rather than grade or identify students at risk of failure (role of online assessment). In these courses the instructor provides active and guiding online instruction (instructor role), the student completes problems and

collaborates with peers (student role), the instruction takes place predominantly in synchronous mode (online communication synchrony), and both instructor and peers provide feedback (source of feedback).

Intending to create a learning community as a key component of effective education, these online cohorts are meant to replicate the social learning aspects of in-person courses while offering the flexibility of remote and online participation. A distinguishing characteristic of CBC platforms and other cohort-based programs is that they occur outside of higher education institutions. A CBC platform is a privately-owned digital platform regulated by its owners and/or investors. Platforms are "digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact" (Srnicek, 2016, 25) which can bring together diverse users with diverse needs and offerings, such as service providers, customers, advertisers, and in the case of educational platforms, learners and instructors. While a central function of CBC platforms is to offer courses to learners, platforms also serve instructors. In other words, they endeavour to host and support content experts who may or may not be professional educators to create successful and profitable learning communities and to share their skills and knowledge with these communities. Like other digital platforms, CBC platforms don't employ instructors. Instead, they facilitate a structured exchange of expertise between experts and their network. This is similar to Airbnb for instance, which does not actually own the homes it makes available for users to rent, but connects homeowners with potential guests, and makes a profit through that transaction. Similar to Airbnb, once an asset exists (i.e., a course is created), there is potential for it to be "sold" or offered multiple times, if demand exists for it.

Over the last three years we have witnessed an increasing number of cohort-based course platforms and initiatives. Some offer a variety of courses and others focus

on niche audiences of topics. Examples other than Maven include Disco, Mighty Networks, altMBA, Lambda, and Section4. We focus on Maven for three key reasons. First, Maven describes itself as building "the university of the future" (Maven, 2022a), an assertion we take seriously in light of the intense needs and instability of the current moment both within education and beyond. While other platforms have their own aspirational branding – and many have described CBCs in ways that are characteristic of the optimism that permeates the educational technology industry (e.g., by being described as an innovation (Gibbons, 2021), as "reshaping education" (Fleming, 2021), as "the way forward" (Notermans, 2022)) – Maven's own characterization is particularly striking given the prevailing uncertainty about the future of education and ongoing calls for imagining a "new normal" (Dea, 2021; Rapanta et al., 2021). Second, the co-founders of Maven (Wes Kao, Gagan Biyan, and Shreyens Bhansali) are established figures in the online learning and educational technology (edtech) industry, meaning they have familiarity with the business side of other successful education-focused ventures. The Maven website (Maven, 2022a) describes Kao as co-founding with Seth Godin altMBA, which is a popular online leadership program (altMBA.com, 2022), and describes her as "inventing the modern cohort-based course format." Biyan is noted to have co-founded Udemy, "the world's largest platform for massively open online courses." Bhansali co-founded the popular app Socratic which was eventually acquired by Google. In other words, Maven's co-founders are leaders and active participants in the educational technology industry, where they have found business success, which suggests that their perspectives offer an insight into the prevailing attitudes and inclinations of the broader edtech ecosystem. Finally, Maven has attracted a substantial amount of investment funding from venture capital firms Andreessen

Horowitz and First Round to the tune of approximately $25 million USD (Mascarenhas, 2021), suggesting a strong belief in the growth potential of the platform.

Theoretical framework

Amidst the backdrop of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, late stage petro-capitalism, the Russian war against Ukraine, and economic concerns worldwide, the future of education is as ripe for transformation towards liberation and equity as it is for exploitation and commodification. The multiple ongoing crises – from mental health, to economic inequality and poverty, to racial discrimination, to climate change and environmental degradation, for example – are converging under the weight of the unequal distribution of the pandemic's harmful effects. With respect to education in particular, there are risks for exploitation in the form of disaster capitalism as a type of pandemic "recovery" for example. Disaster capitalism is a type of neoliberal capitalism that exploits and profiteers off of different types of disaster and crises, including warfare, environmental catastrophes like earthquakes and tsunamis, and pandemics, in order to generate capital and profit through increased privatization during moments of societal instability and vulnerability (Klein, 2007). Education systems are by no means immune from this process, as Klein points out happened in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, which resulted in the "most privatized school system in the United States" (Germain, 2021, np). Edtech companies are not new to this process either (Tauson & Stannard, 2018). Indeed, scholars have already noted a trend in response to the pandemic whereby the edtech industry, and Big Tech more generally, have sought to insert their software and services into the operations of education under the guise of support to public education institutions in times of emergency remote learning (Ideland 2021; Norris, 2022). This trend is suggestive of disaster capitalism in action, which

brings with it a host of concerns beyond the privatization of public education including around the alarming infiltration of data mining practices and surveillance technologies that edtech often relies upon, and around the degree to which those practices are non-transparent to learners and educators alike (Facer & Selwyn, 2021; Selwyn, 2011; Moore, De Oliveira Jayme, & Black, 2021).

Critically engaging with edtech

In a report written to inform the UNESCO (2021) education futures project, Facer and Selwyn (2021) provide a useful framework for categorizing the claims made by proponents and developers of edtech, while also offering a series of key critical questions to ask about those claims to identify where they might be misleading, underthought, and consequential in unforeseen ways. They suggest a need for critical engagement around issues raised by edtech growth, and these questions are especially useful in thinking about the threats to education presented by disaster capitalism. We use these questions as our theoretical framework.

The key claims loosely fit into five categories. First, Facer and Selwyn note that edtech companies often claim that their tools will improve efficiency through time saving, fast tracking, and reliance upon automated technologies to reduce the cost of human support. Second, often through the collection of personal data, they claim that they can offer 'precision' education, which will be predictive of learners' needs and desires. Third, they claim they can offer learning differentiation which can offer learners the specific learning modalities they as individuals need to best learn, as predicted by data and machine learning. Fourth, they claim that their technologies can provide "enhanced 'insight' and 'knowing'" (11) through comprehensive data collection meant to enable knowing of everything related to a user/learner's activity. Finally, Facer

and Selwyn note that edtech companies claim that their technologies, through their efficiencies, can help eliminate education inequalities faced by under-resourced learners and communities. In response to such claims, they suggest asking the following questions (12-13):

1. How might these emerging technologies interact with the existing social contexts of education?

2. What assumptions about learning and teaching processes drive these technologies, and what forms of learning will therefore be valued or ignored? What evidence is there to support their impact on learning?

3. What non-educational consequences might result from these technologies – especially in terms of inequalities, impact on teachers' work, or other ways of altering the character and conditions of education?

4. What is the relationship between the education technology in question and the broader sustainability goals which global educational futures need to consider?

To better understand the potential benefits and risks of privately owned CBC platforms, we use these questions in order to examine the claims made by Maven.

Questioning the claims

The platformization of education

What does it mean for Maven in particular, and other CBCs in general, to function as "the university of the future?" A first broad consequence to education potentially risked by a future dominated by CBC platforms like Maven, is the increasing platformization of education, which is to say the role that platform capitalism may have in the so-called university of the future. Platform capitalism is a direct function of the creation and proliferation of digital platforms. Platforms rely on network effects, meaning the larger

a network is, or the more connections within a network, the more potential benefit and profit there may be for the business. Twitter and Facebook, for instance, rely on networks: the greater their user base (i.e., the larger the network), the greater the likelihood of profit for the business (e.g., the greater the likelihood that ads can be better targeted, the greater the likelihood that more people will join since that is where their friends and colleagues are, etc.). In the case of Maven, the network is accessed and expanded through the course instructor, as the instructor is explicitly encouraged to capitalize on their social media network to recruit students for the course they will be teaching. In other words, instructors' social media following appears to be central to how Maven relies upon and can exploit network effects, thereby indirectly increasing Maven's user base, which as Srnicek (2016) notes is how value is created for platforms. In other words, Maven is in fact what Srnicek identifies as a lean platform, much like Airbnb or Uber, which relies on value created by others rather than through assets the platforms themselves own. Consequently, an instructor's already established network appears to be a significant factor in determining who Maven will contract with to develop and deliver courses.

The impact of platformization on instructor selection

From this platformization and the reliance on network effects there are several direct and significant non-educational consequences with this approach to selecting instructors, the most prominent being the narrowness of candidacy that comes when instructors' qualifications are measured through social media following. Being an expert in something is not necessarily the same thing as being an expert in social media, and indeed, experts in many fields avoid social media given the ways in which it could compromise one's capacity to produce innovative work (Newport, 2016). This means

that inherent to the instructor selection process is a delimitation unrelated to knowledgebase with respect to whose expertise qualifies as relevant to the university of the future. Further, social media popularity often requires a concerted effort to understand how social media operate, alongside things such as search engine optimization (SEO) for example, which ultimately consume time that not all experts (or people whose knowledge would be valuable to others) have access to (or again, desire for).

Research demonstrates that social media popularity (and influencer profitability) is also not strictly a product of one's content, but is influenced by factors such as race, gender, aesthetic, and number of accounts they themselves follow (e.g., Bishop, 2018; MSL Staff, 2021; Pham, 2016; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2016). In other words, network popularity is often a privilege for particular groups, and contracting with instructors largely on network popularity given the commercial necessity of drawing on network effects for profit reduces the possibility of diverse courses, diverse perspectives, and diverse instructor subjectivities. In short, for platforms like Maven, an instructor with a large following is potentially more valuable than one without, which has fundamental consequences (a) for the livelihoods of educators, who in the future imagined by Maven now also need to have a social media following, and (b) for who is likely to be able to take on the role of educator in such a context. In this education model, it is not enough to be an expert in one's field, but one has to also command attention, visibility, and influence online, perhaps attaining micro-celebrity status as described by Marwick and boyd (2011).

Courses as commodities

As a site of education that relies on network effects, Maven claims that it "empowers the world's experts to offer cohort-based courses directly to their audience" (Maven, 2022a). Platforms, as Srnicek (2016) also notes, often come with tools and services that aid in the creation of products, which is also true of Maven as it supports its instructors via its platform and its onboarding activities (Maven, 2022a). The profitability for both Maven and instructors comes through the sale of courses/products, or "highly leveraged asset[s]" (Maven, 2022b), which themselves are scalable and repeatable once established. Viewing courses as "assets" could perhaps be seen in a positive light, if it reduces the amount of labour instructors need to do for course preparation and facilitation. While this creates an opportunity to both share knowledge and generate profit, it is reminiscent of Noble's (2002) concerns around the commodification of education, which in turn would potentially influence what and how someone teaches depending on the whims of the market. For example, what kinds of content will scale best? What kinds of content will have the longest shelf life? Consequently, a broad impact of the uptake of CBC platforms like Maven may be the increasing commodification of education such that it becomes a means to producing, selling, and acquiring products. Indeed, when curriculum becomes so expressly a commodity, and the value of a commodity is tied to market interests, reputation metrics, and other factors not fully shaped by merit but rather by developing expertise in the tools that shape the attention economy (such as algorithms and SEO), a privileged few with a particular set of digital market-driven skills become the curriculum writers and producers. Ultimately then, the curriculum is determined at least (if not more) as much by microcelebrities and the market, as other factors, like values or ethics, which Maven's current course catalogue seems to bear out as discussed below.

Parasociality and the university of the future

An additional non-educational consequence of relying on network effects for the development and promotion of education is the explicit reframing of the relationship between learners and instructors. For example, Maven advertises to potential learners that by participating in their courses, they can "help the best creators on the Internet make a living teaching what they love" (Maven.com, 2022), thus drawing on (and even reinforcing) the parasocial relationship that can come with the establishment of social media celebrity (Chung & Cho, 2017). While not necessarily harmful in itself, such a relationship relies on an affective connection to an instructor and their course, a connection that has little to do with the instructor's actual capacity to teach skillfully, nor on whether or not the course is actually something a learner needs to study or has a genuine interest in pursuing. In other words, there is a possibility that participating in a course becomes less about learning a particular skill or knowledge and more about access to specific individuals, thereby inflecting education with a discourse of and drive for a certain type of celebrity. To be fair, this is not *necessarily* a problem for a paying customer because access to someone may in fact be the intention for participating in an online experience, but it does mean that it is important to deeply consider and further study what exactly the university of the future is and is not if social media metrics and parasocial relationships play a role in who is considered qualified to occupy the role of educator, and what the role of learners is in that qualification process.

Transparency and surveillance

A further significant concern about the relationship platformization of education is the role of transparency and the impact of surveillance in learning contexts. With respect to the aforementioned reliance on network effects, platform capitalism typically

lacks transparency in its operations (Srnicek, 2016), and this is true of Maven, including for example around the metrics used to determine how instructors are selected, how learning is assessed, and how courses are evaluated. If this is the university of the future, it would be incumbent on the public to understand how educators for this university are selected, including, at minimum, what kind of benchmarks are used to determine instructor qualification. Transparency is also lacking around how learner data are used, which Facer and Selwyn (2021) note is already a concern within all levels of education as more education technology becomes integrated into learning institutions. Increasing research has demonstrated that such data collection, and the type of surveillance practices that it necessitates, disproportionately harm students with less privilege of various sorts, including those without white privilege and privilege associated with socioeconomic status (Cyphert, 2020).

Concerns around equity and access

There are further concerns related to the relationship between emerging technologies and the social context of education. A key claim of online and flexible learning in general is that it can improve access to education for people in many different ways and places (Veletsianos & Houlden, 2019). But as the pandemic has made highly visible, remote learning is not always accessible to all as it relies on unequally distributed technologies and infrastructures (Czerniewicz et al., 2020). On the one hand, a turn towards CBC platforms may enhance access to learning opportunities, but on the other hand still requires access to adequate technology and appropriate space from which to learn. Not everyone has that access, and indeed the COVID-19 pandemic made it particularly visible how many higher education students relied on institutional resources like libraries, wifi, and computer labs to do their work efficiently or even at

all (Raheim, 2020). A CBC platform as the university of the future means that education will have to effectively contend with existing social contexts of unequal access to technology and infrastructure, or else favour what McMillan Cottom (2015, 8) calls the 'roaming autodidact,' i.e., those individuals with the freedom and privilege to learn whenever, wherever. There is little evidence in Maven's public-facing presence that would suggest a concern for this, nor in terms of funding, scholarships or otherwise, for learners. Who will be able to afford learning on such a platform, and who will not? This is not to say that Maven's offerings will be more or less expensive than university education, but access to higher education institutions can come with access to grants, scholarships, and loans, and a wide variety of other supports like access to career services, libraries, etc.

While the relationship between the social context of education and CBC platforms seems to lack robust and meaningful thought beyond the status quo flexible education discourses of being able to learn how and when one wants, the learning and teaching processes seem to have been given more thought, and indeed are central to Maven's particular brand. For example, on their "About" page, Maven indicates that they "believe community is the cornerstone of learning online," and that "going through a course alongside a group of peers is the best way to achieve transformation" (Maven, 2022a). Social aspects of learning are emphasised in Maven's approach and are core principles behind the design of CBCs in general. Through building and sustaining an online cohort, education is understood to be more effective in terms of both outcomes achieved, satisfaction, and completion rates. Nevertheless, while earlier research demonstrates that social learning and learning in communities is worthwhile, there is no single effective way in which learning happens. If Maven were to indeed be the university of the future (or the model of the university of the future), as a model it

would be rather one-dimensional as there is more than one approach to teaching and learning, some of which are more effective, engaging, equitable, and efficient than others, particularly based on context. By pre-selecting a particular pedagogical approach in a particular online design (i.e., cohort-based online courses) there is little room to consider whether cohort-based synchronous learning is the appropriate solution to a particular education problem because it's actually always presented as *the* solution.

The nature of Maven's pedagogy and content

In terms of pedagogy and content, among factors that Maven considers important to achieving "transformation," includes learning in community and learning through doing via "hands-on projects," which are in line with broader research which highlights the potential of active, participatory, problem-based, project-based, and community-centred learning (e.g., Barron et al., 1998; Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007; Hoadley, 2012; Jenkins, 2009). Maven suggests that through its courses learners have the opportunity to learn relevant, real-world skills specific to their interests and industries. Rather than a focus on something like general knowledge (as might be found in first year university survey courses, particularly within the Humanities), the courses Maven offers are by and large explicitly meant to develop skills and knowledge that will have immediate impact on a learner's career and self-development. There is nothing inherently problematic about such an approach; in fact, it is increasingly recognized as necessary and relevant, sometimes in the form of micro-credentialing for example, as learners seek to optimise their education for their future careers (e.g., British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education and Training, 2021). But where is the space for learning about history? Or philosophy? Even social sciences?

Of the more than one hundred courses listed on the Maven site at the time of writing (i.e., February 15, 2022), approximately 70 were related to career development (e.g., LinkedIn Masterclass with Joel Hansen), business and leadership coaching (e.g., Ascend's Leadership Program with Shivani Berry), and marketing (e.g., Content Marketing with Amanda Natividad). The remaining courses focused on cryptocurrencies and blockchain (e.g., Hype-Free Crypto with Dror Poleg), writing (e.g., Power Writing with Shaan Puri), personal development (e.g., Date Smarter with Logan Ury), teaching (e.g., Design Your First Cohort-Based Course with Aruna K. and Gautham), and in the smallest category, social justice (e.g., Butterfly Effects with Naki Winfield and Devyn Harris), with this latter course being the only course explicitly oriented towards anti-racism and activism. There is no mention on the platform about the ways in which courses and learners are evaluated, and no mention of the degree to which evaluation of the communities in these courses aligns with recommendations in the literature that suggest a multidimensional evaluation of online learning communities (Ke & Hoadley, 2009). Significantly, we identified no guarantees about the quality of education, no quality assurance processes, and no external evaluation processes on the Maven website, except through what Maven (and platforms like Maven) decide are useful to learners.

Still, Maven appears to fill a gap left by higher education programs that focus too much on abstract knowledge and not enough on teaching students the skills needed to actually get or grow in the jobs they desire. This skills gap however is conceived narrowly around concerns tied to economics and career, even when those skills orient towards self-development as some of the self-help courses are. In other words, the function of education in this context (i.e., the university of the future), while perhaps beneficially improving some individuals' chance at career growth, is largely defined by

the learning subject as an individual almost entirely oriented towards increasing their own earning capacity, itself one aspect of the larger neoliberal project of self-reliance and economic focus above all else (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2021).

Instead, Maven's proposition here is that by employing expert practitioners, learners have the opportunity to study and connect with people in their field who understand the field's current concerns and trajectories, enabling relevant skills development for competitive job markets. On its face, this may be a positive development, given the need and pressing needs societies face for ongoing professional development, upskilling, reskilling, etc. (Chopra-McGowan & Reddy, 2020; Zahidi, 2020). However, such a proposition becomes problematic when this narrow goal becomes the goal that defines the university of the future. Little room is left to welcome more transformative approaches to learning, including the kinds of critical pedagogies that aim for social and cultural change, nor for education not defined by Western economic goals and interests, such as Indigenous and decolonial ways of learning (Andreotti, 2021). As the university of the future, it eliminates any sense that the university, as a socio-cultural institution, is or could be about more than just career development. However, as a *complement* to broader or more critical education, a platform like Maven offers something potentially exceedingly useful as a counterpoint to more institutional forms of education that may not be at the forefront of digital technologies or as agile in terms of responding to immediate need for skills development. As a replacement it offers far too many constraints on what counts as worthwhile education.

Sustainability considerations

A final question to ask of CBC platforms and Maven as an educational technology as suggested by Facer and Selwyn (2021), is how they align with the necessary sustainability goals for global education futures? This is a complicated question to ask with no easy answer. While presumably the reduced greenhouse gas emissions of learning online are significant (Versteijlen et al., 2017), increasing use of technology that relies upon rare earth minerals (for devices), lithium batteries (to charge devices), and server farms (to operate the platform) which require substantial amounts of water and energy, is an imperfect solution. All of our digital technologies require materials, which often (if not almost always) brings with it concerns around resource extraction, waste and energy use (Fuchs, 2008; Kannengießer & McCurdy, 2021), even in the context of "green" energy production (Dunlap, 2017). To be fair, Maven does not make claims about the sustainability of their endeavour, but once again, if we are to take their tag of being the university of the future seriously, we also need to take seriously what that future requires of its education models, systems, and institutions both in terms of environmental and social sustainability.

Resisting current education trajectories

At stake in imagining a business like Maven as the university of the future is the acceptance or refusal of the further corporatization of and neoliberal trajectory of higher education, in which corporate elites undemocratically decide the fate of learning (Giroux 2017). To what extent does it make sense to concede this future to private interests? What are the long-term outcomes of such a vision? When the university is imagined as a profit-driven platform through which instructors are determined at least in part by their social media following, education seems to become secondary to popularity, even as popularity does not necessarily equate to good education. When the

university of the future essentially becomes reducible to the gig economy, social safety nets that come from institutional structures (e.g., unions, health coverage, academic freedom) are compromised and no longer guaranteed. This is not to say that the current university structure is not in need of transformation: on the contrary, with its reliance on adjunct labour and market forces, and with academics facing an increasingly competitive, uncertain, and precarious labour market (Childress, 2019; Rose, 2020), Maven's imagined university of the future shares similarities with trends already occurring in higher education. Indeed, many have argued that the university itself, given its colonial roots and increasingly neoliberal orientations (Hall, 2021), should be radically transformed and even dismantled as part of the education needed to meet the many crises unfolding today (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). To do so means disrupting the economic imperatives foregrounded by education projects shaped by neoliberal capitalism, not by accelerating them through platformization.

Potential Benefits

So far, this paper has mostly been a critique of CBC platforms and Maven as models embedded in platform capitalism. It is necessary to highlight that there is potential in the cohort-based online course model for more sustainable, hopeful education futures. One such area is the expansion of lifelong learning, and the orientation to audiences that universities don't typically address, including adult learners and learners at later stages in their careers seeking timely and specific skills, competencies, or ideas to engage with. As noted above, Maven and platforms like it, potentially have an agility that larger institutions lack, and may be well positioned to respond to immediate changes in skills requirements given the practical orientation to skills development, such as is required for a just transition to a green economy (Mohamed, 2020). Indeed, many structural and

social changes are likely to be on the horizon regardless of whether or not we collectively respond to the climate crisis or fail to respond to it in time (IPCC, 2022), and a platform like Maven could become extremely valuable for changing economic demands and increasing environmental instability. With this lens, the CBC model may be a worthwhile model for institutions to explore in more meaningful and concerted ways, particularly if the model is disentangled from the logics of platform capitalism. Furthermore, as other online learning platforms have explored and forged partnerships with higher education institutions (e.g., Coursera, FutureLearn, LinkedIn, etc.), cohort-based course platforms may partner with institutions to enable such institutions to reach new audiences through their platform or by making space in their offerings to university learners. Even if partnerships aren't pursued, there is much room for Maven and CBCs to improve their logics and practices. The issues we raised in this paper may be a valuable starting point for doing so.

Conclusion

The future of education is an area of practice and advocacy for institutions, governments, industry, and various communities around the world, often highlighting the necessity and urgency to adapt education systems to the needs of learners and society alike. With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, this push has only intensified (UNESCO 2020; UNESCO 2021; World Bank 2021). UNESCO (2022), for example, reports that because of the pandemic, the most vulnerable learners in the world have been impacted by disruptions to education, and such disruptions have "increased inequalities and exacerbated a pre-existing education crisis." This finding has also been echoed in recent literature (Norris, 2022; Tesar, 2021), with clear attention given to the impact disrupted education has on everything from the future of democracy (Norris,

2021), to economic development (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020), to the advancement of the rights of women and girls (Global Education Monitoring Report Team & UNESCO, 2021), alongside a deepening understanding of the pandemic's effects on the interconnected nature of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 4 ("Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all") (Shulla et al., 2021). These reports call for learning futures that are more equitable, accessible, and just, but often note the just and liberatory education called for is by no means guaranteed.

The push to address these inequities and pandemic disruptions has created an opportunity for the edtech industry to expand their offerings (Ideland 2021; Norris, 2022), and these technologies come with a wide range of claims about the specific ways they can ameliorate the education crisis. The claims are often alluring, offering a facile (if often expensive) top-down solution to complex systemic problems (Moore, Jaime, & Black, 2021), and if accepted uncritically may enable disaster capitalism to take further hold within educational systems. While it is likely a reach to say that Maven as it exists today exhibits the markers of disaster capitalism given its current distance from public institutions like universities, it remains worthwhile to follow closely how learning platforms grow and whether or not they infiltrate public learning institutions. Indeed, how the impact of the intersection of network effects and platform capitalism squares with the notion of creating the university of the future remains something educators and researchers need to explore. Does the university of the future, reliant upon digital platform infrastructures and the capitalist rules that bind them, have anything to say about the kind of world we might want to create in the future? Or about the kind of education we might need for the kind of world we'd like to create and the circumstances which demand our effort?

References

altMBA. 2022. "Workshop details." altMBA. Accessed June 12, 2022. https://altmba.com/info

Andreotti, V. de Oliveira. 2021. "The task of education as we confront the potential for social and ecological collapse." *Ethics and Education* 16(2): 143-158.

Barron, B. J., Schwartz, D. L., Vye, N. J., Moore, A., Petrosino, A., Zech, L., & Bransford, J. D. 1998. "Doing with understanding: Lessons from research on problem-and project-based learning." *Journal of the Learning Sciences* 7(3-4): 271-311.

Bishop, S. 2018. "Anxiety, panic and self-optimization: Inequalities and the YouTube algorithm." *Convergence* 24(1): 69–84. https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517736978

British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education and Training. 2021. "Micro-credential

Framework for BC's Public Post-Secondary Education System." Accessed June 30, 2022. https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/post-secondary-education/micro-credentials/mc_framework.pdf

Childress, H. 2019. *The Adjunct Underclass: How America's Colleges Betrayed Their Faculty, Their Students, and Their Mission.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Chopra-McGowan, A., & Reddy, S. 2020. "What would it take to reskill entire

    industries?"

Harvard Business Review. Accessed June 1, 2022. https://hbr.org/2020/07/what-

    would-it-take-to-reskill-entire-industries

Chung, S. & Cho, H. 2017. "Fostering Parasocial Relationships with Celebrities on

    Social Media: Implications for Celebrity Endorsement." *Psychology & Marketing*

    34(4): 481-495.

Conrad, D. 2005. "Building and maintaining community in cohort-based online

    learning." *International Journal of E-Learning & Distance Education* 20(1): 1-

    20.

Cyphert, Amy B. 2020. "Tinker-ing with Machine Learning: The Legality and

    Consequences of Online Surveillance of Students." *Nevada Law Journal* 20(2),

    Article 4.

Czerniewicz, L., Agherdien, N., Badenhorst, J. *et al.* 2020. "A Wake-Up Call: Equity,

    Inequality and Covid-19 Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning." *Postdigit*

    Sci Educ 2: 946–967. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00187-4

Dea, S. 2021. "Imagining the post-pandemic university." *University Affairs*, October 22.

    https://www.universityaffairs.ca/opinion/in-my-opinion/imagining-the-post-

    pandemic-university/

Decuypere, M., Grimaldi, E., & Landri, P. (2021). "Introduction: Critical studies of

    digital education platforms." *Critical Studies in Education* 62(1): 1-16.

Dunlap, A. 2017. "Wind Energy: Toward a 'Sustainable Violence' in Oaxaca." *NACLA*

    Report on the Americas 49(4): 483-488, DOI: 10.1080/10714839.2017.1409378

Facer, K. & Selwyn, N. 2021. "Background paper for the Futures of Education

    initiative: Digital technology and the futures of education – towards 'non-stupid'

optimism." UNESCO Education Sector.

https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377071.locale=en

Fleming, D. Nov. 16, 2021. "How the intersection of edtech and the creator economy is

reshaping education."

https://www.smartcompany.com.au/startupsmart/analysis/edtech-creator-

economy-education/

Fuchs, C. 2008). "The implications of new information and communication

technologies for sustainability." *Environ Dev Sustain* 10: 291–309

https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-006-9065-0

Germain, J. 2021. "What is disaster capitalism? A cycle of crisis, exploitation, and

privatization." *Teen Vogue*, September 2. https://www.teenvogue.com/story/what-

is-disaster-capitalism

Gibbons, S. 2021. "How cohort based learning is transforming online education."

Forbes, December 17.

https://www.forbes.com/sites/serenitygibbons/2021/12/17/how-cohort-based-

learning-is-transforming-online-education/

Giroux, H. (2017). "Neoliberalism's war against higher education and the role of public

intellectuals." In *The future of university education*, edited by Izak, Michal,

Monika Kostera, and Michal Zawadzki, 185-206. Palgrave Macmillan.

Global Education Monitoring Report Team & UNESCO. 2022.

"#HerEducationOurFuture: keeping girls in the picture during and after the

COVID-19 crisis; the latest facts on gender equality in education." *UNESCO*.

https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375707

Hall, R. 2021. *The hopeless university: Intellectual work at the end of The End of

History*. Mayfly. Ebook.

Hanushek E. & Woessman, L. 2020. "The economic impacts of learning losses."
Education Working Papers 225. OECD Publishing, Paris.
https://doi.org/10.1787/21908d74-e

Hillman, T., Bergviken Rensfeldt, A., & Ivarsson, J. 2020. "Brave new platforms: a
possible platform future for highly decentralised schooling." *Learning, Media and
Technology* 45(1): 7-16. DOI: 10.1080/17439884.2020.1683748

Hmelo-Silver, C. E., Duncan, R. G., & Chinn, C. A. 2007. "Scaffolding and
achievement in problem-based and inquiry learning: a response to Kirschner,
Sweller, and Clark." *Educational psychologist* 42(2): 99-107.

Hoadley, C. 2012. "What is a community of practice and how can we support it?" in D.
H. Jonassen & S. M. Land (Eds.), *Theoretical foundations of learning
environments* (2nd Ed.) (287-300) New York: Routledge.

Houlden, S. & Veletsianos, G. 2021. "The problem with flexible learning:
neoliberalism, freedom, and learner subjectivities." *Learning, Media and
Technology* 46(2): 144-155. DOI: 10.1080/17439884.2020.1833920

Ideland, M. 2021. "Education, disaster capitalism and the need of distance." *IJHE
Bildungsgeschichte* 11(1): 70-71.

IPCC, 2022: *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability.*
Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the
Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [H.-O. Pörtner, D.C. Roberts, M.
Tignor, E.S. Poloczanska, K. Mintenbeck, A. Alegría, M. Craig, S. Langsdorf, S.
Löschke, V. Möller, A. Okem, B. Rama (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press. In
Press.

Jenkins, H. 2009. *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century* (p. 145). Boston: The MIT Press. http://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/26083

Kannengießer, S., & McCurdy, P. 2021. "Mediatization and the absence of the environment." *Communication Theory* 31(4): 911–931. https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtaa009

Ke, F., & Hoadley, C. 2009. "Evaluating online learning communities." *Educational Technology Research and Development* 57(4): 487-510.

Klein, N. 2007. *Shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada.

Komljenovic, J. 2021. "The rise of education rentiers: digital platforms, digital data and rents." *Learning, Media and Technology,* 46(3) 320-332.

Machado de Oliveira, V. 2021. *Hospicing modernity*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.

Martin, F., Sun, T., Turk, M., & Ritzhaupt, A.D. 2021. "A Meta-analysis on the effects of synchronous online learning on cognitive and affective educational outcomes." *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning* 22(3). Web.

Marwick, A. E., & boyd, danah. 2011. "I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience." *New Media & Society, 13*(1), 114–133. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810365313

Mascarenhas, N. 2021. "a16z bets millions on Maven, a platform for cohort-based courses. *TechCrunch*." Accessed June 1, 2022. https://techcrunch.com/2021/05/20/maven-series-a-a16z/

Maven. 2022a. "About us." Retrieved from Maven.com. Archived at https://archive.ph/9dhuX.

Maven. 2022b. "Home." Retrieved from Maven.com/about. Archived at

    https://archive.ph/5D5AT

Means, B., Bakia, M., & Murphy, R. 2014. *Learning online: What research tells us*

    about whether, when and how. New York: Routledge.

McMillan Cottom, T. 2015. Intersectionality and Critical Engagement with the Internet.

    Social Science Research Network. http://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2568956.

Mohamed, N. 2020. "Are skills the missing piece in green transitions?" *Green Economy*

    Coalition, September 11. https://www.greeneconomycoalition.org/news-and-

    resources/are-skills-the-missing-piece-in-green-transitions

Moore, S.D.M., De Oliveira Jayme, B., & Black, J. 2021. "Disaster Capitalism,

    Rampant EdTech Opportunism, and the Advancement of Online Learning in the

    Era of COVID19." *Critical Education* 12(2): 1-24.

MSL Staff. 2021. "MSL Study Reveals Racial Pay Gap in Influencer Marketing." *MSL*.

    Accessed May 31, 2022. https://www.mslgroup.com/whats-new-at-msl/msl-

    study-reveals-racial-pay-gap-influencer-marketing

Newport, C. 2016. *Deep work: Rules for success in a distracted world*. New York:

    Grand Central Publishing.

Noble, D. 2002. *Digital diploma mills*. New York: New York University Press.

Norris, T. 2022. "Educational futures after COVID-19: Big tech and pandemic

    profiteering versus education for democracy." *Policy Futures in Education*.

    Online First.

Notermans, M. 2022. "Cohorts: The latest eLearning variant." *eLearning Industry*,

    March 31. https://elearningindustry.com/cohorts-the-latest-elearning-variant

Perrotta, C., Kalervo N. Gulson, K.N., Williamson, B., & Witzenberger,

    K. 2021. "Automation, APIs and the distributed labour of platform pedagogies in

Google Classroom." Critical Studies in Education 62(1): 97-

113. DOI: 10.1080/17508487.2020.1855597

Pham, M.T. 2016. *Asians Wear Clothes on the Internet: Race, Gender, and the Work of Personal Style Blogging*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.

Raheim, M. D. H. 2020. "Technological Barriers and Challenges in the Use of ICT during the COVID-19 Emergency Remote Learning." *Universal Journal of Educational Research* 8(11B): 6124–6133. https://doi.org/10.13189/UJER.2020.082248

Rapanta, C., Botturi, L., Goodyear, P. *et al.* 2021. "Balancing Technology, Pedagogy and the New Normal: Post-pandemic Challenges for Higher Education." *Postdigit Sci Educ* 3: 715–742. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-021-00249-1

Romiszowski, A., & Rushby, N. 2015. "Remembering the past in researching for the future: Diagnosis and treatment of social amnesia in the educational technology community." *Educational Technology*: 29-34.

Rose, D. 2020. "A snapshot of precarious academic work in Canada." *New Proposals: Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry* 11(1). https://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/newproposals/article/view/192381

Selwyn, N. 2011. "In praise of pessimism—the need for negativity in educational technology." *British Journal of Educational Technology* 42(5): 713-718.

Shulla, K., Voigt, BF., Cibian, S. *et al.* 2021. "Effects of COVID-19 on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)." *Discov Sustain* 2(15): 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1007/s43621-021-00026-x

Srnicek, N. 2016. *Platform capitalism*. New York: Polity.

Tauson, M. & Stannard, L. 2018. "Edtech for learning in emergencies and displaced settings." *Save the children.*

https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/global/reports/education-and-child-protection/edtech-learning.pdf

Veletsianos, G., & Houlden, S. (2019). "An analysis of flexible learning and flexibility over the last 40 years of Distance Education." *Distance Education 40*(4): 454-468.

Veletsianos, G., & Kimmons, R. (2016). Scholars in an Increasingly Digital and Open World: How do Education Professors and Students use Twitter? *The Internet and Higher Education, 30, 1-10.*

Versteijlen, M., Perez Salgado, F., Groesbeek, M.J., & Counotte, A. 2017. "Pros and cons of online education as a measure to reduce carbon emissions in higher education in the Netherlands." *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 28: 80-89, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2017.09.004.

Weller, M. 2020. *25 years of ed tech*. Athabasca, AB: Athabasca University Press.

Williamson, B. (2020). "Making markets through digital platforms: Pearson, edu-business, and the (e)valuation of higher education." *Critical Studies in Education* 62(1): 50-66.

Zahidi, S. 2020. "We need a global reskilling revolution – here's why." *World Economic Forum.* Jan 22. https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/01/reskilling-revolution-jobs-future-skills/