Chapter Seven

Virtual Learning as Liberation or Commodification? A Critical Perspective

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Introduction

This chapter analyses the monograph's contribution to empirical and design-based practices by incorporating Marxist critiques alongside Habermas (1984, 1989, 1998) and Ferrara (1993, 1998). The shift in higher education has led to the development of Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL), a prominent and increasingly visible teaching methodology. VCL enables active and international education while fostering collaboration, critical thinking, and global participation. With all the mentioned benefits, evaluating them against persisting inequalities and structural challenges is crucial, particularly in developing nations (Garrison & Anderson, 2003).

VCL moves away from the confined traditional classroom learning into a more innovative space, which is digital. Such spaces allow students to solve problems, construct knowledge, and accomplish collective tasks while being located far apart (Reinhardt et al., 2021). DeLuca and Bellara (2020) indicate that VCL assists colleges and universities in creating flexible, interactive, and international learning opportunities, enhancing students' educational experience. The nature of VCL offers the opportunity to participate with each other, which improves learning outcomes through the engagement of peers (Helm 2020). Students sharing insights and perspectives have aided in broadening the learning outcome (Deardorff, 2022). This model motivates active participation, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills vital for the changing demands of the 21st-century job market (Collier & Evans, 2021).

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The asynchronous nature of VCL also enables students to learn at their own pace, accommodating various learning styles and needs (Means et al., 2014). VCL's interactive learning approach not only boosts engagement but also develops digital literacy and technical skills, which are essential in today's connected world (Siemens, 2005; Wang, 2015). Integrating digital tools into learning encourages students to become more skilled at using technology, preparing them for a future where digital skills will be increasingly necessary (Castells, 2009). Furthermore, VCL promotes social learning by building relationships among students. Sharing ideas and working together helps students learn from one another, gaining fresh perspectives and deepening their understanding of the material (Smith & MacGregor, 1992). This is especially important in higher education, where encouraging critical thinking and diverse viewpoints is a key goal (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). However, despite its successes, concerns about VCL arise, particularly in developing countries. In the next section, we will apply the Marxist critique of commodification and exclusion to address this issue.

Marxist Critique: Commodification and Exclusion

VCL and other forms of education, including traditional ones, can be analysed through Marxism's lens, which has developed and gained popularity since the 19th century. In simple words, Marxist theory revolves around one's economic status and social relations. It claims that, like other institutions, education seeks to further class differences and usually operates to benefit the ruling class more than the working class. Regarding VCL, a Marxist perspective critique would note how contemporary education facilitated by technology is market-driven and reinforces many demand and supply principles of the economy, which limits its capacity to fully democratize learning. The perception of education as an asset one can purchase is fundamental to Marxist critique. For developed economies, education is increasingly perceived as a good or service offered to people, which they can purchase, and therefore access is often restricted to those with financial means (Harvey, 2005). VCL is usually ascribed to this paradigm of relegation despite its innovative nature. Access to VCL usually presupposes the availability of certain technological prerequisites, such as computers, stable internet, and relevant software tools that are not evenly accessible worldwide. Thus, students from wealthier families benefit more from the innovations, while poorer families are left behind. From a Marxist per-

spective, the absence of socioeconomically disadvantaged students is the most significant challenge for VCL. There are three concepts that better explain Marx's ideas. Respectively, the digital divide, the process of commodification and alienation.

Digital Divide

The lack of technological equipment and internet connections creates a gap in society called the digital divide. This gap exists between people with and without access, extending beyond basic hardware. It includes access to internet connections, literacy, and adequate support for utilising these technologies (Warschauer, 2003). This gap is largely visible in third-world countries and developing countries. The primary INSTAT data indicates that almost 850,000 families living in Albania, only 82.2 per cent, have internet access. Approximately 153 thousand families deem online learning unattainable for their children. INSTAT shares another concerning statistic stating that 29.6% of children under 17 are living in relative poverty, unable to afford a smartphone, tablet, or a computer. Wealthier families enable their children to fully leverage cutting-edge learning tools like VCL, whereas poorer families are excluded from such opportunities. This situation deepens societal inequalities since the more vulnerable groups within the free-market economy are pushed further behind because of the digital divide. Moreover, even within wealthier countries, the digital divide persists along lines of class, race, and geography. For example, rural areas often have less reliable internet access than urban areas, and low-income students are less likely to have access to personal computers or high-speed internet at home (Selwyn, 2010). This uneven access to digital resources exacerbates existing educational inequalities, as students from disadvantaged backgrounds can participate less in the collaborative, interactive learning experiences that VCL offers (Brouns et al. 2020).

The Process of Commodification

A Marxist critique would highlight how VCL perpetuates labour exploitation, knowledge commodification, and access concerns. VCL is just one example of how education in free market societies is becoming more focused on creating workers who can satisfy the labour market demands. VCL responds to the needs of the global free market economy, which values these abilities in workers, by prioritising teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills (Schneider &

Preckel, 2017). Although there is no denying the value of these skills, the emphasis on creating 'market-ready' workers reflects the larger commodification of education, where knowledge is viewed as a good to be bought and education is a way to make money. VCL platforms frequently prioritise employability and marketable skills over critical consciousness to further the interests of tech companies. Students may lose touch with their teachers, peers, and the learning process in virtual environments. Albania is a prime example of these difficulties, where, according to INSTAT reports, 29.6% of children live in poverty, and more than 150,000 families cannot access dependable internet. These numbers demonstrate how wider social exclusions are reproduced by digital inequality.

Alienation

Marx's theory of alienation is another important idea for evaluating VCL. Marx (1976) argued that workers in capitalist systems are cut off from their coworkers, the production process, the results of their labour, and human potential. When students feel cut off from their peers, the subject matter, and the learning process, alienation can appear in the classroom. VCL can worsen this feeling of alienation, even though it encourages cooperation. Due to the virtual environment, students may become estranged from their teachers and the course material. They may become more isolated and less engaged in the learning process if they are not in the physical setting of a classroom (Johnson et al., 2006).

In a nutshell, different regions and social classes have unequal access to devices and the internet. VCL platforms frequently prioritise employability and marketable skills over critical consciousness to further the interests of tech companies. Students may lose touch with their teachers, peers, and the learning process in virtual environments (Freire, 1970). Albania is a prime example of these difficulties, where, according to INSTAT reports, 29.6% of children live in poverty, and more than 150,000 families cannot access dependable internet. These numbers demonstrate how wider social exclusions are reproduced by digital inequality.

The Influence of Technology on Free Market Dynamics

Many people believe that technology has a neutral role in education. On the other hand, it represents capitalist interests from a Marxist

standpoint. Businesses specialising in educational technology make money by treating education like a product through Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL). The potential for personal freedom may be overshadowed by this change, which links educational objectives with the labour market demands. According to Marxist theory, technology is influenced by and serves the interests of the wealthy, making it non-objective. The technology used in VCL to facilitate online collaboration is usually developed and run by private businesses that profit from the sale of hardware, software, and digital resources to educational institutions. In order to grow their market share and earnings, these companies are keen to encourage the broad use of VCL. The emergence of educational technology companies that purport to provide cutting-edge educational solutions makes the connection between technology and capitalism evident. These businesses, however, are motivated by profit, and their goods frequently meet the demands of the market rather than those of students. For instance, rather than emphasising critical thinking or social equity, many VCL platforms emphasise abilities that employers value, such as problem-solving and teamwork. Consequently, VCL supports an educational system that prepares workers for the economy.

Moreover, the focus on virtual collaboration might reduce chances for face-to-face interaction, which is crucial for building meaningful relationships and a sense of community in education. In Albania, major gaps in access to virtual learning arise from the digital divide, hitting low-income and rural students the hardest. Research shows that internet access is limited in certain areas, with many students lacking vital tools like reliable internet and digital devices necessary for full participation in online education. The problem worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, when education shifted to online platforms, leaving many underserved students behind. Many testimonies from students at EUT after the pandemic revealed the impossibility of accessing internet resources or technological tools such as a tablet or a laptop. Furthermore, UNESCO (2023) highlights that while Albania has made progress in educational accessibility, digital inequalities remain significant barriers to fair education, especially for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in rural areas. Gelvanovska-Garcia et al. (2023) also stress the need for greater investment in digital infrastructure and more inclusive digital policies in Albania and other countries to close this gap and ensure equal access to online learning.

Therefore, policy initiatives should concentrate on increasing affordable internet access, enhancing digital literacy, and providing technological support to students in underserved communities to address these issues. When developing and executing VCL programs, educational institutions must also put equity first, ensuring all students can engage in virtual learning regardless of their financial circumstances or backgrounds. In addition to preparing students for the workforce, schools should foster environments that promote social justice and critical thinking. By addressing these problems, VCL can be used to promote equity in education rather than exacerbate already-existing disparities. To make this shift, education funding and structure must be completely redesigned, moving away from the commodification of knowledge and toward a model that puts social justice, inclusivity, and fairness first (Giroux, 2010).

Habermas and the Limits of Communicative Action

Perceiving educational technology as objective ignores its Marxist connections to capitalist incentives. By commercialising learning, companies in the educational technology sector benefit from adopting VCL. This shift diminishes education's liberating potential by tying it to labour market demands. Leading social theorist of the 20th century, Jürgen Habermas (1984), offers a framework for assessing innovative teaching strategies like VCL. His communicative action theory is a good framework for analysing how VCL promotes authentic communication and democratic learning because it emphasises the value of discussion, agreement, and involvement in education. According to Habermas' paradigm, the VCL's efficacy is based on its capacity to foster open communication and collaborative decision-making, rather than just how well it imparts knowledge or raises academic achievement. The central tenet of Habermas's communication theory is that mutual understanding and agreement can be fostered through rational dialogue. Open communication should be a part of learning, where teachers and students exchange ideas, question presumptions, and collaborate to expand knowledge.

According to Habermas, education fosters critical thinking, knowledge sharing, and active democratic participation. Theoretically, by establishing virtual environments for student collaboration, dialogue, and engagement, VCL holds promise for fostering communicative action. Digital platforms allow students from different backgrounds to

collaborate, exchange ideas, and complete projects. As a tool for communication and comprehension, this cooperative learning aligns with Habermas's educational philosophy. A Habermasian analysis, however, might raise doubts about whether VCL fosters the free, democratic discourse that Habermas advocates. Although VCL platforms promote cooperation, they frequently do so in a top-down, structured way, with organisations or educators establishing the parameters of the partnership. Due to established learning objectives, assessment standards, and technological constraints, this hierarchy restricts students' ability to participate in communicative action. The public sphere, where people congregate to discuss shared concerns and reach a consensus through reasoned debate, is another key concept in Habermas's work. In education, the classroom can be viewed as a miniature version of society, where students engage in discourse and debate to investigate diverse viewpoints and acquire more profound understandings.

According to Habermas, the perfect discourse environment is one in which everyone can freely participate in conversations without feeling dominated or under duress. In this ideal scenario, participants converse logically to reach mutual understanding rather than to win arguments. Therefore, regardless of background or social status, all students should have an equal learning opportunity. VCL frequently falls short of establishing this ideal discourse environment, even though it encourages collaboration. As previously stated, accessing VCL necessitates technological resources such as dependable internet, computers, and software. Due to a lack of these resources, students from underprivileged backgrounds, particularly those in developing countries, may be unable to engage in virtual learning fully. Due to this disparity, equal participation is undermined since some students can participate in discussions while others cannot. Generally speaking, VCL platforms prioritise productivity and efficiency over free-form discussion. Although this emphasis can facilitate teamwork, it also reduces students' opportunities for unplanned, impromptu conversations, which are essential for fostering creativity and critical thinking. VCL occasionally replicates hierarchical structures where some voices predominate and others go unheard, rather than encouraging free discussion. Habermas also challenges the notion of technological determinism, which holds that society is fixedly shaped by technology. This critique pertains to the rise of VCL in education, which is commonly offered as a remedy for contemporary issues like increasing accessibility and

raising student engagement and performance. However, from a Habermasian perspective, VCL's effectiveness should be assessed based on its capacity to promote substantive discourse and democratic participation as well as its technological prowess.

VCL's reliance on digital platforms is a major drawback, as it may make communication difficult for students who are not tech-savvy or do not have access to the required materials. While VCL can increase some students' engagement, it can also isolate others, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds or those with limited digital skills. This digital divide weakens VCL's capacity to establish an inclusive learning environment. Additionally, emphasising technology in the classroom risks undervaluing the human element of instruction. According to Habermas, education fosters open communication, develops relationships, establishes trust, and digitally exchanges knowledge. Although VCL can promote collaboration, it frequently prioritises productivity and efficiency over deep communication. As a result, rather than being active co-creators of knowledge, students may feel alienated and treated as merely participants in a preset educational process.

To overcome such a milieu, educational institutions must concentrate on establishing forums for candid discussion and democratic engagement in virtual learning environments in order to address the drawbacks of VCL from a Habermasian standpoint. This entails switching from a top-down, institution-dictated approach to VCL to a more inclusive model where students direct the learning process. One method is using participatory decision-making to involve students in developing and implementing VCL programs. Students may have a say in choosing learning goals, evaluation criteria, and group projects. VCL can develop into a more democratic and inclusive educational model by allowing students to co-create the learning process (Ke & Hoadley, 2009). Institutions should also endeavour to guarantee fair access to VCL, including investing in technology infrastructure, particularly in developing nations, to enable all students to engage in online learning fully. All students, regardless of their particular needs or abilities, can actively participate in the learning process if VCL platforms have accessibility features (Aloni, 2008).

According to Habermasian theory, we should assess VCL based on how well it communicates knowledge, enhances learning outcomes, and establishes forums for candid dialogue and democratic participation. VCL frequently fails to create the inclusive, democratic learn-

ing environment Habermas envisioned, despite its capacity to promote collaboration and interaction. It can advance education in a way consistent with Habermas's concept of communicative action and democratic engagement by tackling the digital divide, fostering participatory decision-making, and emphasising equity in access. Also, it can fulfil its promise as a progressive educational resource for students from all backgrounds and in affluent communities in this way. To sum up, Habermas' advocacy of communicative action emphasises the importance of discussion and understanding between students.

In the following, we will delve into the paradigm of another author, Alessandro Ferrara (1993, 1998), whose concept of authenticity serves as another perspective to assess the shortcomings of VCL.

Ferrara and the Question of Authenticity

According to Reeves and Herrington (2010), authentic learning is a crucial strategy for teaching in the twenty-first century. They emphasise the value of educational opportunities that reflect the difficulties and circumstances encountered in the real world. They contend that because traditional education frequently focuses on abstract ideas, passive learning is insufficient to prepare students for the complexity of modern life and the workplace. Students are encouraged to participate in worthwhile, real-world activities through authentic learning, which fosters teamwork, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. The goals of this teaching approach and VCL are similar in that they both seek to establish learning environments that extend beyond conventional classrooms and promote practical knowledge. However, Alessandro Ferrara's viewpoint on authenticity offers a more thorough critique of this model.

Ferrara's concept of authenticity, which has its roots in postmodern and existential philosophy, helps us raise the question whether learning activities can be genuinely 'authentic' by simply simulating real-world tasks. Ferrara argues that authenticity is more about relating one's behaviour to freedom and deeply held beliefs than replicating real-life circumstances (Ferrara, 1993). Therefore, authentic education should mirror the working world while assisting students in critically evaluating their values, social settings, and larger political and economic systems. Consequently, even though Reeves and Herrington's (2010) authentic learning model greatly increases student engagement and learning outcomes, it is still not fully developed. Without

incorporating authenticity as a tool for ethical autonomy and critical self-reflection, these models risk upholding existing power structures rather than promoting the individual and group transformation Ferrara (1993) advocates. This criticism suggests that for educational experiences to be truly authentic, they must address the existential and moral dimensions of student development in addition to simply mimicking real-world tasks. By more general ideals of social justice and individual liberty, authenticity entails 'doing' actual work and 'being' critical and reflective (Dweck, 2006).

Policy Recommendations

According to our analysis above, VCL presents a viable way to increase access to high-quality education in developing nations. However, intentional, and context-sensitive policy interventions are needed to realise its full potential. Innovation in technology alone is insufficient in these situations. The developing states must systematically address structural issues like uneven internet access, low digital literacy, and a legacy of educational inequality. Governments must first acknowledge that foundational infrastructure is necessary for equitable participation in VCL. This entails funding digital literacy initiatives, broadband internet coverage, and reasonably priced digital device access. There is still a digital divide within and between nations, separating linguistic minorities, urban and rural areas, genders, and income levels. Without intentional state action, VCL risks escalating rather than resolving these inequalities.

Therefore, equity must be the guiding principle for public investment in internet infrastructure, guaranteeing that underserved and remote areas receive the same attention as urban centres. Similarly, digital literacy campaigns should not be reduced to technical training but cultivate critical engagement, empowering learners to navigate, question, and responsibly use digital platforms. This also applies to teachers who frequently lack institutional support and training to create and implement collaborative online pedagogy successfully. In this sense, technology proficiency and the pedagogical transition that VCL necessitates, from top-down instruction to student-centred, participatory learning, should be emphasised in teacher preparation programs.

A transformative VCL policy should democratise the governance and design of digital learning environments and grant access. Students becoming passive users of systems created without input is one

of the main risks associated with platform-driven education (Schoop & Köhler 2022). Platforms solely created by administrative or software engineering teams often replicate hierarchical, one-size-fits-all solutions that do not consider the needs and goals of diverse student populations. On the other hand, meaningful ownership and feedback are made possible when students co-design, plan, and evaluate VCL tools. In addition to promoting inclusivity, openness, and flexibility, participatory design processes serve as an example of the kind of civic engagement and critical thinking education should promote. Additionally, collaborative design can lessen the linguistic and cultural gaps in imported digital learning platforms. Numerous platforms utilised in developing nations were created with Western markets in mind. Without contextual adaptation, they risk alienating students whose values, languages, and learning styles diverge from those incorporated into the platform. Policy must therefore guarantee that VCL design is democratised and responsive to students as partners, not just consumers, rather than merely localised.

Ensuring accessibility is a third pillar of a successful policy. This extends beyond just offering laptops and internet. It also entails recognising and adjusting to the nuanced realities of students' lives. Flexible learning schedules are crucial for students who work, care for family members, or reside in unstable environments. Screen readers, text-to-speech programs, and interfaces that can be customised are examples of assistive technologies that ought to be integrated into the main infrastructure rather than being optional extras. Additionally, the content needs to be multilingual, culturally appropriate, and flexible enough to accommodate a range of educational backgrounds. Accessibility is a political commitment rather than a technical one; it necessitates recognising diversity and incorporating it into the design of curricula and educational platforms.

Finding a balance between critical introspection and skill development is equally important. Framing VCL primarily as a means of acquiring marketable skills carries a risk. While collaborative and digital skills are important, education must also prepare students to question the systems they are being prepared to use. VCL should be a place where students learn how to collaborate and consider the reasons behind, the beneficiaries of, and the repercussions of their actions. This entails incorporating questions of ethical responsibility, equity, and systemic injustice into the curriculum. For instance, students could in-

vestigate the connections between digital collaboration and platform capitalism, surveillance, and global labour inequality. Without this reflective component, education becomes a reproduction tool rather than a transformation process. Poor nations, many of which suffer from global inequality, cannot afford an education system that ignores their circumstances. An educational framework that links professional competencies with critical consciousness must therefore be supported by policy.

Lastly, states need to fight against education becoming a commodity. Market logics are influencing VCL more and more; performance metrics, private platforms, subscription models, and data monetisation rule the industry. Education must, however, continue to be a public good in developing nations, accessible, accountable, and focused on social rather than economic value. Funding public platforms, promoting open-source tools, and opposing the outsourcing of pedagogical authority to private providers are all necessary to decommodify VCL. Rejecting the notion that education should always be 'efficient,' 'scalable,' or 'competitive' is another aspect of it. Students are not consumers, and learning is not a business. The idea that education is a social right rather than a consumer good should be reaffirmed by policy. This affects institutional priorities, assessment techniques, and curriculum design. For instance, the degree of engagement, the development of a sense of community, and the development of civic and ethical sensibilities should all be considered when evaluating the success of VCL, rather than just completion rates or job placement statistics (OECD, 2023).

In conclusion, technology alone is insufficient for a successful VCL strategy in developing nations. It must be ingrained in a more comprehensive understanding of inclusion, justice, and civic duty. In addition to providing infrastructure, the state plays a crucial role in upholding democratic values in education. Policy can guarantee that VCL develops into a digital upgrade and a democratic opportunity by funding access, incorporating students in design, encouraging critical awareness, promoting inclusive pedagogy, and opposing commodification (Bates, 2019).

Summary of Policy Recommendations:

- To encourage improved Virtual Collaborative Learning (VCL) in developing nations, the state must modify its regulations

- To bridge the digital divide, invest in infrastructure, reasonably priced internet, and digital literacy
- Involve students in the planning, design, and assessment phases to democratize VCL design
- Encourage accessibility with multilingual content, flexible scheduling, and assistive technology
- Strike a balance between critical thinking about equity, inequality, ethics, and professional skills
- Reiterate that education is a public good and oppose its commercialisation

Conclusion

Virtual Collaborative Learning, a promising but problematic development in contemporary education, was critically examined in this article. It made the case, drawing on the theories of Marxism, Habermanism, and Ferrara, that although VCL has a great deal of promise to increase access, foster teamwork, and develop critical skills, when market forces are at play, it also runs the risk of escalating structural inequality.

From a Marxist standpoint, VCL's primary focus on education's economic usefulness can alienate students, widen the digital divide, and turn knowledge into a commodity. According to a Habermasian perspective, although VCL platforms foster interaction, they frequently fall short in fostering genuine communication, democratic engagement, and inclusivity. However, Ferrara's emphasis on authenticity challenges the utilitarian theory of education, highlighting the necessity of learning opportunities that promote ethical consciousness, critical thinking, and students' sense of belonging and autonomy.

VCL must be redesigned with equity, participation, and critical engagement in mind if its liberating potential is to be realised. This calls for investing in technology infrastructure, ensuring underserved groups have access, letting students help create digital learning environments, and incorporating instructional strategies that encourage inquiry, discussion, and social awareness. In addition to developing democratic skills and moral reasoning, VCL should mimic workplace dynamics. Moving away from the narrowly defined concepts of employability and market readiness, educational institutions can reframe VCL as a public good devoted to human growth. For virtual learning

to become a platform for inclusive, meaningful, and transformative education, the chapter ultimately advocates for a shift from commodification to liberation.

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