Technology in Western Society Classrooms

Dolores Duran

She/Her/Hers

"My name is Dolores Duran and I graduated from CSUDH in 2020 with a bachelor's degree in anthropology and a minor in communications. I am currently attending California State University Long Beach in pursuit of my master's degree in applied anthropology and conducting my thesis project about how cultural convergence describes new ways audiences are relating to media content, specifically in the science fiction television show genre."

One of the goals of anthropology is to better understand humankind and cultural development. In the field's early years, anthropologists used varying theories with scientific, humanistic, or mixed approaches. Some anthropologists believe that anthropology is scientific and argue that culture has aspects that are universal and quantifiable. Others believe that anthropology should be considered a humanity because they argue that history, as interpreted by societies, helps them understand cultures to a greater degree. Additionally, several anthropologists believe that the field has mixed aspects of both the scientific and humanistic ideologies. Over the years, the field of anthropology has developed into a holistic discipline, borrowing ideas from both sciences and humanities, while attempting to understand cultures by implementing different methods.

Leslie White was an American anthropologist who supported theories such as sociocultural evolution, neo-evolutionism, and cultural evolution. White proposes that cultures develop as the amount of energy harnessed increases, technological means increase in effectiveness, or as they both simultaneously

increase (Moore, 2009). White's formulaic theory about technological influences on cultures contributes to the argument that anthropology is a scientific discipline (Moore 2009). Marshall Sahlins, a cultural anthropologist whose research focuses on the intersection of history and culture, believes that western influence causes other societies to lose aspects of their culture because they have adopted western technology instead of remaining with more traditional ones (Moore 2009). Sahlins' argument about societies turning to modern technology incorporates the use of historical accounts within its methods to provide a developmental explanation to readers (Moore 2009). This notion would place anthropology as a humanistic discipline. Marvin Harris, who influenced the development of cultural materialism, argued that anthropologists require the use of both the emic and etic viewpoints to understand systematic changes within a given society (Moore 2009). He also argues that his scientific construction of infrastructure should be conceived as anthropological law because it is vital in determining the well-being, economics, and environmental activities of a society. Both of Harris' ideas help classify him as an anthropologist who operates under a more holistic discipline that uses both scientific and humanistic methods. This paper will present the theories of these anthropologists and discuss which theorist would serve the best argument for using technology in western society classrooms.

According to Education Week, an educational organization that publishes their theories and findings, United States public schools provide at least one computer for every five students (Harold 2016). On average, these schools spend three billion dollars a year on educational technology, including tablets and computers (Harold 2016). Some states are also beginning to administer standardized tests electronically instead of using pencil and paper. The term "early adopters" is used to describe the schools and teachers who are at the beginning of technological advancement in their classrooms while using technology effectively (Harold 2016). As technology progresses, students are advancing along with it. However, there are still many who have not incorporated technology into their classroom. The number of educators who are passively integrating technology into the classroom exceeds the number of educators who welcome technology and thrive (Harold 2016).

Leslie White's approach to technological advancement by harnessing energy follows the scientific method. In his work, *Energy and the Evolution of Culture*, White claims that culture serves two purposes: to satisfy one's individual needs and to serve as a mechanism that draws resources for society's well-being (Moore 2009). White's theory of cultural evolution is divided into three parts: technological, sociological, and ideological. White suggests the level of cultural development of a society can be determined by the formula $E \times T = P$, in which "E" is the

amount of energy harnessed, "T" the technological means with which they are collected, and "P" represents the resulting product (Moore 2009). He then proposes that when cultures continue to develop as energy harnessed increases, the technological means to obtain energy increases in its effectiveness. White explains that cultures specialize to be more efficient under different circumstances. He further adds that social organization is dependent on and determined by the mechanical means with which food is secured, which shelter is being provided, and which defense methods.

White would argue that with more technology in the classroom, more energy is being utilized which will lead to more cultural development. Technology will inevitably continue to increase in efficiency, meaning that classrooms would also increase in cultural development as time goes by. In either case, White could argue that culture will continue to develop in new ways, potentially leading to better social organization in the classroom.

Marshall Sahlins' discussion about societies turning to modern technology follows a humanistic methodology. In his work, "What is Anthropological Enlightenment? Some Lessons of the Twentieth Century," Sahlins introduces his "despondency theory," which describes how technological advances in western societies are viewed as "progress," but changes in other societies cause them to "lose" their culture (Moore 2009). Sahlins claims that these other,

often indigenous, societies still exist but have changed to incorporate modern technology into their respective cultural traditions. Indigenous people were originally viewed by Europeans as lacking history, having no culture, and no agency before their arrival for colonization. He claims there is now a "world culture," an organization of diverse forms of life interacting through trading agreements and capitalism, rather than the reproduction of a uniform culture around the world. This "world culture" was brought about by the Western expansion that reached many "traditional" cultures before any anthropologist ever had a chance to study them. Sahlins discusses several ethnographic cases and points out that when migrant islanders arrive in new locations, they do not seek to lose their culture, but instead want to become an extension of their home (Moore 2009). In some cases, migrants maintain ties to their homeland by sending money and goods in the form of long-distance reciprocity. Sahlins states that "the discipline [of anthropology] seems well off as it ever was, with cultures disappearing just as we were learning how to perceive them, and then reappearing in ways we had never imagined" (Moore 2009). Sahlins concludes that we perceive cultures as losing variety when in reality, they incorporate innovations into their lifestyle.

Sahlins would argue that the introduction of technology in classrooms, if used accordingly, would eventually integrate enough changes in a western society for the

technology to be viewed as a progressive agent within that society (Moore 2009). In other words, if technology is introduced into the classroom and is perceived positively, society will perceive technology as an asset that increases cultural advancement.

Marvin Harris' analysis of his materialist theory serves between the scientific and humanistic methodologies. In his article, "Anthropology and the Theoretical and Paradigmatic Significance of the Collapse of Soviet and East European Communism," Harris claims that his materialist theory comprises three parts that include: infrastructure, structure, and superstructure (Moore 2009). Infrastructure is made up of modes of production and reproduction. In his article, Harris wrote that the Soviet Union lacked a solid infrastructure, which eventually led to the lack of economic growth and a decrease of technological advancement.

Harris would argue that because schools require a strong infrastructure, they would welcome technology as a resource into the classrooms. Once the schools acquire the technology, it would be up to them to decide the degree of its use. Schools would need to have the most current technology to support a strong "infrastructure."

In conclusion, Marvin Harris' mixed approach to technology in western society classrooms is the most convincing because he would give schools the power to decide how to incorporate technology into their educational system.

Works Cited

Harold, Benjamin. 2016. "Technology in Education: An Overview", 5 February 2016. https://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/technology-in-education/index.html.

Moore, Jerry D. 2009. Visions of Culture : An Annotated Reader. CA: AltaMira Press.