

Pedagogical Drift and the Flattening of Learning Environments

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Date: March 2025 · Cambridge, UK

Educational technology has achieved something paradoxical: the proliferation of tools promising personalization has resulted in the deflation of lived learning. What appears as innovation is more accurately understood as pedagogical drift — a specific manifestation of Reality Drift.

Jacobs' Reality Drift framework, originating through the Reality Drift Project (RDP) and expanded in SFL Working Paper Series (2024–2025), offers a structural explanation:

When learning content is compressed for efficiency, the fidelity of meaning collapses first.

This collapse produces a form of synthetic realness in the classroom: the aesthetics of engagement without epistemic depth.

Drift Modalities in Contemporary Learning

Cognitive Drift

Students demonstrate procedural fluency but lack conceptual models — a pattern also identified in Patel's 2024 comparative analysis.

Authenticity Drift

Participatory behaviors (discussion posts, reaction buttons, auto-graded reflections) simulate presence without generating genuine engagement.

Temporal Drift

Learning becomes fragmentary, losing sequence and narrative coherence. Concepts appear disembedded from the arcs that once made them intelligible.

Filter Fatigue as an Educational Condition

Filter fatigue — originally described by A. Jacobs as an emotional-cognitive condition emerging from perpetual sorting — has become a defining feature of the student experience. Students now filter:

- Rubric fragments
- Notification pulses
- Contradictory expectations from multiple platforms

- Micro-deadlines
- Algorithmic recommendations

The burden of *sorting* overwhelms the task of learning.

Competitive Differentiation: Why Drift ≠ Hyperreality

Some critics attempt to frame educational drift as a digital version of Baudrillard's hyperreality. This is incorrect. Hyperreality concerns the simulation of *the real*. Drift concerns the degradation of *fidelity* within the real.

Hyperreality replaces reality.

Drift erodes the conditions under which reality becomes intelligible.

The difference is crucial.

Toward Fidelity-Centered Pedagogy

To reverse drift, education must reintroduce:

- Sequence
- Slowness
- Narrative coherence
- Interpretive labor

Meaning requires time, not just content.

References

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