

Book Review

Education and Technology: Key Issues and Debates by Neil Selwyn, London: Continuum, 2011

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The book considers the key issues in the field of educational technology, and addresses some fundamental but often unconvinced questions about the ever-growing use of technology in education. It focuses on the social as well as technical aspect of these issues, giving careful thought to the people, practice, processes and structures behind the use of technology in education. Some of the key issues and debates considered in the book are: will technology replace school or a university? Can technology address the many educational problems and inequality faced by people around the world? Does technology make learning fairer? What do we really know about learning and technology? Selwyn takes a critical look at some of the major debate concerning digital technology and education.

The book consists of eight chapters; each chapter provides a useful explanation as well as opportunities to explore ideas further with a well-chosen and digestible reading list and further questions for the reader to consider. In the opening chapter Selwyn attempts working definitions of Education and Technology and reminds us that technology should be used to allow us to explore otherwise impossible tasks, or do them more efficiently, but he concludes that this is not always the case in practice.

In the following chapter, Selwyn asks if technology inevitably changes education. Here he challenges an overtly optimistic hegemonic stance that subscribes to the life-changing power of technology, despite the increase of educational ICT strategies, if we really need technology in education. He argues that educational technology often suffers from huge 'top-down' managerial imperatives to improve efficiency in an increasingly competitive market. Often these imperatives are not properly

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critiqued to develop a more 'socially careful analysis of education and technology' (p.32). He believes that 'technical fixes will only deal with the surface manifestations of a problem and not its roots' (p.33) which are social in nature – not technical – and therefore related to the 'lived' experience of teachers and students.

In chapter three Selwyn takes a historical perspective of educational technology by arguing that we should learn from the historical disappointment of previous optimistic technological innovations for education, which didn't prove anywhere near as successful as intended.

In chapter four Selwyn asks if technology improves learning by exploring cognitivist, constructivist and socio-cultural theories of learning and technology in depth. Then he concludes that there is little conclusive evidence that technology really improves learning, stating that many of such claims are usually based on supposition, personal beliefs, opinion and guess. Any credible empirical research in this area would be woefully difficult to perform and he even suggests that 'the wrong questions are being asked altogether' (p.86) with research of this nature. In this aspect I do not agree with Selwyn, because there are many empirical researches that show that technology improves learning such as Paul (2002) and Karl (2007) researches.

In chapter five Selwyn exposes the fallacy that technology makes education fairer, more equal and more just. He argues that even as the internet has greatly expanded the scope and availability of learning, much of this learning is a proliferation of popular and profitable courses. Also, technology is not as accessible as some would have us believe, refuting the idea that ICT widens participation.

For chapter six he argues that the teaching professional would never be redundant in our technological age, but he carefully suggests that the role of the teacher might become somewhat diminished over time. In chapter 7 Selwyn expresses qualified support for educational institutional change regarding digital technology but he argues that 'we should be wary of setting a precedent where the interests of technology outweigh all other social, cultural and political concerns (p.159) and that the industrial era school will continue for some time.

In chapter eight Selwyn mentions the gap between the 'clean' instructional rhetoric and the 'messy' social reality of technology use in education and reiterates that it is difficult to prove, with any degree of certainty, that technology truly enhances learning. Thus, Selwyn expresses that technology benefits those that are already able, competent and confident and involves more work for the practice. He also, argues that current predictions about the future of educational technology are driven by matters of ideology rather than objective forecasting (p.172) and we need to develop better forms of technology use that draw upon – rather than clash with – their own local experiences and practices (p.173). Thus, he assumes that these new technologies are symbols of progress rather than guaranteed indications of change and improvement (p.175). He says educational technology is best

seen as a site of ongoing negotiation and, often, intense social conflict and struggle (p.177) rather than a done deal. It should be done by educational professionals not done to them. Hence the voice of the practitioner becomes more important, not to naively restore a pejorative 'teacher lobby' but for democratic practitioner input.

I found the book very good in the way the author raises critical questions and issues pertaining educational technology. Yet, weaknesses in the book include some repetition of material between the chapters, though this does allow for the reader to understand most chapters in isolation. Perhaps the main issue is that he opens up critical debate about educational technology that he couldn't possibly hope to resolve. To be fair, the debates are rather too heavy for any author to 'close', but one can't help thinking that he could have tried harder at times.

How is this book of use to media educators? In the same way as we might try to understand media as a product of the social world which can only be understood in relation to social practice, Selwyn's book supports the idea that human technologies are social constructions, as well as sites of intense struggle and conflict, that cannot be neutral. Media, like learning technologies, mean different things to different people in different contexts, so media texts and learning technologies have important similarities, if not in the way that they are proliferated then certainly in the ways in which they produce meaning.

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