

Scholarly Book Review: *Is Technology Good for Education* by Neil Selwyn

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Introduction

Is Technology Good for Education is a contemporary analysis of the changing and complex relationship between education and technology. The book's author, Neil Selwyn is a professor at Monash University. With a strong interest in exploring digital technology's place in everyday life and in education, he has published over 50 articles and 7 books (Monash University, n.d.). He is known nationally and internationally for his critical stance on the use and non-use of technology in education as well as his propensity to incite academic and quality debate. The book was published in 2016, fittingly by Polity Press the "home of independent thinking" (Polity Book, n.d.). Polity are committed to publishing books aimed at a general readership and are topical with a critical edge, Selwyn's work fitting the bill nicely. Polity are well known for their reputation of publishing work that stimulate public debate about social, political and cultural issues. This author/publisher partnership combined with the provocative title of the book provides a clear insight into the direction and tone of the book.

Is technology good for education? In the opening paragraph Selwyn answers this question with the response "yes/no/all points in between" (p.9). The book begins with a strong introduction before leading into the "core" chapters, that discuss four claims made about technology and education. Such as the claim that technology is making education more democratic (Chapter 2), personalised (Chapter 3), calculable (Chapter 4) and commercial (Chapter 5). The book itself is riddled with open ended questions designed to challenge the readers' opinions and preconceptions. This persistent and relentless challenging, although at times tiresome, results in the author leaving the reader feeling curious and wanting more.

This review will explore how the book aligns with the current literature landscape as well as deconstructing some of the key arguments and claims made. In addition, it will evaluate the books effectiveness in achieving its purpose of "shifting the nature of conversation" (p.10) and encouraging readers to "think otherwise about technology and education" (p.9).

Exploring the Literature Landscape

Selwyn is not the first, and will not be the last to explore the complexities around the changing relationship between technology and education. Collins & Halverson (2009) & Resnick (2002) approach the topic with the same critical lens, sharing the common undertone for the need of revolution and change in current approaches to learning and technology. Although both books advocate for critical discussions, the motivations driving Collins & Halverson (2009), to ensure that education doesn't fall behind, opposed to Selwyn's intention of ensuring

education changes for the better, leads to two very different types of rhetoric. Selwyn's constructivist approach means that instead of asking how can we not fall behind? He is instead asking a much more enduring question; how can we make sure we become better?

Similarly, *A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change* by Thomas & Seely Brown (2011) is also driven by the same question of "how can we be better." However, the book is written through a lens centered around the "three" cornerstones of learning, being play, innovation and the cultivation of imagination (Thomas & Seely Brown, 2011). This focused approach, changes the direction of conversation by focusing less on the actual concept of technology and more towards change.

This book is unprecedented in its analytical deconstruction of contemporary and current issues in education and technology. Its purpose to incite debate is evident in its commitment to providing a full and balanced prognosis of some of the current claims made about technology and education. Each of the core chapters is structured the same way. An introductory overview, identifying the realities, highlighting the benefits, the weaknesses and finally concludes with a thought provoking summary. This consistency to provide a balanced argument and the lack of bias is testament to the initial goal to make readers think otherwise about technologies place in education.

Themes & Strengths

One of the books key strengths of the book is its firm and unyielding theme of promoting critical discussion and public debate about technologies place in education. Selwyn argues that separately, technology and education are frequently at the center of public debate however as a result of what seems to be an indifference to their relationship; the education technology debate is not gaining the attention it deserves (p. 189). Critical discussion or as Facer (2011) suggests "*quality conversation*" relies on asking the right questions. Something that Selwyn models seamlessly in what appears to be an attempt to enable readers with the language needed for public debate.

Throughout the chapters this theme of public debate and critical discussion consistently reappears, most effectively in Chapters 4 and 5 where the author explores technologies role in making education more calculable and commercial. It is believed the author chose these claims specifically for their ability to incite debate and draw the attention of multiple stakeholders.

The arguments in Chapter 4 are well structured, balanced, fair and yet by the end of the chapter readers are almost entirely convinced that technologies role in making education more calculable may not be making things better. The chapter suggests that through the rise of 'big data' and 'educational informatics' (Levy et. al, 2014), data is playing a centralised role in changing the relationship between education and technology. It outlines the numerous benefits associated with the use of data, referencing the 2013 McKinsey Report, which suggests that

the standardised sharing of existing data could greatly improve the effectiveness of education around the world (Manyika et. al, 2013). Meanwhile it outlines the arguments against data, such as concerns of ownership, “normative validity” (Biesta, 2009 p. 35) and ethical use so effectively that it overshadows the positives.

Chapter 5 takes a different approach to inciting debate and discussion by using concepts such as commercialism and profiteering to gain attention and awareness. As a result of the “free- market Wild West of tech entrepreneurship” (Sweetland-Edwards, 2014), Selwyn suggests there is a new group of philanthropist that are entering educational reform with an approach that favours individual interest rather than the interests of the many. This focused stance of shifting the spotlight on the questionable role of the “stealth libertarianism of the Silicon Valley” (p.175) in educational technology is a provocative move to bring awareness to gravity of the issue and incite public debate. Using statements such as “...there is a distinct naivety - if not arrogance - in the way that many commercial high-tech interests approach education change and reform.”(p.157) not only incite but invite debate.

However, with that all being said, it is believed the core chapters could be replaced with any claim that technology has on education, without changing the purpose or direction of the book. The purpose of the book is less about the detail of the deconstructed claims but rather the process and the questions being asked. Technology and education will continue to change with new claims being made and challenges faced. What Selwyn has attempted to do is create an academic and quality example of the type educational technology rhetoric that needs to be happening.

So what is missing?

Surprisingly the topic of teacher training or upskilling was absent from the book. Surely technology is changing the way we train teachers? How do we prepare students for a future changed by technology if we aren't preparing teachers for that same future? Given that the successful integration of new technologies is dependent on teachers (Keengwe et al., 2008) and digital literacy, which needs to be taught by teachers, is an essential skill for future success (Chase & Laufenberg, 2011), how is it that teacher training is not considered an essential part of the rhetoric? Perhaps because in comparison to the other claims in the book, it has a lesser likelihood of gaining public attention and traction?

In addition, the book fails to provide a contextualized definition of the term “technology”. It is possible that this omission was a conscious move to appear more inclusive, avoiding the potential for readers to isolate or limit possible discussions as a result of a restricted or incomplete definition. By leaving the term undefined, it opens the door for discussion and ambiguity. There are several definitions of the term technology, including and not limited to, a combination of physical and informational components (Kumar et. Al, 1999), a way of knowing (Herschbach, 1995) or a process of research (Dunning, 1994). It is believed the definition provided by Richey, Silber, & Ely (2008) provides a contextualized and appropriate definition for this book, that would have

benefited readers. *Educational technology is the study and ethical practice of facilitating learning and improving performance by creating, using and managing appropriate technological processes and resources (p.24).*

Winner (1977) suggests that the confusion to define technology “...is an indication of a kind of lag in public language, that is, a failure of both ordinary speech and social scientific discourse...”(p. 10). 40 years on, Selwyn echoes this idea in this book by endeavoring to create the discourse needed to keep up with changing landscape.

Where to from here?

One of the interesting aspects of this book, again could be a move to be seen as inclusive, it does not state the intended readership. Upon reflection there are several groups that would benefit greatly from interacting with the ideas in the book, in order of potential impact, classroom teachers, school leaders, educational technology companies and policymakers and or state bodies. Educational technology companies, invested and committed to the changing future should pay close attention to the emerging discussions that will in time have a direct impact on the way their products will be designed, created, distributed and most importantly evaluated. For policy makers and state bodies, they hold the key to determining whether technology changes education for the better. The book concludes by proposing three suggestions to ensure that the inevitable impacts, that are as a result of technology, changes education for the better. The first places importance on the need for governance in technology and education, encouraging extensive and intensive state involvement (p.174). The second is to limit commercial for-profit interest and to ensure the ethical selling of technology in education (p. 185). Finally, and most importantly there are calls to “reconfigure the topic of technology and education as a site of controversy” (p.187). Selwyn eloquently presents the arguments and these proposed solutions in such a way that lays responsibility for change on this group of power.

To conclude, this book was written with the intent of throwing the topic of educational technology into the ring of public debate by providing a “...tempered, measured and balanced prognosis of what continues to be an overhyped and over-sold area of education” (p.181). Not only has Selwyn successfully achieved this but in doing so he has ignited a debate and fostered a rhetoric that will ground and authenticate the future relationship of education and technology.

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