

Reviews

SELWYN, Neil: Education in a Digital World – Global Perspectives on Technology and Education

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Neil Selwyn's new book on educational technology takes a global spin. Selwyn aims to provide "an internationalized and comparative analysis of educational technology" (ii), avoiding the biased focus on Anglophone academic literature. It also takes a social spin: as he often does in his work, Selwyn develops a social analysis of educational technology provision and practice, entwining education technology with politics, economics and culture. Finally, the volume also takes a local spin: Selwyn stresses the importance of context throughout the volume, opening up the potential for pleasing professionals in the comparative and international education (CIE) field. Selwyn's is a thought-provoking and informative project – but as a whole, it sacrifices depth over breadth.

The book follows a satisfying logical structure, with the first chapters outlining theories of globalization, education and technology, the middle body providing analyses of how provision and practice are handled successively at the level of international organizations, governments and local actors, and the final two chapters drawing the discussion together through the extended case study of the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) initiative and a set of stimulating recommendations.

While the first two chapters would serve wonderfully well as an undergraduate introduction to theories of globalization, comparative education and technology, it is difficult to make out the author's voice or glimpse an emerging argument that would frame the book intellectually. Indeed, the author's conclusion in the second chapter citing Castells' recommendation to "wear one's theoretical clothes lightly" sets the tone for the next three chapters – an unwillingness to commit to a framework, to develop an argument, to stray from the impartial. While this is certainly a benefit for readers looking for a textbook-like, comprehensive volume, it is frustrating for those striving to gauge Selwyn's position. This only starts to emerge when Selwyn discusses ICT for development (ICT4D) in the sixth chapter. He challenges two common assumptions behind practices in ICT4D: that 'anything is better than nothing' so evaluating the impact of educational technology in 'developing countries' is unnecessary, and, by and large, ICT4D has had only a marginal effect on the political, economic and social issues it set out to address. In the seventh chapter, Selwyn consolidates his position through the extensive analysis of the One Laptop Per Child initiative – while providing technology access could be

“one way of breaking the endless cycle of dependency” (Bastion and Rolf cited on p. 136), it may not be the most cost-effective, or even not effective at all, if other basic needs are not met.

Nevertheless, it is not until the last chapter that we get to the crux of Selwyn’s argument (this is satisfying *and* frustrating – it feels like finally figuring out ‘who dunnit’ in a detective novel, wishing we had solved it before). There, Selwyn concludes that the reductive portrayal of educational technology as simply giving a laptop (tablet, smartphone...) to an individual and assuming learning will follow is far from complete. He reminds us that educational technology is a “social affair – based around struggles over benefit and power, equality and empowerment, structure and agency, inequality and social justice” (p. 147) with major actors including international organisations promoting the “learning/earning narrative” of the knowledge economy (Brown *et al* cited on p. 147), (ICT) companies pursuing expanding markets and rising profit, governments concerned over international relations, national competitiveness and domestic cultural identity, NGOs and individuals with a myriad of motivations. Chiefly, he argues that educational technology is used as a tool to “leverage neo-liberal dispositions and a free-market mentality into the minds and actions” (p. 148) of governments and citizens alike, including the most deprived. Educational technology is not, for most of these actors, about how best to learn using technology. It is rather a powerful tool in the widespread efforts to spread and perpetuate the “dominant neo-liberal project” (p. 148) where competition, individualism, self-interest and freedom come before global welfare.

Selwyn gives a balanced account of the consequences of such a use of educational technology. On the upside, he argues, educational technology has received an unbelievable amount of funding and corporate interest, and has undoubtedly changed some educational provision and practice around the world. The downside? Largely because focus has more often been on technology rather than on how to use technology to maximise learning, it has also perpetuated, if not exacerbated, existing inequalities, failing to reach the economically, politically, geographically and socially marginalized. As such, Selwyn concludes, “it is a ‘problem changer’, not a ‘problem solver’” (p. 22).

Best thing about this volume? It is one of the most thought-provoking accounts of how educational technology is used as a very powerful tool to promote the neo-liberal free-market project to develop ‘21st century skills’ – skills that a growing body of research shows unnecessary for large populations (Brown *et al.* cited on p. 152). The book does an excellent job in reminding us that behind “specific claims to the ‘truth’ about educational technology” (p. 156), there are relations of power at play. Interestingly, there are strong echoes with Jenny Ozga’s work (Ozga *et al.*, 2011), where she suggests that

measurement and assessment in education fabricates what is perceived as quality. Selwyn's theme could be seen to run in parallel – the use of technology for educational purposes changes, re(de)finers and restricts what is seen as education. In other words, technology is no longer seen as one of the means to achieve quality educational outcomes, but rather as the one means that guarantees achieving them. As the founder of OLPC affirms, according to him, laptops are the same as electricity: their impact on learning does not need to be tested, in the same way that the impact of electricity on the quality of life does not need to be tested. In the same way that measurement defines education quality across the OECD studies in Ozga's work, technology is now defining education in the world of educational technology.

The OLPC chapter is captivating in its own right. The initiative is presented by the author as being a technology-centred, rather than an education-centred, initiative. While the OLPC has thought out their laptops in the most minute detail (dust and water resistant, shock absorbent, child-friendly anthropomorphic design, flexible monitor settings, wireless access and powering options, built-in educational software), the *use* of the laptops, including their distribution, user training, access, maintenance, structured curricula etc. have not figured in the initiative's plan. Selwyn reports several governmental actors being opposed to the initiative on the grounds that it is essentially a global educational technology experiment with massive funding and no research to support it. It has been portrayed as “naïve and innocent about the reality of formal schooling” (Larry Cuban cited on p. 141) with one official stating that “it would be impossible to justify an expenditure of this scale on a debatable scheme when public funds continue to be in inadequate supply for well-established needs” (Indian government official cited on p. 144).

Selwyn concludes with thought-provoking recommendations. He suggests that nation-states should engage more actively with educational technology by localising global trends into context-friendly policies and ensuring such policies are implemented in the field. Further on, he would like to see the public and the academia challenge corporate involvement with educational technology. Overall, he argues for a politicisation of the educational technology field, so that it becomes disruptive and activist in its nature, occasionally “dragging the giant corporation fully into political controversy” (p. 160).

These are interesting ideas and certainly good candidates for the common unifying thread that this book is missing. The book would gain in value if these ideas flowed through all the chapters, linking them together and constructing a rich argument as they picked up more and more theoretical and practical support. While the volume as it stands merely recommends a politicisation of the field in its concluding chapter, barely making reference to the rest of the

publication, having these stimulating ideas revisited throughout would have produced a book that actually does politicise the field in its own right.

This book falls short of delivering what it could have in a few other respects. Possibly due to the ambitious project of representing educational technology as a social project, resulting in a rather enumerative discussion of all the social theories relevant to the topic, the depth of analysis in many instances is inadequate. While the analysis of the OLPC initiative is thought-provoking, the case studies on Singapore, Japan, USA and Chile, and some other countries through the discussion of PISA results in the fifth chapter, are disappointingly shallow. On several occasions, it feels like Selwyn opens a can of worms without realising and swiftly moves forward as if nothing happened. One particularly telling example of this is when he asserts that “the persistence of relative differences and variations [of the use of technology in educational systems] suggest that educational technology is far from a globally converging phenomenon” (p.87). This assumption is made throughout the book on several occasions and it never addresses the possibility that, while there are differences in how technology is used across the world, this could also be explained by these systems converging but not having converged yet. Several more examples of assumptions such as these, which are central to the debates about educational technology, are made and never explored.

A final comment regards context. Selwyn chose to give the issue of context a prominent place in this volume by locating large parts of it within the field of CIE. While addressing what one could call the main unifiers of CIE, such as context, Selwyn does not manage to use any of these concepts to advance his argument. Rather, he discusses the importance of context with a few examples, accepts that it is important and uses this discussion to justify his recommendation that nation-states should act as contextualisers of global trends. Defining what he understands by context and in which ways it is important to his discussion would have progressed his argument much more than the dogmatic “context is important” stance he took. As Rappleye (2006, p. 223) puts it, we lack general “conceptual tools to understand contextual influence”. Selwyn was close to providing some of these tools and how to use them. Exploring his recommendation that government take a more explicit role in adapting global trends in educational technology into context-sensitive policies and providing support for these policies to be enacted on the ground, would have provided a useful starting point for a context-specific tool grounded in relevant social, educational and globalisation theories.

While this book lacks a unifying argument and the author’s voice is sometimes too uncritical, it is a thoroughly thought-provoking read and will be useful to anyone aiming to familiarise him- or herself with the recent debates around educational technology in a globalised world.

REFERENCES

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