

Book Review: Is Technology Good for Education?

By N Selwyn. Pp 178 (pbk). Cambridge: Polity Press. 2016. ISBN 9780745696478

This book debates the role of technology in education in 21st century. Although there is much discussion and debate about the role of technology/ies in education as well as discourse on the pros and cons of their use, this book offers the reader the opportunity to take some time zooming out of these narrow and in many cases technical debates and reflect on bigger issues about the role of technology in education such as: democratic education, accessibility, equality, commercialisation, learning preferences and encourages the reader to critically examine assumptions we make about technology in education.

The book is organised into six chapters that evolve around key questions and troubling concepts of democracy, personalised learning, “datafication” and the commercialisation of education in order to conclude in the final chapter a search of what constitutes “good” education in relation to digitalisation. Throughout the book answers are not offered, but questions are raised and it is up to the reader to think these issues through opposing debates presented and to arrive in a view for his/her own. Although the book has a clear positioning this is not imposed to the reader, but instead the reader is intellectually challenged as to whether “digital technology *really* changing education-and is this *always* in our best interest?” (p.3) which is the central debate in Chapter1.

Chapter 2 takes a journey through a series of arguments to examine what democratic, and equitable education means in terms of digital education. It concludes that although some claim that digital education can or is democratic due to accessibility, Selwyn argues that actually the division of classes is still apparent, as in other aspects of education, and it takes more than the inclusion of digital technologies to achieve democratic education.

The next chapter tackles the “enchantment” of personalised learning and how digital technologies can provide such an environment. Among other arguments for or against, the most significant one is the role of education-customers/consumers/marketisation of education. The book questions that with the increasing emphasis on marketable software programmes (such as Netflix) a personalised learning approach “might be lost” (p.80). This leaves us troubling the values of what makes for “good” education by asking “if we are all immersed in our personalised learning journeys, what implications might this have for education as a social, supportive and shared endeavour” (p.77)? The chapter thus provokes us to

think the role of digital education in the context of personalised learning and cautions us that maybe in the name of personalised learning we are “trapped” in a marketisation of education that is irrelevant and outside of the education itself.

Chapter 4 and 5 extend these discussions focusing on the role of digitalisation in education and argue whether education is becoming more calculable and more commercial. They contest the idea that digital education is not all about the learning environment, but might be driven by “commercial interests [that] are based around decidedly different agendas and ideologies” (p.131) that are outside of the interest of a “good” education.

As a psychologist researching and studying learning theories for many years now this made me pause and think. It is actually digital education as Selwyn argues, leading us to “the idea of learning as product” (p. 79), or should we focus on cultures of creating effective learning environments that recognise difference, diversity and individual visionary fulfilments where digital technology is seen as an asset of it, but not determine it.

Selwyn urges us throughout the book to think the digitalisation of education as a social, political, economic and cultural complex phenomenon. The final chapter poses a very important question about the “*values* that we most want to underpin any use of technology in education” (p. 159) by inviting us to investigate the ways which technology is used or can be used in education “rather than being dominated by commerce, markets and profits”.

Selwyn thus invites us to oppose a simplistic view that technology is “good” for education and instead it provokes us to cognitively reflect on aspects of the role of technology in education that we might have ignored, having been preoccupied on how to use technology for/in education. The book opens up “new” ways of thinking and conceptualising digital education and extends our views beyond the technical aspects of its implementation and approach it rather as a social phenomenon that challenges us to a collaborative and collective reflection of what this means for each of us working in the field.

All those in education, whether they are “technophiles” or “technophobic”, must read this book.

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