

Journal of Learning for Development - JL4D, Vol 1, No 1 (2014)

Selwyn, Neil (2013). *Education in a Digital World: Global Perspectives on Technology and Education*. New York: Routledge.

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VOL. 1, No. 1

I have been following Neil Selwyn's career since 2007 when I reviewed *Adult Learning in a Digital Age: Information Technology and the Learning Society* which he co-authored with Stephen Gorard and John Furlong. At the time I remarked that this book provided a "refreshing counterbalance to the prevailing discourses of techno-utopianism and techno-zealotry" (Bullen, 2008). Five years later it seems not a lot has changed in terms of the dominant educational technology discourse. In fact, I would argue, that with the advent of the iPad and tablet computing more generally, followed more recently by the MOOC phenomenon, that the hyperbole surrounding educational technology as a solution to a host of educational, social and economic problems has become even more over-bearing. We now see the uncritical acceptance of many of the underlying neo-liberal and globalist assumptions in educational policy agendas of developed and developing countries around the world. So once again it is up to Neil Selwyn to prick the bubble and open the door to the educational technology echo chamber by asking critical and awkward questions and developing "analyses of educational technology that are more socially attuned" (p. viii). As he says in introducing the book, "Despite the best efforts of a few critically-minded scholars, there is still a distinct reluctance amongst educational technology writers and researchers to think about the connections between digital technology use and the wider world – i.e., what takes place beyond the immediate context of the technological artifact and the individual user" (p. viii).

This is a relatively short book but in its 164 pages and eight chapters, Selwyn manages to present a penetrating analysis of the role of educational technology in international development and the often hidden ideologies driving their use. In the first chapter, *Education and Technology: Developing a Global Perspective*, he argues that educational technology needs to be viewed in the broader political, economic, social, cultural and historical contexts of the countries in which it is being implemented. He poses a number of critical questions that are all tied to questions of power "i.e., matters of who stands to gain most from educational technologies and in whose interests they serve" (p. 21). He concludes by suggesting that educational technology be approached as a "problem-changer" rather than a "problem-solver" since it is just as likely to "reproduce, perpetuate, strengthen and deepen existing patterns of social relations and structures" (p. 21) as it is to change them.

In Chapter 2, *Making Sense of Education and Technology: Theoretical Approaches*, Selwyn discusses how social theory can help us develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the "structures, actions, processes and relations" (p. 25) that underpin the use of educational technology in international development. More specifically, he examines three theoretical perspectives: a comparative education, a political economy approach and post-colonialism. In reading this chapter it is easy and tempting to interpret it as a defeatist rejection of technology in education, to conclude that educational technology is doomed from the start because of how it is being appropriated in support of certain ideologies. However, Selwyn cautions against this and urges us to take a constructive rather than destructive perspective. "The post-colonial approach in particular", he argues "highlights the need to not simply decry the unsatisfactory state of the present, but also to consider opportunities and spaces for future critical action as well as critical scholarship" (p. 40).

In the remaining six chapters Selwyn uses the theoretical perspectives discussed in chapter 2 to examine educational technology and international development from a number of different perspectives. In Chapter 3, *Education, Technology and International Organisations* he looks at the role played by organisations whose mandates and activities are not restricted to a single country. This includes multi-national corporations, non-governmental organisations, and inter-governmental and supranational political and economic groupings. He argues that, while these organisations may all have different aims and agendas, they are not acting independently of each other and there is a considerable amount of collaboration and interplay between the various organisations which shapes the nature and form of educational technology and how it is implemented around the world. He illustrates this interplay between international organizations to shape the educational agenda with the example of the "21st century skills" movement which he portrays as neo-liberal in orientation because of the way it connects technology use, the knowledge economy and the need for human capital. He concludes that the agendas of international organisations "tend to coalesce around sets of common values and assumptions...and position educational technology as a central component of the neo-liberal framing of education" (p. 61).

Chapter 4, *Education, Technology and National Policymaking* examines national policy development in the UK, the US, Japan, Chile and Singapore. In doing so, he explores the connections between educational technology policymaking and the "economic, social and cultural fortune of individual nations" (p. 63). While he finds important similarities between the policies of these five diverse countries, he argues that it would be a mistake to interpret their implementation and use of digital technology as simply "national interpretations of global economic agendas" (p. 83). Instead he suggests we focus on the differences and discontinuities and recognize the importance of the local context in policy development and implementation. He also points out that, while the policies of different countries may be similar their effects will not be predictable and consistent. There may be a number of intended consequences but also unintended and unexpected consequences.

Chapter 5, *Local Variations in Educational Technology Provision and Practice*, continues where chapter 4 left off and explores how similar policies informed by a common global discourse of educational technology are interpreted and adapted to meet the local realities of different countries. Digital technologies are shaped by the social contexts in which they are implemented, he says, and this suggests we need to consider the influence of issues such as language and religion. While he stresses the importance of local culture and the localised realities, Selwyn cautions us not to ignore the power of individual agency within local contexts. Matters of local context need to be *added* to any account of education and technology", he emphasises (p. 102).

As Selwyn points out in the opening to Chapter 6, much of the book up to that point deals with educational technology in developed country contexts. So Chapter 6, *The Role of Educational Technology in International Development* and Chapter 7, "One Laptop Per Child" - *A Critical Analysis* are particularly pertinent to readers of the *Journal of Learning for Development*. Both chapters make for somewhat uncomfortable reading by those engaged in ICT for development (ICT4D) initiatives because Selwyn suggests that, despite their good intentions, many of these initiatives are misguided and may not be having the impact they are intended to have. The unbalanced relationships between the developing countries receiving the technology assistance and those who are doing the 'developing' is an issue that Selwyn highlights. He argues that too many of these initiatives are 'pro-poor': the innovation is conceived and developed outside of the communities but on their behalf. Not enough are 'para-poor', that is, use a participative approach in which the communities being supported are involved in the design process. This technical approach to development and the "false promise of potential transformation" he says has the potential to distract attention from deeper issues that affect the provision of education in developing countries. In Chapter 7 he pursues this issue in greater detail in his critical analysis of the One Laptop per Child initiative. He takes issue with the largely acritical enthusiasm that surrounded this initiative and the fact that it was promoted as a "transformatory example of educational technology" that would "create educational opportunities for the world's poorest children" (p. 128). Yet, he says, much of the focus of the OLPC has been on the devices and their technical specifications, not on their educational use. There is a sense that by simply putting this technology in the hands of students, educational access issues will be resolved and educational transformation will occur.

In concluding this book, Selwyn suggests that we need to fundamentally rethink how we conceive of educational technology and its role, particularly in development. Decisions about the use of educational technology need to be much more inclusive and, in development contexts, driven much more by those who are the intended recipients of the technology to ensure that local realities and contextual factors are accounted for. This would mean a "reorientation of the field of educational technology away from the logics of neoliberalism and the self-interested actions of dominant actors in the global knowledge economy...a fundamental reorientation of social relations as well as educational technology arrangements" (p. 164).

Reference

Bullen, M. (2008). Review of *Adult Learning in a Digital Age: Information Technology and the Learning Society*. In *Journal of Distance Education*, 22(2).

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