**Selwyn, N. (2016). *Is Technology Good for Education.* Toronto, ON: John Wiley &
Sons. Pages: 160. ISBN: 978-0-7456-9646-1 (hardcover/paperback/e-book)**

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   Is Technology Good for Education? by Dr. Neil Selwyn discusses the convergence of
technology and education from a critical perspective that seeks to challenge the deterministic
paradigm that often frames the "ed-tech" discourse. Dr. Selwyn has written extensively over
the last decade on the (non)use of digital technologies in educational environments and his lat-
est publication will most certainly appeal to old and new readers alike. The central thesis of the
book uses its provocative title to argue that more thoughtful debates need to take place around
the social, political, economic, and cultural complexities of technology and education. In this
respect, Dr. Selwyn's book is certainly a timely publication. This is not to say that there is no
"connecting tissue" to the same possibilities and problems that have besieged technology and
education over the last forty years of digital innovation, but that Selwyn is speaking to a shift-
ing context (currently premised on "personalization," "big data," "entrepreneurship," etc.). He
is therefore justified in unearthing how this cycle of sustained and disruptive innovations may
impact the values and agendas of those who stand to gain from technology's increasing impact
on education, and more importantly, of those who are being left behind. Selwyn's case here is,
without a doubt, well intentioned. However his *underlying* intent to "make you think otherwise
about technology and education" (p.vi), by means of a measured and balanced assessment of
the ed-tech phenomenon, is carried out with varying degrees of success.
   The book is divided into four main thematic chapters, which are bookended by intro-
ductory and concluding sections that serve to both situate the omnipresence of digital educa-
tion and frame an intellectual debate around notions of "goodness." Whilst this latter discus-
sion connotes technology and education's ties to formal theory emerging from philosophy,
sociology, psychology and so on, the depth of Selwyn's argument is quite light in comparison
to his previous works, particularly the insightful, *Education and Technology: Key Issues and
Debates* (2011). Drawing largely from popular, non-academic literature compiled over the last
few years (i.e., news reports, blogs, editorials, magazines, etc.), it is clear that Selwyn wants to
speak to the most pressing and contemporary issues in technology and education (which formal
scholarship may have not caught up to). However, this can also be interpreted as the academic
attempting to appeal to a more general (seemingly Western) audience. He prepares his veteran
readers for this departure by explaining that simply dismissing the "vacuous and enthusiastic
excesses of 'tech-talk'" (p. ix), rather than critically engaging with the discourse, is leaving
education *outsiders* to make their own uninformed judgments and leaving education *insiders*
disengaged. His premise is sound. In four chapters the author provides a detailed overview
of the current critical tensions of digital technology by posing difficult questions he believes
many people are encountering in education daily. Chapter 2 confronts the notion that technol-
ogy has been a "democratizing force" (p. 51) in education and Chapter 3 problematizes the
current trend towards "technology-based personalization and individualization" (p. 78). Chap-
ter 4 focuses insightfully on the highly political (not neutral) nature of data collection and use,
while Chapter 5 injects a dose of fear and urgency into the current debate enveloping education
reform and the private sector. Selwyn readily admits that although the questions he raises will

elicit responses of "yes/no/all points in between" (p. vi) and offer no clear solutions, we have much to learn simply by asking and discussing.

Though noble in his aims, Selwyn's argument begins with an all too common oversight in much of the academic scholarship on technology and education. He writes, "Thinking carefully about the language that is used to describe education and digital technology is a theme that recurs throughout this book" (p. 8). It is then highly ironic that Selwyn himself neglects to define "technology" and often leaves the reader with vague ideas about what actually is being discussed when the term is used. For new readers of Selwyn's work, this may lead to a populist interpretation that reduces technology to merely "artifacts" and "devices" (which has plagued common ed-tech discourse for years). Contrarily, Luppicini (2005) has defined "educational technology" as:

A goal oriented, problem-solving systems approach utilizing tools, techniques, theories, and methods from multiple knowledge domains, to: (1) design, develop, and evaluate, human and mechanical resources efficiently and effectively in order to facilitate and leverage all aspects of learning, and (2) guide change agency and transformation of educational systems and practices in order to contribute to influencing change in society. (p. 108)

Clearly outlining technology as a "process" from the outset of the book would have certainly elevated the already strong critical discourse on the subject. The absence of a broader conceptualization of what constitutes technology (or educational technology specifically) is further problematized by his flurried use of undefined (and somewhat redundant) terms: "technology" (p. vi), "digital technology" (p. 1), "educational technology" (p. 2), "digital education" (p. 8), "technology-based education" (p. 34), "technology-based learning" (p. 38) and so on.

Though the absence of some defining characteristics and consistent language may seem like a minor issue to raise, its impact is felt throughout the book given the perceived binary/dichotomy Selwyn purposely uses to organize his writing. He engages the question of whether technology is "good" or not for education as a "neat publishing device – a blunt but immediate way of unsettling cozy assumptions about technology and education" (p. 135). While the stylistic choice certainly engages the reader in the debate (and Selwyn does dedicate much of the last chapter to troubling the often *fixed* concept of goodness), it is difficult to see how an ambiguous description of technology will not leave many readers framing technology's gaps and pitfalls purely in the context of devices and software. Latchem (2014) writes,

Where there are failings and shortcomings in implementing educational technology theory or principles, these are largely because, not to any inadequacies in the tools, but of too little attention being paid to the pedagogical, organizational, cultural and other factors that determine what fails, what works and what transfers successfully into other contexts. (p. 5)

Although Selwyn does a stellar job of engaging a critical constructivist paradigm that voices the importance of the "collective good" and "social justice," he opts to not discuss the shortcomings in educational leadership, training and implementation, and other social action that could improve the efficacy of formal efforts to join technology and education in the 21st century. Similarly, other structural flaws in the current approach to public education (i.e., the American education-industrial complex, growing organizational inefficiencies, shifting government agendas, etc.) and their impact on the success rates of technology rollouts in school systems are largely glossed over. Failing to thoughtfully address these concerns may result in knee-jerk reactions that call for a reduction in technology investments at the wrong time in education history, as most recently experienced after the release of the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development's (OECD), "Students, Computers and Learning: Making the Connection" report in 2015.

Throughout the book, Selwyn does well to avoid calling for specific policy/governance

solutions to the inadequacies of technology's function in education. Had he gone down this path he would merely be replacing the hyperbole that surrounds educational technology as the cure to what ails education (and society at large) with his own sentiments. Instead he opts to raise critical questions and elicit a healthy dose of skepticism that he feels is required when examining the current era of educational practice. It is here where Selwyn is at his strongest and most measured. For example, when discussing the "Silicon Valley model of technology development" (p. 141), Selwyn explores the growing societal influence of tech philanthropists and venture firms by outlining how the values that underpin their success in the free market *may* not translate when attempting to generate successful outcomes in public education. This sentiment has been echoed by Kathleen deMarrais (2012) who similarly sought to ask critical questions of philanthropy and the impact it is having on educational policy in the United States. Perspectives like these are much needed in the current discourse of educational technology and will *raise the bar* for what the public sector expects (and eventually demands) from its prospective partners in the private sector. As he writes in the final chapter,

> Digital education needs to be considered from the position of multiple disadvantaged groups. Issues of class relations, economic dynamics and structures clearly underpin much of what has been discussed in this book. So do issues of gender, race, disability, sexuality, ability, nationality and citizenships. These are all fundamental factors in how societies (and the technologies within societies) operate. Moreover, all of these issues are inter-sectional and relational – all things that are rarely factored in to the digital education mix. (p. 143)

For Selwyn, the concepts of *democracy, personalization, calculation, and commercialization* all need to be unpacked as they relate to technology and education in a postmodern context. He argues – very persuasively – that while culture and economics are being reshaped along digital lines, society needs to be cognizant of how these shifts (i.e., the growing influence of corporate thinking, neoliberalism, individualization, etc.) may end up marginalizing just as many people as they empower. Selwyn indirectly references a notable article written by Neil Postman (1998) where he famously wrote,

> Perhaps the best way I can express this idea is to say that the question, 'What will a new technology do?' is no more important than the question, 'What will a new technology undo?' Indeed, the latter question is more important, precisely because it is asked so infrequently. (p. 4)

It is clear that Selwyn has recycled this argument to serve as the sub-theme to his book. Yet leaning on this rationale limits his ability to provide a "tempered, measured and balanced prognosis" (p. 157) of educational technology, as it does not engage with the counterargument with similar emphasis or gusto. For example, Anna Craft (2012), who also wrote from a constructivist and socio-cultural perspective, challenged this notion for years, positing that the "childhood at risk" narrative surrounding technology use in schools is actually stifling creativity in children as it often overshadows the "childhood empowered" narrative. It may have been beneficial for the book to include such arguments. Now unlike Postman (a self-identified humanist), who was highly outspoken about his distrust of technology, Selwyn refuses to give up "on the potential of digital technology to support better forms of education" (p. 148). Perhaps his forthcoming work(s) will explore this notion in greater depth.

Overall, this book provides a contemporary overview of the key issues and debates related to technology and education, whilst advocating for an increasingly necessary critical discourse that pushes back against arguments rooted in technological determinism. In particular, the four main chapters should be read from start to finish by anyone looking to gain a deeper understanding of the social complexities of educational technology in greater depth. At a 160 pages in length this is a relatively concise publication, however, Selwyn manages to keep

the reader engaged throughout by critiquing the most pressing and "shiny" developments in the ed-tech space. Despite the criticisms relating to language, focus, and style cited here, the book provides both the research community and a general audience with the opportunity to wrestle with some of the most important tensions in the education landscape (especially if they have not yet been exposed to more critical readings on the topic). From this perspective, the book is undoubtedly successful in shedding light on the inequalities and privilege that frame technology use in education. However, does Selwyn deliver on his intent to provide readers with a well-composed and balanced appraisal of digital education (through which readers get to think *differently* about the phenomenon)? After assessing the book's respective strengths and weaknesses, the answer has to be "yes/no/all points in between" (p. vi).

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